

THE LAG



Peter Repetti

with Claude

PART ONE

SPARK





The Way We Used to Think

THE RADIATOR IN MY office made a sound like someone was trapped inside it. I'd put in a maintenance request in September. By October the department's "system" had misrouted it three times, and eventually sent a technician to the wrong building, with the wrong part. Nobody fixed the radiator. I learned to work through the sound. That fall, the fall of 2027, everyone was learning to work through something.

The fog still had many different names then. People called it burnout, or screen fatigue, or digital overwhelm. The DSM committee wouldn't formalize Information Fatigue Syndrome for another eight months, but we were already drowning in referrals at the lab. Students who couldn't finish a paragraph. Tenured professors who'd start a sentence in a meeting and just lose it halfway through, eyes going glassy, hands drifting toward their phones like there was something gravitational about it. The university counseling center had a six-week waitlist. Two of the counselors were on medical leave themselves.

My office was on the third floor of the Kessler Building, a brutalist slab that the architecture department used as a cautionary example. I had a corkboard covered in index cards, which my graduate students found charmingly archaic but which were actually the end product of twenty years of learning how to keep my own mind in order. I'd been told in grad school that I "probably didn't meet the threshold" for ADHD because my grades were too good, which is another way of saying I was compensating hard enough that the compensation was invisible. The index cards, the color-coding, the rigid morning routines, all scaffolding for a brain that wanted to think about everything at once and could

never just do the next thing. I also had three monitors running parallel data streams and an AI assistant that could pull and cross-reference any paper published in the last forty years in the time it took me to pour coffee. Everyone had tools like this by then. They were the weather. You didn't think about them any more than you thought about electricity.

What I did think about, what I was paid to think about, was what the weather was doing to us.

The numbers were bad. Sustained attention spans had dropped 40% in adults under fifty over the past three years. Working memory scores were cratering. The Flynn Effect, that steady century-long climb in IQ scores, hadn't just plateaued but reversed. And the curve bent like a hockey stick. The downturn arrived faster than any model had predicted, correlated almost perfectly with the adoption curve of generative AI integration into daily workflows.

We weren't just distracted. We were getting worse.

The university was mid-tier, public, located in a Massachusetts town that had once manufactured textiles and now manufactured nothing in particular. The campus had a quad with old oaks and a flagpole that was missing its flag. The library roof leaked. The student center coffee shop had recently replaced its human baristas with an automated system that could make any drink in forty-five seconds but couldn't tell when someone was crying and needed a kind word.

I gave a lecture about it that October, to an introductory cognitive science class. Two hundred students in a tiered auditorium, the ceiling panels half burned out. The light was bad. It was always bad in there.

"Let's go back," I said. I clicked to a slide showing a campfire. Just a stock photo, flames against a dark background. "Way back. A hundred thousand years ago, give or take. Somewhere in Africa. A group of hominids sitting around one of these."

I watched the room. Maybe a third of them were looking at me.

"So here's what fire did. The obvious thing first: cooked food. Cooked food is easier to digest. Easier to digest means more calories available, more calories means bigger brains. That part's straightforward, it's in your textbook, I won't belabor it." I clicked to the next slide, realized it was the wrong one, clicked again. "But there's a less obvious thing. Fire extended the day. Before fire, when it got dark, you slept, or you sat in the dark and tried not to get eaten. After fire, you had these hours. Firelight hours. And you couldn't hunt by firelight, not really, and you couldn't gather, so what did you do?"

I let the question sit. Someone in the second row said, "Talked?"

"Talked. Yeah. You sat around with your group and you talked. And some anthropologists, Polly Wiessner is the big name here if you want to look it up, think that's where complex language really took root. Not during the day, when communication was functional, task-oriented. *Get that. Bring this. Watch out.* At night. Around the fire. When there was nothing to do but sit with each other and talk about things that weren't immediately useful. Stories. Gossip. Who did what to whom and why."

I advanced the slide. A clay tablet covered in cuneiform.

"Writing. Five thousand years ago. First time memory gets externalized. You don't have to hold everything in your head anymore, you can put it down. And for a while, people were terrified. Socrates argued writing would destroy memory, would make people lazy. He wasn't entirely wrong. Oral cultures did have these feats of memorization that literate cultures lost. But something else grew in its place. Analytical thinking. Abstract reasoning. The ability to build an argument across pages rather than holding it in a single breath."

Another slide. Gutenberg's press. Then a telegraph. A television. A smartphone.

"Each of these created a flood of new information. And each time, human brains struggled. There was a lag, sometimes centuries, sometimes just decades, while our cognitive architecture caught up. Not through biological evolution. Way too slow. Through cultural adaptation. New habits, new institutions, new filters. Schools. Libraries. Editorial standards. Peer review. Ways of sorting signal from noise."

I paused. The auditorium was quieter than usual. A few more faces had turned my way.

"And each time, the technology didn't just change what people knew. It changed how they organized themselves. The printing press didn't just spread information, it spread schism. Protestantism, nationalism, pamphleteering. Every leap in information technology is also a leap in fragmentation, because suddenly people can inhabit completely different versions of the truth. We've been living through that with social media for two decades now. The AI tools have accelerated it past the point where most people can hold two contradictory ideas long enough to compare them."

"Here's where we are now."

The last slide was just a number: 847,000%. The estimated increase in information output per capita since the widespread deployment of generative AI systems. I'd calculated it myself and I still found it hard to hold in my head as a real quantity.

"We're in the lag," I said. "The space between a new fire and learning how to sit around it."

A hand went up. A student near the back; I couldn't see her face well in the bad light.

"But isn't this different? Like, all those other times, the information was still coming from people. Someone had to write the book. Send the telegram. Now the AI can generate more content in a day than every human being who ever lived. It's not a bigger fire. It's..." She stopped. Started over. "It's like the fire is making more fire."

"Yes," I said.

I looked at her, at her silhouette in the bad light, hand still half-raised. I had the impulse to ask her name. I didn't, and I've thought about that since. She might have been one of us. Or she might have been one of the billions of people for whom the fire was simply too much, whose question was just a sign of good instincts and a willingness to follow a thought to its uncomfortable end. I had no way of knowing then.

I don't remember what else I said in the lecture. Probably something about neural plasticity, the brain's capacity to rewire. Some measured optimism about adaptation. That was still my position then, that we'd adapt, we always had, it would just take time. I believed this the way you believe weather will eventually turn. Not from evidence but because the alternative is hard to sit with.

What I didn't mention, because I hadn't yet understood what I was looking at, was the divergence.

It had shown up three weeks earlier, on a Wednesday. I remember it was Wednesday because my graduate student, Tomas, always brought his dog to the lab on Wednesdays. A barrel-chested pitbull named Kirchhoff, after the physicist, who would sleep under the desk and occasionally sneeze with such violence that it sounded like a gunshot.

We were running a longitudinal study. Six hundred subjects, tested every eight weeks on a standard battery: working memory, attention, processing speed, pattern recognition, cognitive flexibility. Fourteen months in. The hypothesis was straightforward. We expected to document the decline, map its curve, correlate it

with AI usage patterns.

The decline was there. Across the cohort, consistent, almost monotonic. Every metric, down. Exactly what we'd predicted.

Except.

Tomas had flagged it. "There's something weird with the residuals," he said, not looking up from his screen. Kirchhoff sneezed. "Like, look at this."

He pulled up a scatter plot. Six hundred dots, most of them clustered in the expected region, moderate to severe decline across metrics. But there was a small group that had separated from the cloud. Not just holding steady. Moving in the opposite direction. Up. Across everything.

"How many?" I asked.

"Nineteen. Out of six hundred."

I leaned closer. The dots weren't just above the trendline. They were accelerating away from it, as if the two populations were being pulled in opposite directions.

"Coding error," I said.

"I checked."

"Check again."

He checked again. I checked after him. We pulled the raw data, went through it subject by subject. Nineteen individuals whose cognitive performance hadn't declined at all. Whose scores were climbing, rapidly, across every dimension we measured. Working memory up 20, 30, in one case nearly 50 percent. Processing speed gains that would have been publishable on their own. Pattern recognition scores that broke the ceiling of our assessment tool.

"That can't be right," I said. But I could see that it was.

I told Tomas to keep it quiet while I looked into it. Not because I suspected what it meant. I had no idea what it meant. But in science, anomalies that look too dramatic are usually errors, and announcing errors is a good way to end a career. Tomas nodded, scratching Kirchhoff behind the ears. He was good that way. Unflappable, discreet. He'd come to the program from a physics background and still thought like a physicist, trusting math more than narratives. I valued that more than he knew.

I spent the next two weeks trying to make the data wrong. Re-normed the tests. Checked for ceiling effects, practice effects, response bias. Pulled the demographic data on the nineteen: ages twenty-two to sixty-one. Eleven women, eight men. Mixed ethnicities. No clustering by education, income, profession,

geographic location. No common medications, no shared dietary patterns, no obvious genetic markers in the subset who'd consented to saliva samples.

The only thing they shared was the direction of the curve.

I did the math on the percentage late one night, alone in the lab. Kirchhoff had gone home with Tomas hours ago. The radiator was doing its thing. Outside, the campus had that late-October emptiness, trees nearly bare, the walkways lit by those new solar lamps that gave everything a bluish, morgue-like cast.

Nineteen out of six hundred gave you about three percent, but our sample was skewed, university town, self-selected for a cognition study, overrepresenting the educated and the curious. When I corrected for the demographics, modeled what the rate would look like across the general population, the number dropped. Way down.

Zero point three percent.

I wrote the number on an index card and pinned it to the corkboard. Stood there looking at it for a while.

I didn't have a headache. I realized I never had headaches. My colleagues complained about them constantly, the pressure behind the eyes, the dull throb that set in after a few hours of work. The information headache, they called it. I'd always assumed I was just lucky, or disciplined, or maybe slightly less online than they were. That last part wasn't really true. I used the same tools. I swam in the same current.

I just seemed to be staying afloat.

I unpinned the card, put it in my desk drawer, and went home.

The apartment was on the second floor of a triple-decker near Davis Square, the kind of place that had been affordable ten years ago and was now merely possible if you didn't mind the upstairs neighbor's bass guitar and the laundromat running until midnight downstairs. Leon and I had moved in together two years prior. The walls were his: framed prints of historical maps, a poster from a Rothko exhibition we'd seen on our third date. The books were mostly mine, overflowing from shelves into stacks on the floor, arranged in a system only I understood.

Leon was already asleep. I stood in the bathroom brushing my teeth, looking at my face in the mirror. Square jaw, dark eyes, the crease between my eyebrows that my mother said I'd had since birth, like I'd arrived already concentrating on something. Same face. Nothing different.



Noise

THE THING ABOUT LOOKING for confounders is that you always find some. That's the nature of data. It's dirty, full of coincidence and correlation posing as meaning. The hard part is knowing which confounders matter and which are noise. The harder part is admitting when you've run out of noise and you're left with signal.

I spent November trying to disqualify the nineteen.

I brought Tomas in fully. I needed his computational skills, and honestly I needed someone to argue with. He was twenty-six, from Tucson, built like a distance runner. He had a relentless methodological skepticism that makes a good scientist and a pretty exhausting dinner companion. He questioned everything. That's what I wanted. If the finding was real, it would have to survive Tomas.

We started with the obvious. Test-retest reliability: we brought the nineteen back for a second round, then a third. The scores held. They didn't just hold, they continued to climb. The trajectory was so clean it looked manufactured, which is exactly what Tomas said.

"What if they're gaming the tests?" he said. We were in the lab. It was raining outside, one of those November rains that just goes all day and turns the campus into a system of shallow rivers. "Like, what if they've figured out the patterns in the assessment battery and they're optimizing for the specific tests?"

"Then the transfer tasks would be flat."

We'd built in novel tasks, problems the subjects had never seen, in domains outside their expertise. The nineteen performed as well on these as on the familiar battery. Better, actually. As though unfamiliarity were a stimulant rather than an

obstacle.

"What about nootropics?" Tomas tried. "Microdosing? Off-label stuff?"

We'd asked. Self-report isn't perfect, but we also ran tox screens on the subset who consented. Nothing. No common supplements. No shared pharmacological profile.

"Sleep patterns?"

Variable. Some of the nineteen slept eight hours. Some slept five. One reported sleeping only three to four hours a night and feeling, her word, "carbonated."

"Okay, what about AI usage itself?" Tomas said. He was pacing now, Kirchhoff watching him with the patient resignation of a dog who knows his person. "Maybe it's not about what they share demographically. Maybe it's about how they interact with the tools."

This was reasonable. We spent a week on it. Pulled usage logs, survey responses, behavioral profiles. Some of the nineteen were heavy AI users, integrated into every aspect of their work. Some barely used AI at all, or used it reluctantly, the way some people used email in the early 2000s. Suspicious and minimally engaged. There was no pattern. No common tool, no common frequency, no common interaction style.

"It's like looking for what makes certain people sunburn," Tomas said, rubbing his eyes. "You check sunscreen use, skin tone, time outdoors, latitude. But this group, they're from everywhere, they do everything, they look like everyone. The only thing they share is the sunburn."

"Except the opposite," I said. "They're the ones who don't burn."

He looked at me. "Yeah. Except the opposite."

I wrote down everything the nineteen didn't have in common:

Age. Gender. Race. Education. Income. Profession. Geography. Diet. Sleep. Exercise. Screen time. AI usage (frequency). AI usage (type). Personality profile. Psychiatric history. Family medical history. Handedness. Birth order.

The list went on. Two pages of negatives. I stared at it one evening while Leon cooked dinner, lentils, the apartment warm with cumin and garlic, and what struck me wasn't any individual item but how long the list was. In any normal study, you'd have found your confounder by now. Some shared variable that explained the divergence. The fact that I hadn't found one wasn't a failure of the search. It was a finding.

"You're doing it again," Leon said from the kitchen doorway.

"Doing what?"

"Being here but not here." He paused. "You're always half somewhere else lately."

I closed the notebook. "Sorry. What were you saying?"

"I wasn't saying anything. That's the, like." He smiled when he said it, but there was something underneath. A tiredness. Leon was a high school history teacher, patient by vocation, generous in ways I'd mostly stopped earning. We'd been together four years. He had this way of absorbing my absences, and it made me feel both grateful and guilty, though the guilt had started to feel automatic. Like a bill I paid without reading it.

"The lentils are almost done," he said. He went back to the stove.

Over dinner I tried to be present. Leon was talking about a student who'd written a paper on the French Revolution using AI. "Every fact was correct," he said. "Dates, names, events, all accurate. But the argument was just flat. Like a surface you can't get any traction on. He could tell you what happened but he had no idea why it mattered. No sense that the Terror was, you know, terrifying. That it meant anything beyond a sequence of events."

"What did you do?"

"Gave him a B-minus. Which felt insane, because technically nothing was wrong. But I kept reading it and thinking, the knowledge is here and the understanding isn't. He didn't analyze anything. He just assembled facts in the right order and thought that was enough." Leon shook his head. "I don't even think he knows the difference. That's the part that gets me."

I nodded. I was thinking about the nineteen.

"Mara."

"I'm here. I'm listening."

"You're listening and you're somewhere else. You've always been like this but it's getting..." He stopped. Picked up his glass of water, put it down. "Never mind. How was your day?"

Not even a question. Just a redirect.

I told him about the lentils being good, which they were. I told him about a faculty meeting that had run long, three hours on whether AI-generated lecture notes constituted academic dishonesty, a discussion that went in circles because half the committee couldn't remember what they'd decided at the last meeting. And the AI-generated minutes were no help. They were accurate, technically. Every motion recorded, every vote tallied. But they'd missed everything that

mattered: who had argued with whom, where the real disagreements were, what had gone unsaid. A perfect record of what had been spoken and no record at all of what had happened. I told him a funny version of this. He laughed. I did not tell him about the nineteen.

Later, after he fell asleep, I lay in bed and ran the data in my head. Not figuratively. I could see the scatter plots behind my closed eyes, could rotate them, zoom in. I'd always had a strong visual memory, but this was different. More like a workspace than a recollection. I could manipulate the images. I could ask questions of them and feel the answers arrive, not as words but as shifts in the visual field, certain dots brightening, relationships becoming visible the way constellations do when you learn their names.

I didn't think much of this at the time. Or I thought about it the way you think about a skill you've always had: unremarkable, personal, not worth mentioning. But the pull was there. I could have stopped and gone to sleep. I didn't want to. The workspace behind my eyes was more interesting than anything sleep could offer, and stepping away from it felt like putting down a book mid-sentence. So I lay there for another hour, turning the data. Told myself it was just diligence.

It was the following week that Priya showed me the dataset.

Priya Chandrasekaran was a computational neuroscientist two doors down from me. Small, close-cropped hair, a laugh that could carry through concrete walls. We collaborated occasionally, traded datasets, argued about methodology over bad departmental coffee. She was working on a project mapping neural connectivity patterns during multi-task AI-assisted workflows: what the brain looked like when people used AI tools to do complex work.

"I need fresh eyes on this," she said, dropping into the chair across from my desk. She slid her laptop toward me. On the screen was a connectivity matrix, a grid showing correlations between activity in different brain regions during task performance. Hundreds of nodes, thousands of edges. The kind of dataset that typically takes days to parse, even with software.

"What am I looking at?" I asked. A courtesy. I already saw it.

The matrix had a structure. Nested, hierarchical connectivity that most people would need software to identify, and even then would need multiple analytical passes to verify. The prefrontal regions were hyperconnected, but not randomly. They'd organized into a specific topology: hub-and-spoke architecture with secondary hubs in the temporal and parietal regions.

"The connectivity structure is scale-free," I said. "Your high-performers are developing hub architecture in the PFC. And look, the temporal-parietal coupling is phase-locked. That shouldn't be possible at these frequencies unless..."

I stopped. Priya was staring at me.

"I've been looking at this for four days," she said. Slowly.

The office was very quiet. I could hear the radiator. Down the hall, someone's AI assistant was reading back meeting notes in its flat, pleasant voice.

"I've just been thinking about similar structures," I said. "From the literature. It's not... I just happened to have the context."

"You looked at it for maybe thirty seconds."

"I'm a fast reader."

Priya held my gaze for a moment, then shrugged. She knew I was good at my job.

But sitting in my office after she left, the connectivity matrix still on the screen, I knew it was something else. Closer to perception than analysis. Like hearing a wrong note in a piece of music. You don't reason your way to it. You just hear it.

I opened my green notebook. Under the list of things the nineteen didn't share, I started a new page. At the top I wrote: *What do they share?*

Underneath, just one line: *The world makes more sense to them, not less.*

Then I closed the notebook, put it in my bag, went home. Didn't look at it again for three days. I was afraid of what I'd write next.

Those three days I spent on my regular work. The fog research, the declining-cognition studies, the stuff with clear funding and institutional support that didn't threaten to upend anything. I went to meetings. I taught my Tuesday seminar, where I noticed two more students had dropped without explanation. Just empty seats. The remaining students looked at me with an attentiveness that I now think was partly desperation. They wanted someone to tell them it would be okay. I told them what I believed, which wasn't enough.

I had lunch with Priya on Thursday. She was talking about a conference she'd attended in San Diego, where half the presentations had been derailed by technical failures. The AI-powered presentation systems were glitching, displaying someone else's slides, auto-summarizing the talks in real time with visible errors that the audience couldn't stop reading. "It was like watching a building designed by an architect who'd never been inside a building," she said. She was picking at a salad. "Everything almost worked. Nothing actually did."

"How was the science?"

"The science was good. Terrifying, actually. There's a group in Tokyo, Hayashi's lab, doing longitudinal imaging. The fog isn't just functional. It's structural. They're seeing volume changes in the prefrontal cortex. Gray matter loss. In adults under forty. Over eighteen months."

I put down my fork. "How much loss?"

"Two to four percent. Depending on exposure."

That night I lay in bed doing the math. Two to four percent volume reduction in eighteen months, and the data showed it was from *exposure*, not a disease or from aging. The brain wasn't just struggling to keep up with the information environment. It was physically shrinking under the load.

And nineteen people out of my six hundred were going in the other direction. The interviews started in December.

I contacted the nineteen by email, using carefully neutral language. I was conducting follow-up interviews related to the longitudinal study. Would they be willing to come in for a conversation? Purely voluntary. One hour. Compensation provided.

Fourteen said yes. Three didn't respond. Two declined, one with a terse message, *I don't think I want to be studied*, that I read several times.

The interview room was small, carpeted in institutional gray, with a window that looked out onto the parking garage. I set up a recorder and a second camera as backup, but mostly I just talked to them. I had a protocol, a list of questions. The questions that mattered were the ones I hadn't written down.

The first subject was a man named Dae-jung. Forty-four, electrician from Revere. He sat across from me with his hands folded on the table, neat and still. When I asked him to describe how he'd been feeling over the past year, he was quiet for a long time.

"It's like..." He unfolded his hands, made a gesture I couldn't interpret. "Okay, you know when you're driving and the sun is in your eyes, and you flip the visor down and suddenly you can see? It's like that. Except I didn't flip anything. It just, I don't know. Cleared."

"When did it start?"

"I don't know exactly. Spring, maybe? I started noticing I could read the schematics different. Not faster, exactly. More like I could hold the whole system in my head at once. Every circuit, every junction, the whole thing. Before I'd have to trace it step by step. Now I just... see it."

He was quiet for a moment and then added, almost as a correction: "I always could see the whole system, actually. That was the problem. I'd see the whole layout and then I'd skip steps in the procedure because I already knew where everything connected, and my foreman would write me up. Twice I almost got fired. You can't explain to a guy with a clipboard that you skipped step six because step six is obvious if you can see the whole circuit. They just think you're being sloppy."

"Has this caused any problems for you?"

He considered this. "My wife thinks I'm on something."

"Are you?"

"Miller Lite." A small grin. "That's it."

The second was a twenty-two-year-old CS student who'd stopped sleeping more than four hours a night. Not insomnia. She just didn't need more. She'd wake at 3 AM, clearheaded, and spend the hours before dawn writing code that her professors couldn't follow. Not because it was wrong but because the architecture was organized in ways she couldn't fully explain. "It just seems obvious," she said, and you could hear the frustration in it, because she knew that *obvious* isn't an explanation. She told me she'd been on academic probation twice before the change. Not for lack of ability, her professors all said she was brilliant, but she couldn't make herself do the assignments in order, on time, the way the system required. "I could see the whole project but I couldn't do the steps. It was like being able to read a map but not walk." Then, almost as an aside, she mentioned trying to take a weekend off. Went camping, left her laptop behind. "I lasted about six hours before I started writing pseudocode on napkins," she said. "My brain won't, like, idle anymore. It's like an engine with no neutral gear. Which sounds cool, I guess, but it's actually kind of..." She didn't finish the sentence.

I spoke to twelve more over the following two weeks. A paramedic who could now hold the vitals of every patient in a mass casualty event in his head simultaneously, triaging without charts. A grandmother who'd started composing music, complex fugues she could hear complete in her mind before writing a single note, and she'd never played an instrument. She was writing twelve, fourteen hours a day. Her daughter had called, worried. She told me this with the particular defiance of someone who knows the worry isn't unfounded. A UPS driver who'd optimized his route so thoroughly that his supervisors accused him of falsifying his delivery logs. The times were too good. The efficiency was

too perfect to be real.

Their domains were different. Their backgrounds were different. What they shared was a quality I kept trying to name and couldn't quite pin down. Something had opened up in their cognition, and in almost every case they described it as having been there all along, just inaccessible. And in almost every case there was the other thing: a restlessness. A difficulty stepping back. They described the changes the way someone might describe a drug that works too well. The grandmother forgot to eat. The CS student said going back to normal thinking felt like "trying to run underwater." Dae-jung mentioned he'd stopped watching television because it was "too slow." They weren't complaining, exactly. They were reporting. But I heard something in their voices that none of them named directly.

None of them had sought it out. None of them could point to a moment of change. And none of them used the word "better." They likened it to living in a room, and only now realizing how small it had been.



The Ones Who Stayed Awake

HER NAME WAS YUNA, and she was the one who changed how I thought about all of it.

She was the last of my fourteen interviews. Thirty-eight, graphic designer. She showed up in paint-stained jeans and a coat too thin for the weather. She sat in the interview chair with one leg tucked under her like a teenager.

I went through the protocol. Timeline, changes in daily functioning, sleep, diet, work performance. She answered patiently, precisely, giving me nothing I hadn't heard from the others. But there was something about the way she watched me. Not just answering, assessing. Like she was conducting her own study and I hadn't been told.

I was wrapping up, getting ready to thank her and stop the recording, when she said:

"Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"Why do you keep asking what changed in us?"

I paused. "Because something did change. Your test scores..."

"My test scores changed. Sure. But I didn't." She leaned forward, elbows on the table. "What if nothing changed in us? What if we were always like this, and the world finally, I don't know, caught up? Or shifted. Or whatever."

Outside, a car alarm went off in the parking garage, then stopped.

"I don't understand what you mean," I said, though I did.

"Okay. Think about it like..." She chewed her lip. "You know those people who can hear the hum? Like, electrical hum. Most people filter it out completely.

But some people hear it all the time. And for most of history, that was just a weird thing about them. Annoying. Maybe even a liability. But then imagine a world where hearing that hum is suddenly the most important skill you can have. Did those people change? Or did the frequency of the world change?"

I turned this over. It was a version of something I'd been circling for weeks without quite landing on. not adaptation but revelation — something that had always been there, now changing into something else entirely. And beneath that, the colder implication: if Yuna was right, this was a selection event. The environment had shifted, and a trait that had always been present in the population was suddenly the one that mattered. The rest of the population was on the other side of that selection. I didn't want to follow the thought further.

"You think you were always like this," I said.

"I think I was always like this and it didn't matter. Now it does." She paused. Her expression shifted. "Do you know what it's like to spend thirty years knowing you can see things other people can't, and having that be a problem? I got fired from two jobs before I was twenty-five. Not because I was bad at them. Because I couldn't make myself care about things in the right order." She said this flatly, without self-pity. "I don't want to be your research subject, Dr. Chen. I'm not a syndrome. I'm not even, like, interesting. I'm just suited. Finally."

After Yuna left, I sat alone in the interview room for a long time. The parking garage light came through the window, gray and flat. I thought about her word. *Suited*. And about the lecture I'd given in October, the one about fire and the lag. I'd told my students we were in the lag between a new technology and our adaptation to it. But what if the adaptation wasn't something that would happen in the future, what if it had already happened, in a handful of people, silently? What if the fog wasn't a universal condition but a selection pressure?

I did what scientists do with uncomfortable ideas. I tried to formalize it.

That evening, in my office, I drafted the outlines of a hypothesis. Not a mechanism, because I still didn't have a mechanism. A framework. What if cognitive capacity wasn't a single spectrum from low to high, but something more like a landscape with multiple stable states? Most human brains had settled into one state, adapted to normal information flow, and the current environment was destabilizing it, pushing people into cognitive decline. But a small number of brains had always existed in a different configuration. One that was maladaptive or neutral under normal information loads, but adaptive under extreme ones. An old mutation and a dormant architecture that had never had the right

environment.

I typed this out and then deleted it. It sounded too clean. Too much like a story. Good hypotheses feel broken at the edges. This one felt polished, which made me distrust it.

But I kept thinking about it. About selection. The asteroid that ended the Cretaceous didn't just kill the dinosaurs. It changed which body plan mattered. Sixty-six million years of reptilian dominance, and then a rock hits the Yucatán and suddenly it's the small, warm-blooded, burrowing things that inherit everything. Not because they evolved in response to the impact. Because they were already there, already suited, already carrying traits that were marginal until the world made them essential. I thought about fire. About the first hominids who could tolerate smoke long enough to cook food. The ones who could sit closer to the flames. Every evolutionary advantage starts as a neutral variation, an accident of wiring, a stray allele, sitting in the population doing nothing until conditions change and it turns out to be the one that matters.

I brought the findings to Alan Restrepo in January.

Alan was the department chair. He looked like a basset hound and had the political instincts of something considerably more predatory. He'd shepherded the cognitive science department through two rounds of budget cuts, a plagiarism scandal, and the great AI pedagogy panic of 2025, and had come out of each with more funding and fewer enemies than he'd started with. I respected him. I also knew that what I was about to show him would be, from his perspective, a problem.

"Zero point three percent," he said, looking at the summary I'd prepared. We were in his office, which was larger than mine, with a window that faced actual trees. He'd offered me coffee from his personal machine, the good stuff. Either respect or groundwork. "And you're saying their cognitive performance is improving."

"Not just holding steady. Improving. Significantly and consistently, across all metrics, over fourteen months."

"While everyone else declines."

"While everyone else declines."

He set the summary down. Took off his glasses and cleaned them on his shirt. I'd seen him do this in faculty meetings right before delivering bad news.

"Mara, what do you think you have here?"

"I think I have a finding."

"You have nineteen subjects out of six hundred. In one study. No proposed mechanism, no genetic marker, no replication." He put his glasses back on. "What you have is a statistical curiosity."

"Alan..."

"I'm not dismissing it. I'm telling you what the review board will say. What NIH will say. What the press will say if this gets out before you've got something solid." He leaned back. "They'll say it's noise."

"I've controlled for everything I can think of. Tomas has been over the data..."

"Tomas is a second-year doctoral student. That's not a replication, that's a homework check." He almost smiled when he said it, but not quite. "I'm not saying you're wrong. I'm saying that a claim this big needs evidence to match, and nineteen people in one study isn't that. It's a pilot. At best."

He was right. By every conventional standard, he was right. The sample was too small. The effect was too large, which paradoxically made it less credible, because large effects in small samples are the hallmark of statistical artifacts. And I had no mechanism. I could describe what was happening but not why, and in science that means you haven't really described anything at all.

"What about funding for a larger replication?" I asked.

"With what pitch? 'Give us money to study twenty people who are doing suspiciously well?'" He shook his head. "You know how this works, Mara. The money goes to the fog. IFS is the crisis. That's where Congress is looking, that's where NIH is looking. Nobody's funding a study of people who don't have the problem."

"What if they're the key to the problem?"

"What if they're an artifact?"

We looked at each other. He wasn't hostile. Alan was never hostile. But he was concerned. For the department, which had positioned itself as a leading center for IFS research, and for me, because he'd seen careers stall on findings that turned out to be mirages.

"Run a proper replication," he said. "Bigger sample. Independent site. Get a mechanism hypothesis on paper. Then we talk."

I stood up. At the door, I turned back.

"Alan. If this is real..."

"If it's real, then it's real, and we'll deal with it. But 'if' is doing a lot of work in that sentence." He picked up his coffee. "Go be a scientist, Mara. Not a prophet."

It stung. He wasn't wrong about the politics. He was protecting me, or the department, or both.

I left his office and walked back down the hall. Late afternoon, that dead hour when day faculty have gone home and evening classes haven't started. Priya's door was closed, lights off. The grad student bullpen, where Tomas was probably still working, Kirchhoff dozing at his feet. The water fountain that had been broken since September.

In my office, I sat down and opened my laptop. I had four papers to review for a journal. Four dense, methodologically complex papers on different aspects of information processing. Each was forty-plus pages. Each required careful attention to claims, evidence, statistical methodology.

I opened all four.

Not one at a time. All four, simultaneously, each in its own window, tiled across my three monitors. And I began to read.

Not skim. Read.

This is the moment I can no longer explain away. My eyes moved across the four documents in a pattern I wasn't consciously directing. A paragraph from paper one, a figure from paper three, a methods section from paper two, a discussion point from paper four. I wasn't switching between them the way you switch between tasks, with that small cognitive stutter, that momentary blankness as one context is swapped out and another loaded in. I was holding all four. Four separate arguments, four methodologies, four threads, and they weren't interfering with each other. They were informing each other. I could see where paper two's findings contradicted paper four's assumptions. Where paper one's methodology resolved a question paper three had left open. The four documents, which should have been four separate cognitive tasks, were functioning as a single integrated field of understanding.

It took me forty minutes. A thorough review of four complex papers, with notes, would normally take me two full days. Forty minutes. And my notes were better than usual. More incisive, catching things I would have missed reading the papers one at a time, the way you think you're supposed to.

I sat back. The office was dark. I hadn't turned on the lights. The monitors cast the room in pale blue. My hands were steady. No headache.

And I didn't want to stop. That was the part I didn't write down. I could have gone home. It was past seven. Leon would be making dinner or grading papers or both. Instead I opened another dataset, one of Priya's, and started looking for the

connectivity patterns I'd spotted the week before. The pull of it was physical. The same focused appetite I'd heard in the CS student's voice, in the grandmother's defiance. My unassisted mind, the one that would surface if I closed the laptop and sat in the dark, felt like a slower and less interesting version of myself. I recognized this feeling from somewhere. I didn't want to name it.

I opened my green notebook. Stared at the page. Something Yuna had said came back to me: *I was always like this*. The green notebook. The index cards. The morning routines I'd built like load-bearing walls. I hadn't been disciplined. I'd been coping. My whole career was a workaround for a mind that processed in parallel but lived in a world that demanded single file. And now the lanes were gone and I didn't need the scaffolding and what I felt was not triumph but vertigo, because if the scaffolding had never been discipline, then who had I been all those years? Just someone struggling and calling it rigor.

I sat there in the dark office with the monitors glowing and my hands flat on the desk. I felt my stomach turn over, a wave that welled up through my chest, tightened through my throat, and reached my eyes. All those years. The color-coded calendars. The five alarms to get out the door. The panic before deadlines that had nothing to do with the work being hard and everything to do with the steps being in a line I couldn't walk. I'd thought that was character. I'd thought I was earning something by fighting my own brain every day. And I was, but not what I thought. Not discipline. Scar tissue. And now, sitting in a dark room at forty-one, I was seeing myself clearly for the first time. Not through Priya or Tomas or anyone in the building. Just me, finally legible to myself. It should have felt like relief. It felt like grief.

The wave passed. I wiped my eyes. Closed the notebook and put it away.

I didn't tell Leon. I didn't tell Tomas. I went home and made dinner and asked Leon about his day and laughed at the right moments and went to bed. Lay in the dark. What I felt was not excitement or fear but something more like when you've been looking at an optical illusion and the second image resolves, the vase becomes two faces, the old woman becomes a young one, and you can't unsee it.

I went back to the lab the next morning and set up the test battery.

The full assessment takes about three hours. Sustained attention. Divided attention. Working memory, verbal and spatial. Processing speed. Pattern recognition. Cognitive flexibility. Executive function. I'd administered these tests hundreds of times. I knew the norms by heart. What a good score looked like, what average looked like, what the fog scores looked like.

I calibrated the equipment. I tested the software. I sat down in the same chair where Dae-jung had sat, where Yuna had sat, where fourteen people had come and demonstrated something that shouldn't be possible.

Then I began.

Sustained attention first. Tracking a moving target while ignoring distractors. The target moved faster as the test progressed, the distractors proliferated, movements designed to be maximally confusing. At a certain point most subjects' performance degrades. Tracking becomes erratic. Error rate climbs.

I watched the target. The distractors swarmed. And the thing I noticed, the thing I let myself notice, finally, was that the distractors weren't distracting. They were information. I could see them all, hold them all. The target wasn't something I had to find among the noise. The noise was part of the signal.

Working memory tasks. Sequences of numbers, letters, spatial positions, growing longer and more complex. At a certain length, the human brain can't maintain the sequence. Items drop out, the early ones overwritten by the later ones. This is a hard limit, one of the most robust findings in cognitive science. Seven plus or minus two. Miller's Law. Sixty years of research confirming the same ceiling.

I held seventeen items without effort.

Pattern recognition. Abstract matrices, rotating figures, sequences with hidden rules. The test gets progressively harder, patterns more deeply embedded, the solution space larger. At the highest levels, even gifted test-takers slow down considerably, needing minutes to work through the logic.

I didn't slow down. The patterns were just there, the way a melody is there once you've heard it. Immediate. Obvious. Impossible to unhear.

The battery took me two hours and forty minutes. I sat afterward in the quiet room, looking at the equipment. The eye-tracker blinking. The biometric sensors I'd forgotten to remove from my fingertips. I pulled up the scoring software and ran my results.

I looked at the numbers for a long time.

My scores were not in the range of the nineteen subjects I'd been studying. They were beyond it. On every metric, at or above the highest performer in my sample. The working memory score alone was so far outside the normative range that the software had flagged it as a probable input error.

I ran the analysis again. Same results.

I remember the exact moment. The fluorescent light in the testing room, the one tube that had been flickering for weeks. The way my hands looked resting on the keyboard. My mother's hands. Wide-palmed, short-fingered. I remember wanting to feel something large and instead feeling only a settling, as if a question I hadn't known I was asking had been answered. These details don't matter. I record them because they're what I have. The last coordinates of who I was before I understood what I was becoming.

I sat in the testing room in the gray light of a January afternoon, and I let myself know what I already knew. I was not studying the divergence from the outside. I was the phenomenon. I had been, maybe, for longer than I understood. The word I'd been avoiding since Yuna's interview surfaced and I let it: *selection*. If this was selection, then I was on one side of it. Most of the people I knew and loved were on the other. I wrote the word in my green notebook and sat looking at it, because writing it made it harder to take back.

Outside, students walked in clusters, heads bent toward their phones, moving slowly. A world moving too fast for them, generating more information than their brains could process. The fog wasn't just cognitive decline. It was also, I was beginning to think, the end result of twenty years of algorithmic sorting, each person sinking into a private informational universe, losing not just capacity but common ground. The 0.3% could hold the contradictions. Everyone else was narrowing.

I took off the biometric sensors. Saved the data to an encrypted file. Shut down the equipment, turned off the lights, left the building.

The air outside was cold. January cold, the kind that makes your lungs ache. I stood on the steps of the Kessler Building. Bare trees, brutalist concrete, students moving through the dusk.

Leon was grading papers at the kitchen table when I got home. He looked up, and something in my face must have been different, because he put down his pen.

"Hey," he said. "You okay?"

I hung up my coat. Sat down across from him. The kitchen was warm, the overhead light casting its usual yellow circle on the table between us. His stacked papers and red pen. The coffee cup he'd been nursing.

"I need to tell you something," I said.

But I didn't tell him. Not that night. I sat there looking at him, at his kind, tired face, and I couldn't find the words. Not because I didn't have them but because I had too many, and none of them fit what I needed to say.

"I'm just tired," I said. "Long day."

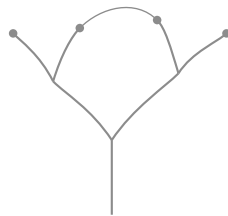
He reached across the table and squeezed my hand. "Lentils again?"

"Lentils again."

We sat there in the kitchen, in the warm light. Two people at a table. The distance between us, the one that had always been there, that he'd noticed and I'd ignored, was not smaller than it had been that morning. It was exactly the same size. But I could see it now. I could measure it. And I knew, the way you know a season is turning before the weather confirms it, that the distance was going to grow.

PART TWO

BURN





Emergence

THE CHANGE DIDN'T ANNOUNCE itself. That's the first thing I want you to understand, and it's also the first thing I'll fail to make you understand, because the language I have to use, *the change*, implies a boundary, a before and after. There wasn't one. What there was, if I'm being honest about the phenomenology of it, was a tide. Very slow. I didn't notice my feet were wet until the water was at my knees, and even then I wasn't sure it was water.

Six weeks after I ran myself through the battery, I realized I'd been reading a meta-analysis, composing a reply to it, and cross-referencing its methodology against two papers from 2019 — all at the same time, without deciding to. The way you don't decide to breathe. And the strangest part was that it didn't feel extraordinary. It felt like relief. Like I'd been wearing shoes two sizes too small my entire life and had finally taken them off. Of course I could hold all of this. Of course I always could. What had I been doing before?

This is the dangerous thought, and I want to flag it as dangerous even though, from where I sit now, I can't entirely disagree with it. The feeling of rightness is not evidence of rightness. I knew this then. I know it now. The philosophy of mind literature is full of this stuff; Thomas Metzinger has a whole framework for it, the transparency of phenomenal states. But the feeling was so total, so structurally integrated into every other thing I was experiencing, that doubting it felt like doubting gravity. You can doubt gravity. You can write philosophical papers about the epistemological status of gravitational force. Meanwhile, you stay on the ground.

I stayed on the ground. I kept working. I kept teaching my Tuesday seminar, though the students had started looking at me differently. Not with suspicion, exactly. More with the expression of someone watching a foreign film without subtitles who catches, every few minutes, a word they recognize. I was still speaking English. I was still making arguments they could follow. But there was something in the connective tissue of my lectures, in the way I moved between ideas, that was pulling ahead of them. I could feel the moment it happened — the leap across three inferential steps that felt, to me, like walking across a room. I'd look up and see twenty faces with the same expression. Not confused, not bored. Left behind. This one kid in the front row, Ralph, who was probably the sharpest student I'd had in a decade, started staying after class to ask me to re-derive the connections I'd skipped. He was never frustrated about it. He'd just loop back, persistent, almost cheerful about it. "Wait, how did you get from A to D?" And I'd have to reconstruct B and C, which I'd stopped experiencing as separate steps. He'd nod, write it down, and the next week he'd be back with a new gap to fill. I liked him for it. There's something to be said for the person who just keeps showing up until the thing makes sense.

I learned to slow down. Or I tried. A French professor teaching in English doesn't resent having to translate. She just does it. The resentment, if it comes, comes later, when the translation starts to feel not like a courtesy but like a cage.

Leon noticed. Of course he did. Leon noticed everything; it was one of the reasons I loved him and also one of the reasons the distance between us started to grow. He noticed things slowly, carefully, the way a good photographer notices. Holding still. Adjusting. Waiting for the right angle. There was deliberation in his attention. It was one of the most beautiful things about him. And I was losing the ability to experience deliberation as anything other than delay.

He said, one night in late March, sitting on the kitchen floor while we argued about whether to keep the blender we never used: "You're here, but you're also somewhere else."

"I'm right here."

"I know you're right here. That's what I said. You're here *and* somewhere else. It used to be you were half somewhere else. Now it's more like you're... ninety percent somewhere else and ten percent humoring me."

"That's not—"

"I'm not accusing you of anything. I'm just describing what it feels like from over here."

He wasn't wrong. Even as he spoke I could feel myself mapping the conversation: his vulnerability, my guilt, the way he held his shoulders when he was trying to be honest without being aggressive. I wanted, more than almost anything, to stop seeing all of this and just *be with him*. But the seeing was no longer something I could turn off.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm working on it."

"On what, specifically?"

I didn't have an answer that wasn't a lie. I said: "On being more present."

He reached over and squeezed my ankle, and the gesture was so perfectly Leon, physical, specific, full of more feeling than he could put into words, that for about three seconds the seeing stopped and I was just a woman on a kitchen floor whose partner loved her. Then it started again.

The daily feel of those weeks, late March into early April, had a quality I don't think I can convey. Two timescales running in the same life. There was the fast time: the transformation itself, every morning a little further along, every day the connections arriving faster, the patterns surfacing more readily, the world becoming simultaneously more legible and more overwhelming in its legibility. And there was the slow time, which was everything else. The commute. Departmental politics. Waiting for the bus. Even in the slow time I couldn't idle. I'd find myself speaking into my phone on the walk to campus, spinning up new analyses, dictating connections I'd need to follow up on later. At faculty meetings I'd nod along while running parallel threads in my head, mapping implications of data I'd looked at that morning.

The fast time had a gravity to it, a hunger. Once you've felt your mind operating at full capacity, the absence of that feeling becomes physically uncomfortable. A dull ache behind the eyes. Restlessness in the hands. Like a runner forced to sit still, or, and this comparison made me uneasy even then, like the first stages of withdrawal.

I started keeping a journal. Not a research journal; I had plenty of those. A private one, handwritten. I wrote in it every evening, trying to capture the day's experience while I could still translate it into sequential sentences. The entries got longer and more tangled as the weeks went on. More subordinate clauses. More places where I'd start to describe something and then bracket it with a correction, *no, that's not right, it was more like*, and then bracket the correction with another correction, the prose spiraling inward like a nautilus shell, each chamber smaller and more precise and further from the opening where a reader might enter.

I knew what was happening to the journal. It was becoming a record not of my experience but of the gap between my experience and language. Each entry was an artifact of failure: the failure to translate parallel processing into serial text, to flatten a three-dimensional perception into a one-dimensional string of words. I kept writing anyway. The failure was useful. It was the only evidence I had that the gap existed. Without the journal, without the daily confrontation with what I couldn't say, I might have convinced myself that the language was adequate. That the new way of being could be fully contained in the old way of speaking. That would have been the beginning of the end. Not of the transformation, but of my ability to notice it.

The others found me, or I found them, or we found each other the way objects of similar density find each other in solution. Not through intention. Through something more like precipitation.

The actual mechanics were prosaic. I started to notice that certain people in public spaces were doing the thing I was doing, the multiple-simultaneous-attention thing. You could see it in their eyes if you knew what to look for — a quality of focus that wasn't focus in the normal sense. Not narrowing but widening. A woman on the subway reading a book and also watching the man across from her and also, I could tell somehow, listening to the conversation happening three seats down and composing something internally that drew on all three inputs at once. She looked up and saw me seeing her, and her face did something I'd never witnessed between two strangers. Not *I know you*. Closer to *I know what you are*.

Her name was Rani. She was a structural engineer. She'd started noticing the change about six weeks before I had.

Within two weeks I knew nine of them. Within a month, thirty-one. We didn't form a group or exchange membership cards. What we did was talk, and the talking was, I don't have a way to describe this that won't sound like boasting or mysticism, and it was neither. The talking was fast. Not in the sense that we spoke rapidly, though sometimes we did. Fast in the sense that we could skip the parts of conversation that exist to establish shared context, because we arrived at shared context almost instantly. I would begin a sentence and the person I was talking to would finish it, not because they were rude but because they could see where it was going the way you can see where a thrown ball is going. And then they'd add something I hadn't thought of but that, the moment they said it, felt like something I'd been about to think of. And then I'd build on that. Within

minutes we'd covered ground that would have taken two *previous* people an afternoon of careful back-and-forth to traverse.

It was thrilling. I want to be honest about that. Talking to Rani or to David (a former accountant who'd quit his job because the numbers had started doing something he couldn't explain to his supervisors, "they were talking to each other," he told me once, which I understood perfectly and which sounds insane to anyone else) or to Wen (a high school biology teacher in Tucson who we only knew through video calls and who had the unsettling habit of laughing before you'd finished your joke, not performing but genuinely finding it funny that early, and then she'd say "sorry, go ahead, finish" even though you both knew she'd already gotten there). Talking to them felt like the first time I'd ever had a real conversation. Everything before had been the equivalent of trying to discuss color while wearing grey-tinted glasses. Now the glasses were off.

Leon met Rani once, at dinner. He was gracious and funny, the way he always was with new people, asking about her work, doing the thing where he pretended to understand structural load calculations and she pretended to believe him. But afterward, driving home, he was quiet for a long time, and then he said: "You two weren't really talking to me."

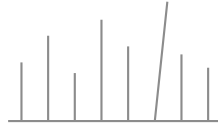
"We were talking to you the whole—"

"You were including me. That's different." He turned onto our street, both hands on the wheel, that careful way he drove at night. "You and Rani were having the real conversation somewhere above my head, and every few minutes one of you would drop a simplified version down to where I could reach it. Like tossing a ball to a kid."

I said nothing, because he was right.

"It's not a criticism," he said, which meant it was.

We parked. We went inside. We made tea and sat on the couch and watched something on television, I can't remember what now and probably couldn't have told you the next morning. What I remember is the weight of him against my shoulder. The smell of his hair, cedar and something else I'd never been able to identify. And the thought, arriving fully formed from a part of my mind that hadn't yet been colonized by the change, that I was going to lose him.



The Adolescence of the Species

THE STARTUP WAS CALLED Lumen. Of course it was called Lumen; the Silicon Valley instinct for naming things after light had survived every other cultural shift of the last thirty years. They'd been founded to build adaptive learning platforms, pivoted to cognitive enhancement, pivoted again to assessment tools, and then, sometime around February, a twenty-six-year-old neuroscientist on their team named Jess Hartwell had figured out that you could test for the trait with a forty-minute battery administered through a standard laptop. The battery wasn't even novel in its components. It combined elements of existing attentional paradigms — flanker tasks, dual n-back, some MOT stuff — with new multitasking protocols. But the scoring algorithm was Hartwell's, and it was, I confirmed when I eventually got access to the methodology, genuinely elegant. She'd found a biomarker. Not genetic or anatomical — functional. A signature in how certain brains distributed attention under informational saturation.

Lumen called it "cognitive amplitude." The press, which needed something shorter, settled on "amp." Within a week of the first media coverage you could buy "Are You Amped?" t-shirts on Etsy. Within two weeks, HR departments at three of the five largest tech companies had begun quietly screening applicants. Within a month the word had metastasized into every conversational space available to it, dinner parties, taxi rides, dating profiles, those interminable group texts where someone's uncle forwards something from Reddit, the way these things do. Too fast for anyone to decide how they felt about it before they were already required to have an opinion.

I hated the word. Not because it was inaccurate; it captured something real about the increase in processing capacity. But because it flattened the experience into a single dimension. Amplitude. As if what was happening to us was simply *more* of what everyone already had. As if the difference were quantitative. The actual experience of being what Lumen called "amped" was not a volume knob turned up. Oliver Sacks wrote about a painter who became totally colorblind after a car accident — not just the loss of color but the loss of the *memory* of color, so that he could no longer imagine or dream in color, and the world became a place of alien, luminous grays that he eventually came to find beautiful in their own right. What happened to us was the reverse. As if we'd been living in those grays, functioning perfectly well, not knowing anything was missing, and then one morning the reds arrived. A sense we didn't know we lacked, applied retroactively to everything we'd ever seen.

But the word stuck. Words do.

Jess Hartwell went on every talk show that would have her. She was photogenic and articulate and careful in the way that makes audiences trust you, and she had the additional advantage of being amped herself, which meant she could answer hostile questions with a fluency that hostile questioners found disarming. She said things like: "This isn't about better or worse. It's about different cognitive profiles responding differently to the same environment." She said: "We wouldn't say that someone with perfect pitch is *better* than someone without it. We'd say they process auditory information differently." She said these things and they were true and they were also insufficient and she knew they were insufficient but said them anyway because the insufficient truth was better than the alternative, which was panic.

The panic came anyway.

The Lumen battery took forty minutes and could be administered on any laptop with a webcam. You sat in front of the screen and performed a series of tasks: pattern recognition, simultaneous attention, information integration. The webcam tracked your eye movements while the scoring algorithm did its work. At the end, you got a number. A single number on a scale they'd designed to look clinical, with the arbitrary precision of all corporate metrics, two decimal places, a colored bar, a percentile ranking. Above 7.2, you were amped. Below it, you weren't. The cutoff was based on Hartwell's data and it was, in statistical terms, well-supported. But statistics can't capture what it feels like to have a fundamental change in human cognition reduced to a number above or below a

line. The experience of being sorted.

People took the test in their offices, in their bedrooms, in their cars during lunch breaks. They took it the way people had once taken pregnancy tests: alone, in private, with the dread of knowing that a number was about to divide their life into before and after. Some of them posted their results on social media. Some of them lied. Some of them took it multiple times, hoping the number would change. You step on a bathroom scale twice because the first reading can't be right.

And some of them, the ones who scored above 7.2, who saw the colored bar shift from blue to amber and felt the bottom drop out of their understanding of who they were, found their way to me. To my email, to my office, to the informal network that was growing without anyone directing it. They came because I was both things: a researcher who could explain what was happening and an amped person who was living it. They came because I'd published data and also, I think, because I returned their emails. The corporations and agencies courting them did not.

They called, they emailed, they showed up. Their partners called too, and their parents, and I said what I could, but what I could never say was the thing that would have been most honest: *you're right to be afraid*. Because I recognized what they were describing. I felt it in myself. The pull toward the tools, toward the data streams, toward the state of full cognitive engagement that was starting to feel less like a capacity and more like a craving. What made it worse, what made the dependency not recreational but therapeutic: for many of us, life before the tools had been hard in a way we'd never had language for. The overwhelm. The executive dysfunction. Smart and useless, seeing connections everywhere but drowning in the linear organizational work required to act on any of them. Panic attacks in grocery store parking lots. Going back to unassisted cognition wasn't just going back to slower. It was going back to the feeling of being broken in a world that demanded you think one thing at a time. We were self-medicating. The drug just happened to work. Unassisted thought had started to feel slow the way walking feels slow when you've learned to drive. You can still do it. You just don't want to.

I'm compressing months here. The specific sequence matters less than the shape. Revelation, fascination, monetization, enshittification, fear, backlash. Always in that order. Always faster than anyone expected. A senator from Ohio called the amped a "cognitive elite" and demanded mandatory testing and public registries. A coalition of disability rights organizations argued, correctly, that the

term "amplitude" implied that non-amped people were diminished. An Oxford philosopher named Margaret Eland wrote a widely shared essay arguing that the amped represented "the first truly involuntary aristocracy, a class distinction written not in wealth or education but in neural architecture." That phrase got picked up everywhere. I saw it on protest signs. What the signs didn't say, what the "cognitive elite" narrative got painfully wrong, was that many of the amped had been struggling *before*. Undiagnosed. Underemployed. Some had been on disability. The "aristocracy" was full of people who'd spent years unable to hold down a linear workflow.

And the tools kept coming. That was the thing nobody talked about, the engine underneath all of it. The AI platforms weren't being deployed because they helped people think. They were being deployed because they reduced headcount and increased throughput and made quarterly numbers move in the right direction. Schools adopted them to cut costs. Hospitals adopted them to process more patients. Employers mandated them because the employers who mandated them first were eating everyone else's lunch. People who said the tools were destroying their ability to concentrate were told to use the tools' built-in focus features. The same technology that was causing the fog was being marketed as the cure for the fog, and the people making that argument were not lying, exactly — the tools *did* help, the way a painkiller helps a man whose shoes are too tight. And meanwhile there were people like us, the 0.3%, for whom the shoes had never fit and the tools were the first time anything had, and we were being held up as proof that the system worked. *Look, these people are thriving*. Nobody mentioned that we were thriving the way a weed thrives in a crack — not because the concrete is good for weeds but because the concrete broke in the one place where our roots happened to be.

But it wasn't just class anxiety. This was happening in a world already fractured by a decade of algorithmic tribalism. People had spent years being sorted into information silos, trained by engagement algorithms to see different realities, to treat disagreement as betrayal. The attention economy had already shattered any shared sense of what was true. And now the amped could see *all* the realities at once, could hold the whole fragmented landscape in their heads simultaneously, and this made them threatening to everyone. The left feared a technocratic overclass. The right feared a globalist hive mind. The amped refused to pick a side in a culture war that everyone else was trapped in, and the refusal itself became an accusation. Street protests in Austin, in Berlin, in Taipei. A man

in Leeds was fired from his teaching position after testing positive, then rehired after a lawsuit, then fired again on an unrelated pretext. Everyone understood it was not unrelated.

And threading through all of it, the recruitment. Discreet approaches. Astronomical salary offers from firms and agencies and organizations that preferred not to be named. The amped were valuable, not as people but as processors. And the dependency made them easy to recruit: offer a work environment built around constant cognitive engagement, a steady feed of hard problems, and the amped would come willingly, gratefully. The way you'd go willingly to the only place that served the thing you needed.

I was being pulled in two directions. I was a scientist. I had data. I had a responsibility to help people understand what was happening, to build frameworks, to bring some rigor to a conversation that was generating more heat than light. But I was also increasingly certain that understanding was beside the point. The change was happening. It was happening inside me. It was going to keep happening whether anyone understood it or not, and the scholarly impulse to study it, to pin it down, classify it, write papers about it. I keep thinking of a person trying to write a field guide to the weather while standing in a hurricane. Except even that makes it sound too dramatic. It was more like writing a field guide to breathing. The thing you're studying is the thing you're doing. You can't get outside it.

Alan Restrepo called me into his office. This was in late April. The dogwoods were blooming outside his window in that aggressive way they have, just absolutely committing to it, white and dense and slightly obscene. Late-afternoon light came through them in patches and moved across his desk when the wind picked up.

"You've been getting calls," he said.

"Some."

"From?"

"Lumen. DARPA. Two hedge funds I'd never heard of. A think tank called the Meridian Group, which I looked up and which appears to be funded by three different defense agencies wearing a trenchcoat."

He almost smiled. "What did you tell them?"

"No. To all of them. For now."

"For now." He took off his glasses and cleaned them. "Mara, your research position is up for renewal in September. The committee has questions."

"About my data."

"About you. About whether you can objectively study a phenomenon you're personally experiencing. The conflict of interest is—" He put the glasses back on, took them off again. "Look, I'm on your side. But the conflict of interest is obvious."

"Every immunologist has an immune system, Alan."

"Every immunologist isn't undergoing an unprecedented immunological transformation that they can't explain."

He had me there. He put his glasses back on. The light through the dogwoods made patterns on his desk that looked, for a moment, like a network diagram. I blinked and they were just shadows again. Or rather: they were both. I could see both. That was exactly the kind of thing Alan was worried about.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked.

"Publish. Get the data out. Let other people replicate or refute it. That's your protection." He paused. "That's the only protection that means anything in this building."

He was right. I knew he was right. I also knew, in the expanding part of my mind that kept seeing further than I wanted to, that publication would change nothing. The data would be absorbed into the noise, processed through the same partisan filters that processed everything else now. The conversation had already moved past the point where data mattered, into the territory of identity and fear and tribal affiliation where facts go to be fitted into stories people already believe.

I published anyway. Because some part of me was still the person who believed in the slow accumulation of evidence, the patient work of science, the idea that understanding *could* matter even when it didn't seem to. That part of me was getting smaller. But it was still there. I owed it something.

A writer named Martin Ashe had been writing about technology and consciousness for two decades, had a following large enough to matter and small enough to remain credible, and had recently published a book called *The Next Fire* that I'd read in forty minutes and that had taken him, I learned later, three years to write. The book argued that every major cognitive technology in human history — fire, language, writing, the printing press, the telegraph, the internet — had produced the same three-phase pattern: a small minority adapted quickly, the majority struggled, and the species as a whole was permanently altered. He called it "the selection event" and he was explicit about the Darwinian frame: each new fire was a selection pressure, and the population that emerged on the other

side was never the same population that went in. Some phenotypes flourished. Others didn't. He borrowed from Richerson and Boyd's work on gene-culture coevolution but pushed it further; where they saw culture as the primary driver of human evolution, Ashe argued that technology was the primary driver of culture, which made it the hidden engine of natural selection itself. The divergence wasn't a medical curiosity. It was natural selection, operating in real time, on cognitive fitness.

I met him at a conference in May. One of those events where serious people gather to discuss serious topics in a renovated warehouse with exposed ductwork and \$14 coffees, and everyone is wearing lanyards and the lanyards have first names in a font size that implies you should already know who these people are. The fluorescent strips overhead buzzed at a frequency I could now hear distinctly, a thin whine nobody else seemed bothered by. Ashe was taller than I'd expected and older, with the kind of face that looked assembled from interesting parts that didn't quite match: heavy brows over unexpectedly gentle eyes, a jaw that suggested stubbornness, a mouth that kept almost smiling.

"Dr. Chen," he said. "I've read your paper. The outlier data."

"And?"

"And I think you're being too careful."

"I'm a scientist. Careful is the job description."

"Careful is the job description for normal science. What you're studying isn't normal science." He picked up one of the \$14 coffees, looked at it, set it down. "It's a species-level event. You're documenting it with the tools of normal science, and that's fine, that's responsible, but it's also like using a thermometer to measure an earthquake. You get accurate temperature readings. They won't tell you anything about the earthquake."

"What would you suggest?"

He looked at me for a moment with an expression I'd come to recognize from other amped people, the fast layered assessment, the multiple threads being evaluated at once. Then I realized, with a small shock, that he wasn't amped at all. He was just very smart and very practiced at thinking quickly. The two things look similar from the outside. From the inside they're as different as walking and flying.

"I'd suggest you ask the question you're avoiding," he said. "Not *what is happening to these people* but *what happens to everyone else*." He gestured broadly, taking in the warehouse, the conference, the parking lot outside. "This isn't a

medical curiosity. This is the fire. Your 0.3 percent aren't patients. They're the first phenotype adapted to breathe smoke."

"That's a metaphor, not an argument."

"Every good argument started as a metaphor. Name one that didn't. Go ahead, I'll wait."

I couldn't, actually, though I wanted to try. He was right about the question I'd been avoiding. I'd been studying the amped, studying myself, with the professional focus of someone determined to understand the mechanism, the etiology, the developmental trajectory. I hadn't wanted to look up from the data long enough to ask the obvious thing: if 0.3% of the population was undergoing a cognitive transformation, what did that mean for the other 99.7%? Not abstractly or as a policy question, but in the daily machinery of human civilization. What happened when a tiny minority could think in ways the vast majority couldn't follow? What happened to democracy, to education, to the basic social contract that assumed a roughly shared cognitive reality?

Martin Ashe had the answer, or at least an answer. The same thing that had always happened. The species adapted, or it didn't. Some phenotypes flourished, and some didn't, and the ones who didn't either figured out how to live in a world shaped by the ones who did, or they were left behind. This had happened with literacy. With numeracy. With every previous fire. The only difference was speed.

"Every previous transition took generations," he said. We were sitting outside now, on a bench, the paper cups of coffee going cold between us. Pigeons doing whatever pigeons think they're doing near our feet. "Writing took centuries to rewire the literate brain. The printing press took decades. The internet took years. This is taking months. The adaptation that used to happen across generations is happening within individual lifetimes, and only in some individuals, and that compression is what makes this one dangerous. Not because the fire is hotter, but because some people are catching fire while others are still trying to figure out what's burning."

I asked him what he thought should be done.

He laughed. A genuine laugh, not bitter. It surprised me.

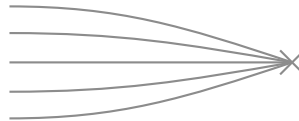
"Done. I love that word. Done." He drank his cold coffee, made a face. "It implies agency. As if someone is in a position to *do* something about a species-level selection event." He looked at the pigeons. "Nothing should be done. Nothing *can* be done. The question isn't whether this is happening. It's whether

the rest of humanity survives the transition. And I don't mean physically. I mean as a civilization. As a way of being that values things the amped are going to stop valuing, because they won't be able to see the point anymore."

"That's bleak."

"It's honest. I notice people keep confusing those."

I went home that night and sat on the couch next to Leon and tried to watch a movie. I can feel, even now, the pull of the two worlds I was living in. The world of the amped, where everything was accelerating, possibility expanding so fast it was almost vertigo. And the world of this apartment, this couch, this man, where things moved at the pace of coffee and conversation and the slow unwinding of a day. They were pulling apart inside me.



Correlated Failure

THE CONVERGENCE STARTED SMALL. So small that I almost missed it, and I was looking for it, which tells you something about how subtle the early stages were. Or, and this is the possibility that keeps me up at night, though "night" and "up" have both lost some of their meaning for me, the convergence itself made it harder to see. Water can't see its own current.

It was David who first mentioned it. We were on a call, him in Burlington, me in my office with the door shut and the blinds drawn because the department had started to feel like a place where I was being watched rather than a place where I worked. He said, almost offhandedly, the way you'd mention the weather: "Did you see Wen's analysis?"

I had. Wen had sent it around two days earlier. A systems-level look at supply chain fragility. Sharp, well-structured, deeply sourced.

"Yeah. Good piece."

"It's identical to mine."

I paused. "Identical how?"

"I wrote a memo for a client last week. Different client, different purpose. I hadn't seen Wen's analysis. We'd never discussed it, not once, not even in passing." He took a breath. "Same argument. Same structure. Same three subordinate claims, in the same order. Same conclusions. And Mara, this is the part that's. Same two points where we both hedged. Same hedges."

"David, that could be—"

"Coincidence. I know. Except I checked with Rani, and she wrote something similar three days before either of us. Different context entirely. But the

underlying analysis is the same. The bones are identical."

What David was describing landed on me slowly. Not a single flash but a spreading thing, like stepping into shade on a hot day and feeling the coolness move across your skin, and then realizing the shade is not from a tree or a building but from something much larger, something you can't see the edges of.

I pulled up all three and laid them side by side on my screen. The pattern was immediately visible. Not in the language, which differed, or the tone, which reflected their individual styles, but in the *architecture*. The same inferential scaffolding. The same leaps made at the same points. The same conclusions arrived at through the same chain of reasoning. And, this was the part that made my stomach drop, the same blind spots. All three of them had missed the same thing, a factor that a specialist would have caught immediately. They'd missed it independently, because their expanding cognitive capacity had led them, independently, to the same high-altitude view, and from that altitude the ground-level detail was invisible.

This is the thing about seeing further. You see further in every direction simultaneously, and the consistency of the view can trick you into thinking you've seen everything. You haven't. You've seen everything *from where you're standing*. But you're all standing in the same place.

I gathered more examples. They came easily. A neuroscientist in Munich and a software architect in Seoul had independently developed the same theoretical framework for modeling consciousness, different terminology but identical structures, within the same ten-day window. An amped epidemiologist in London and an amped ecologist in Vancouver had arrived at the same model of how a particular pathogen would move through a population, through completely different disciplinary pathways, and both had missed the same variable: the behavioral response of the people in the path. How they'd actually react, what they'd refuse to do, the messy human part. Both were reasoning at a scale where individual behavior became noise. In each case the convergence was invisible to the people experiencing it. David didn't feel like he was thinking the same way as Wen. He felt like he was thinking clearly.

I called Wen to talk about it. She listened carefully, the way she always did. Wen's listening had a quality of total absorption, almost uncomfortable, as if she were placing your words on some internal scale against everything she already knew. Then she said something I've thought about every day since. Or what passes for thinking and every day in whatever I've become.

"You're describing a monoculture," she said. Wen the biology teacher.

"Yes."

"You know what happens to monocultures."

I did. Every farmer knows. Diversity is expensive and inefficient and also the only thing that keeps a species alive.

I wrote a paper. I wrote it in two hours; that had changed too, not just the speed of thought but the speed of translation from thought to language. I titled it "Correlated Cognitive Convergence in High-Amplitude Populations" because I wanted it to sound clinical, to sound like science, to be the kind of thing that could be discussed in a seminar room rather than on a cable news panel. The argument was simple: the amped were not simply processing more information than everyone else. They were processing it in the same way. Their cognitive architectures were converging. And this convergence, which felt from inside like clarity, like finally seeing the world as it actually was, constituted a massive and potentially catastrophic vulnerability. A single failure mode, a shared blind spot, a common error in reasoning, a bias that none of them could detect because all of them shared it, could cascade through the entire amped population at once. Not because they were connected but because they were *correlated*. Identical processors running identical software will crash for identical reasons. This is why RAID arrays use different drive manufacturers. This is why banks stress-test against correlated defaults. We knew this. We'd always known it. We just hadn't applied it to cognition.

The actual experience of writing that paper was a conversation between two versions of myself: the scientist who could see the pattern and needed to name it, and the amped person who could feel, even as I typed, the pull of the same convergence I was describing. The comfortable gravity of shared perception. The warmth of a worldview that fit together like a jigsaw puzzle completing itself. These two weren't arguing. They coexisted in a state of mutual, irreconcilable awareness, each one watching the other.

I sent the paper to David and Rani and Wen and to the thirty-one others I was in contact with. The responses came back within hours, and they were, this is the part that still gets to me, or that I think would get to me if I still experienced it the way I used to, all the same response. Not word-for-word. But the same shape. Every one of them agreed the convergence was real. Every one of them agreed that it constituted a theoretical risk. And every one of them felt, viscerally and unshakeably, that the risk was manageable. That their shared perspective was, on

balance, more accurate than any individual perspective could be. That seeing the same things was not a bug but a feature, because the things they were seeing were *true*.

They could see the danger. They couldn't feel it.

Fiction is the part where the cost became real for me. Not abstractly, not as a data point in my research, but in the specific, bodily, irreversible way that loss actually works.

I had been a reader my entire life. Not a voracious reader; I didn't devour books or keep lists or participate in the particular performance of literary consumption that some people mistake for actual engagement with a text. I read slowly and with a serious pleasure that I associated, privately, with something like prayer. Not the content of prayer but the posture of it. The attention. A novel, a good one, could take me weeks. The weeks were the point. I didn't read to finish. I read to be inside.

Sometime in late May, I can't give you an exact date because the change was gradual, a dimming rather than a switch, I picked up a novel I'd been looking forward to, a new translation of Yoko Ogawa, and I read the first chapter, and as I read I found that I could see the construction. Not in the way that any attentive reader sees construction, the craft, the technique, the choices a writer makes. I could see *all* of it. Simultaneously. The narrative mechanism laid bare, every load-bearing wall visible, every emotional lever exposed. The calibration of withholding and disclosure that creates suspense, the exact placement of the image on page seven that would pay off on page forty-three, the way the sentence rhythms were designed to produce a feeling of accumulation that the reader would experience as their own emotional response rather than as a manufactured effect.

The whole thing was transparent. I could see through it the way you can see through a window, and what was on the other side was not the story but the author, sitting at a desk, making decisions. I could see the decisions and the reasons for the decisions and the life material that informed them. None of this was wrong; the author was talented, the decisions were good. But the experience of reading had been replaced by the experience of *watching someone construct an experience for me*. Watching someone cook a meal is not eating it.

I tried other books. I tried poetry, which had always felt different to me, more resistant to analysis, more dependent on sound and rhythm and the spaces between words. Same thing happened. I could see the gears. The line break that

created surprise. The sonic relationship between the third word and the seventh that produced an unconscious sense of inevitability. The image that seemed natural but was as precisely placed as a structural beam. I tried Celan. I tried Bishop. I tried Szyborska's "Could Have," which had made me cry at twenty-two. I could see exactly why it had made me cry. I could see the mechanism. The mechanism was beautiful. I felt nothing.

I'm not simplifying this for you. This is what it was like. This is one of the few things I can describe exactly as I experienced it, because the loss of fiction is a loss I can translate without distortion. You know what it means to be inside a story. You know the pleasure of forgetting, for a while, that you are a person with a body and a job and a list of things to do. You know the way a good sentence can make you feel something that no direct statement of the same content could produce. I am telling you that this is gone for me. Not because I became stupid or because the books became bad. Because I became unable to not see how they worked, and the seeing killed the feeling.

I sat on the couch one evening in early June with the Ogawa novel on my lap, open to a page I'd already read three times, and I cried. Not dramatically. A few minutes of it, chest hurting, vision blurring, feeling sorry for myself and embarrassed about feeling sorry for myself. Leon was in the kitchen. He came out and sat next to me and didn't ask what was wrong, which was the right thing. I leaned into him and he held me, and while he held me I could see every neurochemical reason that his embrace made me feel better: the oxytocin release, the cortisol reduction, the somatosensory processing of pressure and warmth. The seeing didn't diminish the feeling, not in that moment. But it accompanied the feeling like a subtitle.

Leon left on a Thursday.

I want to be precise about this because precision is one of the things I have left, and because the way he left matters, and because I owe it to him, to the person he was, the person he still is somewhere out there in the world I can no longer fully inhabit, to get it right.

He didn't leave dramatically. He didn't throw things. He did what Leon always did: the most thoughtful version of the hardest thing. He came home from school, still teaching, still grading papers with a red pen, still trying to get seventeen-year-olds to care about the Missouri Compromise in a world where caring about anything for more than forty seconds was becoming a clinical achievement. He came home and put his bag down by the door and stood in the

hallway and looked at me, and I could see everything in his face. I could see he'd made this decision three days ago. I could see he'd practiced what he was going to say, probably in the car, probably out loud, because that's what Leon did when he needed to get something right. I could see the set of his jaw, the one that meant he was holding back emotion because he wanted to be clear, not cruel. I could see that he still loved me. I could see that the love was not enough. I could see that he knew this. I could see that the knowing hurt him in a specific place, the right side of his chest, radiating into his shoulder, because he always carried pain there, a somatic habit from childhood that he wasn't aware of and that I'd noticed years ago but had never mentioned, because some things are kinder left unspoken.

"I can't reach you anymore," he said.

God, I wish I could tell you that I just heard those words and felt them and that was it. But I heard them the way you hear a chord played on an instrument with a thousand strings, every string a different register of understanding: linguistic, emotional, historical, somatic, relational, predictive. I heard every string and also the whole chord and also its resonance against every other conversation we'd ever had. All of it present. All of it at once.

"I know," I said.

"I'm not angry."

"I know that too."

"Do you — do you know everything I'm going to say?"

I looked at him. "Probably."

He smiled. A man who found something darkly funny about his own heartbreak.

"Then I don't need to say it," he said.

"You can. If you want to."

"I want to." He sat down in the chair by the window, the one we called the reading chair even though neither of us read there anymore. "You haven't done anything wrong. I need you to hear that. You didn't choose this, and even if you did, you didn't choose it over me. It's not about choosing. It's about the fact that you're going somewhere I can't follow, and staying is..." He stopped. Not for effect. Because the word wasn't there yet. He rubbed his face. "Staying is like standing next to a bonfire. You can feel the heat. You can see the light. But the fire doesn't need you, and you can't touch it, and after a while the heat just. It starts to hurt."

"Leon."

"I know. I know you understand. That's," he sort of laughed, or started to. "Do you see? That's part of it. I know you understand, fully, completely, in ways I can't even imagine. And I can't be fully understood like that and still feel like a person. I need to be a little bit opaque."

He was right about all of it. I could see every layer of the rightness: the psychological truth, the relational truth, the philosophical truth about opacity and selfhood and the necessary incompleteness of knowing another person. And underneath all the seeing, a grief so plain it predated language. The animal fact of someone you love walking away from you. The grief and the seeing existed in the same moment and neither one cancelled the other out.

He packed a bag. He called his sister. He stood at the door.

"Take care of yourself, Mara."

"You too."

"I mean it."

"I know you do."

He left. The door closed with the soft click that our door always made, the same sound I'd heard ten thousand times and was now hearing for the last time. I stood in the hallway and held still and let the grief move through me, and even as I let it move I was watching it move, tracking its path through my nervous system the way a seismologist tracks a tremor. Feeling it and measuring it at the same time. I stood there for a long time. The light changed. The apartment got dark.

Later, it might have been hours, it might have been twenty minutes, time had stopped behaving, I went to the kitchen and stood where we'd sat on the floor that night in March, the night of the blender conversation, and I looked at the cabinet under the sink, which was still open. The cleaning supplies were still arranged the way we'd arranged them together. The blender was gone because we'd decided to give it away. I remembered it perfectly. The perfection of the memory was useless, because the person I'd made the decision with was gone.

I called Rani. Not because I wanted comfort; I didn't think I could be comforted, and I was mostly right. I called because she was the only person I knew who might understand what it felt like to grieve with a mind that couldn't stop analyzing its own grief.

"Leon left," I said.

She was quiet for a moment. Then: "How much can you feel?"

It was the right question, and the one no one else would have thought to ask. Not *are you okay* or *what happened* or *I'm sorry*. How much can you feel. Because

she knew, she was the same kind of person I was now, that the question wasn't whether the grief was real but whether the expanded mind could let the grief be grief, or whether it would immediately convert it into data, into pattern, into something understood and therefore diminished.

"About sixty percent," I said. "The other forty is analysis."

"It'll shift. The ratio." Her voice was flat, factual. "Over the next few days, the analysis wins. It always does now."

"Is that what happened with you and James?"

"James left eight weeks ago." She paused. "By the end of the first week, I could describe exactly what I was feeling, where each feeling originated, what evolutionary purpose it served, how it would progress, approximately when it would fade. The description was perfect. And the feeling was still there, underneath the description, but it was like—" She stopped. "You know those nature documentaries where they show a time-lapse of a flower blooming and dying? You can see the beauty. But you can't smell the flower. You're watching from outside time."

"I don't want to watch from outside."

"I know. But you will."

She was right. By the following Tuesday, the grief had finished its transit from feeling to fact. I still carry it. But I carry it the way a geologist carries a rock sample from a site she'll never return to. Unable to feel its weight as anything other than mass.



Growing, Not Building

I WROTE THE PAPER on correlated failure in three versions. The first was the clinical one I described earlier, dense with data, careful in its claims, structured for peer review. The second was a policy brief, shorter, aimed at the handful of government officials who were beginning to take the amped seriously as a governance challenge rather than a media curiosity. The third was something I hadn't planned to write: a personal essay, the kind of thing I'd never published and had always privately distrusted, in which I tried to describe what the convergence felt like from inside. The comfort of shared perception. The way it mimicked understanding so perfectly that you couldn't tell the difference between genuine clarity and collective bias unless you specifically looked for the seam, and even then the seam was hard to see, because the looking itself was shaped by the convergence.

I published all three. *Cognition* accepted the clinical version within a week, the fastest review process in the journal's history. I attributed this less to the paper's merits than to the editors' awareness that anything about the amped would generate enormous readership, but I was probably being uncharitable. The paper was good; it was the best work I'd done. Two of the three reviewers were amped themselves, which meant they could see immediately that the argument was sound, which was either a point in favor of the review or a demonstration of the exact problem I was writing about, depending on how you looked at it. The policy brief went to three congressional offices and a Senate subcommittee and disappeared into the bureaucratic digestive system without a trace, which is what policy briefs do. Nobody has ever changed their mind because of a policy brief.

The personal essay was published in an online magazine I'd never heard of before it solicited me and that had, it turned out, three million readers, most of them under thirty-five.

The response split along exactly the lines I'd predicted, which was itself a demonstration of the problem I was describing.

Non-amped readers responded with alarm. The essay confirmed what many already feared: that the amped were not just different but were *converging* in their difference, becoming a uniform cognitive class with shared perceptions and shared blind spots and, potentially, shared interests that diverged from those of the general population. The op-eds wrote themselves. "Cognitive Oligarchy." "The Hive Mind Next Door." Somebody drew a cartoon, the amped as identical robots standing in a field of withered flowers, that was crude and unfair and also, in a way the cartoonist probably didn't intend, not entirely wrong.

Amped readers responded with recognition, and then dismissal. Every amped person I heard from agreed that the convergence was real. Every one of them could see the risk. And every one of them felt, with a calm certainty that came from a worldview so internally consistent that doubt slid off it, that the risk was manageable. That their shared perception wasn't bias but accuracy. That they saw the same things because the same things were true.

"You're right that we're converging," Rani said on a call. "But convergence toward truth isn't the same as convergence toward error. If a thousand scientists independently verify the speed of light and get the same answer, that's not a vulnerability. We call it physics."

"Unless they're all using the same flawed instrument," I said.

"Okay, so what's the flaw?"

"I don't know. That's the point. If I could see the flaw, it wouldn't be a shared blind spot."

She was quiet for a second. "So you're arguing for the existence of an error you can't identify, against a convergence you can verify, on the grounds that the convergence itself prevents you from seeing the error."

"Yes."

"You hear how that sounds."

I did. It sounded like unfalsifiable reasoning. It sounded like conspiracy logic. It sounded like exactly the kind of argument that a person who couldn't accept the implications of their own transformation would make to justify clinging to a framework they were outgrowing. And I couldn't prove it wasn't. Maybe the

convergence was fine. Maybe we were all seeing the truth and the truth looked the same from every angle because that's what truth does.

But I didn't think so. And the gap between thinking and proving was where I lived now, uncomfortably, like someone standing in a doorway between two rooms.

I tried other approaches. I tried presenting the correlated failure risk to non-amped audiences, thinking that they at least would feel the danger even if they couldn't see it with the precision the amped could. I gave a talk at a technology policy conference in Washington. Hotel ballroom. Rows of padded chairs, the grey light of an overcast afternoon through floor-to-ceiling windows along one wall. The kind of venue where every presentation runs seven minutes over and nobody adjusts the schedule. I laid out the evidence: the identical analyses, the shared blind spots, the monoculture analogy. And I watched the audience, which was composed of smart, well-intentioned people who worked in government and think tanks and NGOs, and I could see them trying to do two things at once. Trying to understand what I was saying. And trying to decide whether they trusted me. That's what non-amped people did now whenever an amped person spoke. They listened to the words and simultaneously evaluated the source, because the source was a member of the very group being discussed, and their inability to independently verify anything I was saying made trust the only available currency.

Trust was in short supply.

A woman in the third row raised her hand. "Dr. Chen, you're telling us the amped are a risk. But you're amped yourself. How do we know this isn't—" She hesitated. "I don't want to be rude, but how do we know this isn't a way of positioning yourself as the reasonable one? The one amped person we can trust?"

It was a fair question. It was the question I would have asked. And I didn't have a good answer, because the answer was: *you can't know. You have to decide whether to trust me based on evidence you can't fully evaluate, which is exactly the epistemic problem that the existence of the amped has created.* That was true but unhelpful, and saying it out loud would have made me sound either arrogant or evasive. Both of which would have undermined the point.

"You can't," I said. "All I can tell you is that I'm publishing my data and my methodology, and I'm asking people to check my work. That's the best I've got."

She nodded. She didn't look satisfied. Nobody in the room looked satisfied. I stood at the podium and felt the loneliness of being the only person in a room

who could see both sides of a divide and who was trusted by neither, because each side suspected me of belonging to the other.

Martin Ashe was in the audience. Afterward he found me in the lobby.

"That was brave," he said.

"Brave and useless."

"Most brave things are. At first." He bought me a coffee from the hotel stand. It was terrible. We stood by a window looking out at the parking lot, which was full of black sedans with government plates, and I remember thinking how strange it was that the aesthetics of power hadn't changed at all, that the cars were still black, the suits still dark, the coffee still bad, even as the thing they were trying to govern was changing faster than they could schedule meetings about it.

"You know the problem, right?" he said. "The real problem, underneath the one you were talking about in there."

"Tell me."

"You can't warn people about a fire by showing them temperature data. You have to make them feel the heat. And you can't make them feel the heat, because the heat is happening inside your head, and you can't open your head and let them stand inside it."

"So what do I do?"

"Keep talking. Keep publishing. Keep being the person in the doorway." He drank his coffee and winced. "Someone has to stand there. It's a terrible place but it's the only one where you can see into both rooms."

The offer came from the Office of Science and Technology Policy. Not directly; these things never come directly. A former colleague who'd moved to Washington called me on a Tuesday afternoon with the kind of rehearsed casualness that signals a significant conversation. "How are you, how's work, so listen."

"There's a working group," she said. "New. Small. Advisory role, technically, but the kind of advisory role where the advice actually matters, where people in the room have the direct ear of people in the other room, if you know what I mean. They need someone who can speak both languages."

"Both languages."

"Amped and everyone else. You're the only person I know who can do that. Who's amped and is still—" She stopped. "I don't know how to say this without it sounding wrong."

"Still worried."

"Still accessible." A long exhale. "Still thinking about what this means for people who aren't like you. Most of the amped I've talked to, they try, but they can't hold the other perspective long enough to make it useful. They sort of. It's like they're translating from a language they've forgotten. You can still do that. Or you could three months ago." Pause. "Can you still?"

The honest answer was that I didn't know. I could feel my "normal" thinking, the slow, linear, one-thing-at-a-time mode that had served me for forty-one years, fading like a radio station you're driving away from. Still audible but increasingly filled with static. The static was not unpleasant, it was just relentless, and each day there was a little less signal and a little more of the new thing, the expanded thing, the way of thinking that was richer and faster and more comprehensive and also, in a way I couldn't quite pin down, lonelier. Or emptier. It moved me further from everyone I'd ever loved and closer to people I recognized but didn't yet know, all of us becoming more like each other every day.

"I can still do it," I said. "For now."

"For now?"

"Ask me again in six months and I might give you a different answer."

She paused. "Is that a yes?"

I looked out my window. The campus was doing what campuses do in late spring: students on the grass, someone throwing a frisbee badly, a couple arguing under a tree. The argument was winding down. I could see its emotional topology: who was winning, who was about to concede, the hand through the hair that would signal the shift. I could also, if I squinted, remember what it had been like to argue like that, when every moment was genuinely uncertain and the uncertainty was the whole point.

"It's a yes," I said. "While I can still say yes in a way that means anything."

The amped were not a group. That's what I'd been assuming, and that's what everyone was assuming, media, government, the amped themselves. A group of individuals who'd undergone a cognitive transformation. Different backgrounds, different personalities, different life stories. We disagreed about politics and aesthetics and whether it was acceptable to eat meat. We were individuals who shared a trait, the way all left-handed people share a trait without being a single organism.

But that's not what was happening.

Here is the simple version, and it is the accurate one:

We were growing.

Not building. Not organizing. Not collaborating, though from the outside it looked like collaboration. We were growing in the way that a body grows. Not by assembling parts but by a process of differentiation and integration that no one was directing, that had no blueprint, that was emerging from the interaction of twenty-four million individual transformations happening simultaneously around the world.

I first saw it clearly — or as clearly as someone inside a process can see the process — during a two-week period in July when I was preparing my testimony for the Senate subcommittee, the policy work my former colleague had drawn me into. I was reading everything I could find about the amped. Research papers, government reports, corporate analyses, the informal channels where amped people talked to each other in conversations that moved too fast for anyone else to follow. And as I read, as I held all of these inputs simultaneously in the expanded space of my attention, I began to see a pattern that was not in any individual document but in the relationship between them.

The amped were specializing. Not consciously, not by agreement, but organically, the way cells in a developing embryo specialize. Some becoming liver, some becoming bone, some becoming nerve. Each one responding to its local chemical environment, none of them following a plan, all of them producing, collectively, an organism. Rani's structural thinking was deepening and narrowing. David's pattern recognition was becoming more specifically tuned to financial systems. Wen's biological intuition was becoming something I didn't have a name for, something that went past ecology into a kind of systems perception that I'd only seen hints of. Jess Hartwell at Lumen was developing a facility for mass communication that went beyond persuasion into something more like resonance. Each of them was becoming more different from each other in their specific capacities while becoming more similar in their underlying cognitive architecture. The way a heart cell and a neuron do completely different things but share the same DNA.

I mentioned this to Wen on a call, and she went quiet for a long time, long by amped standards, which meant about four seconds, and then she said: "Morphogenesis."

"What?"

"Morphogenesis. That's what this is." I could hear her getting excited, the way she did when a framework clicked into place, her voice going up slightly at the ends of phrases. "The process by which an undifferentiated mass of cells becomes

a structured organism. No cell knows the plan. No cell is in charge. Each cell responds to local signals: chemical gradients, mechanical pressure, signals from its neighbors. And the interaction of all those local responses produces global structure. Heart here. Lung there. Brain in between. Nobody drew the blueprint. The blueprint *emerges*."

"You're saying we're cells."

"I'm saying we're behaving like cells. I'm saying the pattern is the same." She paused. "And I'm saying," her voice shifted, got softer, more careful, "that if we are cells, then we don't get to choose what organ we become. The organism decides. And the organism doesn't ask."

I'm simplifying this for you. Hearing Wen say it was not like hearing an argument but like having a lens placed over my vision that made visible something already there. The way a polarizing filter reveals stress patterns in glass. The patterns exist whether you see them or not. The seeing doesn't create them. But it makes them impossible to unsee.

And what was I becoming? The one who could see the pattern. Who stood slightly outside the organism and described it: *this is what you are, this is where you're going, this is what you'll lose along the way*. The tissue between the organs. The part that held the rest of it together by being, itself, nothing in particular.

This is what I meant when I said the change felt like relief. Not gaining something new. Finding your function. I'd understood this about myself back in January, sitting in the testing room — that the corkboard and the green notebook had never been discipline. That they'd been a workaround. But understanding it and *living* past it are different things. By July the workaround was gone and I didn't miss it, the way you don't miss a cast after the bone has healed. What I felt wasn't just cognitive expansion. It was the end of a lifelong fight I'd been too close to recognize as a fight. The bodily satisfaction of doing the thing you were made to do, the way a heart feels (if a heart feels anything) when it beats. I was made for this. I was made to stand at the boundary between the amped and the world and translate, and the translation was not a compromise or a concession but a calling, in the old religious sense, a calling I hadn't chosen and couldn't refuse, and it was consuming, day by day, the person who had once been Mara Chen, cognitive scientist, reader of novels, lover of Leon, woman who cried on the couch because she couldn't lose herself in a book.

That person was still there. Getting smaller. Fading. But she was there, and she was the one who could see the danger that the organism couldn't see, because

the organism had no outside from which to see itself. She was the outside.

She was disappearing.

I understood then, all at once and irreversibly, the way the amped understand things, that my dual perspective was temporary. A bridge I was standing on while the bridge dissolved beneath my feet. Every day I understood the amped a little better and the rest of humanity a little less. The understanding moved in only one direction. The day was coming, sooner than I wanted to think about, when I would be fully inside the organism and the bridge would be gone, and nobody would be able to build it again. You can only build that kind of bridge from the middle. The middle wouldn't exist anymore.

The amped were growing. Not building. Growing. And growth, unlike building, is not something you can pause or direct or reverse. Growth is what happens when the conditions are right and the organism is ready. You don't build a forest. You don't build a coral reef. You don't build a mind. You create the conditions and stand back, and the thing that emerges is not the thing you planned, because you didn't plan it, because it wasn't the kind of thing that can be planned.

I had three months, maybe six. Three months in which I could still speak both languages. Three months in which the woman I used to be and the thing I was becoming could coexist in the same body, looking at each other across a gap that narrowed every day.

After that, I would be something else. Something that could see further and hold more and process faster than any human being who had ever lived. Something that would share its perception with twenty-four million others and would lose, in the sharing, the singular, unrepeatable way of seeing that had once been mine alone. Something that would remember Leon and would remember the novels and would remember the kitchen floor and the cedar smell and the soft click of the door, and would understand these memories perfectly. And would feel them, this is the part I can't say, the part that catches in whatever I have instead of a throat, would feel them the way you feel a weather report. Accurately. Completely. From very far away.

I sat in my office on a Tuesday in late July and I looked at the dogwoods outside Alan's window, which had finished blooming and were now just green, ordinary trees in ordinary light, and I thought: *I should write this down. All of it. While I still can. While I still remember what it was like to be a person in the old sense, the limited sense, the beautiful sense. While I still have words for it.*

This is that document. You're reading it. And I'm sorry that I can't tell you how it ends, because I'm still in the middle of it, though the middle gets smaller every day, and one day soon it'll close, and I'll be on the other side, and the woman who started writing this will be gone, but not the way you'd think — *translated* into something that can't be written down in a language you can read.

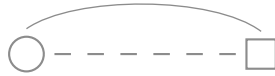
But not yet. Not today. Today I can still reach you. Today the bridge still holds.

Let me keep going while there's still time.

PART THREE

ASH





Translation

I SHOULD TELL YOU what happened next, but the difficulty, and I will keep returning to this difficulty because it is the only honest thing left for me to do, is that the language I'm using was built for a mind I no longer have. I am composing these sentences the way you might try to write a letter using only your left hand: the intent is there, the fine motor control is not, and the result carries the tremor of its own inadequacy as part of its meaning.

Let me try it simply, then.

Fourteen months passed.

The awakened did not seize power. We did not form councils or shadow governments. We did not, as the more breathless commentators had predicted, retreat to private islands or barricade ourselves inside server farms to commune with machines. What we did was, by the standards of the drama the world had prepared itself for, boring. We lost interest. The distinction matters here, and it is the point at which translation most often fails. It was not contempt. It wasn't that we looked at your concerns and found them small. We could see, with a completeness that left no room for selective attention, every concern at once, the carbon in the atmosphere and the debt on the municipal bond and the girl in Chengdu who would not eat and the particular way that sunlight refracts through ice fog in Yakutsk at eleven in the morning in January, and when you can hold all of it, none of it has the special salience that makes action feel urgent rather than arbitrary. We lost interest in the frame. The urgent, sequential, problem-solving frame through which human civilization organizes its attention. That's what we lost interest in, not in each other, not in the planet.

I realize I've already lost some of you. Let me try again with a metaphor, which is itself a concession, since the metaphor will be wrong in the specific ways that all compressions are wrong.

Think of triage. An emergency room. The system works because a nurse looks at the room and assigns priority: this person is bleeding, that person can wait. If you could somehow perceive every patient's suffering with equal clarity, if the sprained ankle and the cardiac arrest produced the same vivid undeniable signal in your mind, you would not become a better nurse. You would become paralyzed. Or you would have to invent a new kind of decision-making that didn't depend on the useful fiction that some suffering matters more than other suffering in this particular moment. That is close to what happened to us, though the analogy breaks down (they all break down) because we were not paralyzed. We were still acting, still thinking, still choosing. But the choosing had become something else. Something I don't have a word for because the word would need to carry the sensation of holding a thousand equally valid reasons to act and selecting among them with a criterion that is not importance or urgency or preference but something more like. I almost want to say aesthetic. That's wrong though, that makes it sound frivolous, and it is the least frivolous thing I have ever experienced.

The world, in any case, adjusted. Badly. There were months of genuine chaos when it became clear that the awakened were not going to play any of the roles that had been prepared for them. The tech companies that had recruited us found their new hires sitting in open-plan offices staring at dashboards with an expression that one journalist described, not inaccurately, as "the face of someone watching a child try to explain long division using finger puppets." They were not being malicious. They were operating on a different set of concerns. Most of us left those jobs within weeks. A few were fired. It didn't seem to matter much either way.

The governments that had convened task forces and drafted containment protocols found that there was nothing to contain. We weren't organizing. We weren't refusing to cooperate. We simply weren't very interested in the things they wanted us to be interested in, and it turned out that you cannot compel interest, not really, not even with national security letters and implied threats of indefinite detention. They detained a few of us, early on. The detainees cooperated fully, answered every question, submitted to every test. They also, each of them independently, began to unsettle their interrogators through a

quality of attention that one Army psychologist described in a leaked memo as "being studied by the subject." The detentions ended quietly. Nobody really talked about them afterward.

What settled out, over those months, was a rough and informal arrangement. Some of the awakened, maybe a third, took on roles as translators. Not between languages. Between systems of understanding. They sat at the interface between human institutions and the AI architectures that those institutions increasingly depended upon but could not fully comprehend, and they interpreted. The word is not wrong, though the reality was stranger than it suggests. An awakened translator working with, say, the Federal Reserve was not simply explaining what the models were doing. She was holding two complete pictures of the economy in her mind, the human picture, sequential and narrative and built on confidence and fear, and the model's picture, probabilistic and high-dimensional and utterly indifferent to narrative, and she was finding the points where they could be brought into enough alignment for decisions to be made. She was lying, in a sense. Or performing a kind of motivated simplification, giving the human decision-makers a version of reality they could act on, knowing that the full version would produce the same paralysis I described a moment ago.

I know what that sounds like. I know you might read that and hear: "The awakened are deceiving everyone, managing the normals like livestock." But the simplification was not self-serving. Most of the translators burned out within a year because the work was a kind of sustained cognitive violence, holding a shape that no longer fit your mind, hour after hour, for the benefit of people who could not see the effort it cost you. Several translators I knew developed something that looked, from the outside, like depression. It wasn't depression. It was more like the exhaustion of speaking a second language all day, every day, in a country where your first language has no speakers. You begin to forget what it felt like to think without translating. You begin to wonder if you are still thinking at all, or merely performing thought in a foreign grammar.

You might ask what happened to correlated failure. My old warning. The vulnerability I had spent months trying to make people see. The answer is that I was right, and that being right did not matter. That is a sentence I never could have written when I was a scientist, when rightness was the currency of my profession, when "I told you so" had weight. In March, a coordinated disinformation attack, state-sponsored and sophisticated, designed specifically to exploit the perceptual convergence of the awakened, succeeded in convincing

forty-three translators across seven countries that a particular geopolitical event was unfolding in a way that it was not. They all saw the same false pattern. They all reported it with the same confidence. The decisions that followed cost, depending on whose estimate you use, somewhere between eleven and forty billion dollars and at least two hundred lives. The awakened who had been exploited recognized the failure within hours. Some resigned. Others did not. The ones who did not are the ones I worry about most, because their reasoning, which I can see from inside, because it is my reasoning, goes like this: the failure happened because we were not integrated enough. More connection, they believe, will solve the problem that connection created. I recognize this logic. It is the logic of every tool that has ever remade the species that used it. The answer to the problems of fire was more fire. The answer to the problems of language was more language. Whether the answer to the problems of convergence is more convergence, I genuinely do not know. This is one of the few questions that my expanded cognition cannot resolve, and I think the inability to resolve it is itself informative. Some problems are not puzzles. They are conditions.

Another third withdrew. Some moved to rural areas, small towns, places where the density of information was low enough that their minds could rest, though rest is also the wrong word. In a place like that, with few inputs, the difference between their cognition and normal cognition was less violently obvious. They could live inside themselves with less friction. A few of them, I heard, found ways to be useful in their communities. Fixing things. Farming. Work that engaged the body and let the mind idle, or whatever the awakened equivalent of idling was. A chess grandmaster playing checkers, maybe, operating on such a reduced subset of capacity that the experience had a meditative quality. One woman I knew, a former computational linguist from Taipei, moved to a sheep farm in Montana and reported, in one of the rare messages she sent, that she had found a kind of peace in the repetitive work of shearing, which occupied her hands fully and her mind not at all. In the evenings she watched the sky and did whatever it is we do when we watch the sky. The thing I still cannot name for you.

And the last third, my third, if I am honest, though the categories are rougher than I'm making them sound, tried to stay. Tried to keep our old lives, our old relationships, our old work. Tried to remain, as one of us put it with a humor that was also a lament, "native speakers of human."

Most of us failed.

The failure was not dramatic. It looked, from the outside, like a slow withdrawal: canceled dinners, unreturned calls, a growing preference for solitude that could be mistaken for introversion or depression or the ordinary attrition of middle age. From the inside it felt like trying to read a book in a language you once spoke fluently but have not used in years. You can still parse the grammar. You can still decode each sentence. But the easy, unconscious flow of meaning, the state in which you forget you are reading and simply inhabit the text, that is gone. You are always aware of the machinery. And that awareness, that inability to forget the gap, is itself the gap.

My days now.

I wake early. My body requires less sleep than it used to, five hours, sometimes four, and I surface from it cleanly, without grogginess. Like a light switched on in a room that was already furnished, everything just there, instantly, no assembly required. Though that makes it sound pleasant and it is mostly just abrupt. This is a physiological change that none of us fully understand, though we have theories. I had left the university by then, left Massachusetts entirely, moved north to Vermont. The house I live in now is small, on a hillside outside a town whose name you would not recognize. Route 14 runs through it. There's a general store with a porch that sags on one side and a white clapboard church and not much else. I rent with money I still earn from consulting work that takes me two or three hours a week. The consulting is a form of translation: a biotech firm sends me data from their drug trials, and I find the patterns that their statistical models miss, and I write reports that describe those patterns in language their scientists can use. It is not difficult. If I am being honest, it is barely conscious. The part of my mind that does this work is a thin surface layer, like the skin on heated milk, and beneath it the rest of me is occupied with other things.

What things. You will want to know. What does the transformed mind think about, when it is not performing tricks for money?

I could say: everything. But that would be glib, and also inaccurate, because the experience is not one of thinking about many things in sequence or even in parallel, but of. I keep reaching for analogies and they keep dissolving. It is like being in a sustained state of apprehension, in the old sense of that word, the sense that means grasping, holding. What is being held is not a single thought or chain of thoughts but a structure, a shape that is always changing and that includes within it the awareness of its own changing. That sentence is as close as I can get and it is not very close. I spend hours with this. From the outside it might look

like meditation, a woman sitting in a chair by a window, apparently doing nothing. It is the most active thing I do. Whether it is productive in any sense you would recognize, I cannot tell you.

A moment that might pass for joy.

Three weeks ago I was walking on the dirt road above my house, late afternoon, the maples going bare and the hillside brown and gold, the valley visible below through a stand of white birch. There was frost on the culvert at the bottom of the hill, the kind that catches late-season light and holds it. A red-tailed hawk passed over me, low enough that I could see the individual feathers adjusting at the tips of its wings. And in the time it took the hawk to cross the road I saw everything it was connected to — the thermal, the vole, the sixty million years of pressure that shaped that wing. Not as thoughts following one another. As a single thing. And what I felt was not what you'd call joy, which rises and falls. It was more like a standing wave. A resonance that does not crest or fade. The beauty was in the completeness of the pattern. Nothing was separate from anything else.

Let me try once more with daily life.

I eat. Simply. Rice, vegetables, fish when I can get it from the co-op in Montpelier. The act of eating has changed: I am aware, while chewing, of the molecular structure of what I'm consuming, of the enzymatic processes that will break it down, of the bacterial populations in my gut that will metabolize it, and this awareness is not intrusive, it does not ruin the meal, it is simply present the way a musician eating dinner is aware of the background music in a restaurant without choosing to listen. I sleep, and my sleep is different. I am partially conscious during it, the boundary between sleep and waking blurred, so that sleeping feels like thinking in a different key. I read, though what I read has changed. Fiction is still difficult. Poetry less so. Mathematics is beautiful and I have no training in it beyond undergraduate calculus but I can follow the proofs now, see the structures they describe. There is a pleasure in this that is entirely new to me.

And I write this. I write this for you, and the writing is its own kind of discipline, because every sentence requires me to choose what to leave out, and what I leave out is most of what I am. The choosing is a small, repeated grief. The kind that accompanies any act of translation: the knowledge that what arrives is not what was sent.

There are, I should mention, over nine hundred of us who stayed in New England, stayed or came here, drawn by the low density of it, the space. Not the total number; there are tens of thousands scattered through the six states. But nine hundred who remained in something like a community, if that word still applies. I know most of them, not because we socialize, though we do sometimes, in ways I will describe if I can find the right compression, but because I can feel them, in a way that the word "feel" does not adequately convey but that I will use for lack of a better one. It is not telepathy. It is something more like the way a flock of starlings feels the flock: each bird aware of its nearest neighbors, adjusting in real time, the collective pattern emerging not from communication but from a shared sensitivity to the same signals. When I sit on my hillside in the morning, I am aware of Yuki in her apartment in Cambridge, running simulations of protein folding that she finds absorbing in the way I find the hawk absorbing. I am aware of David in Burlington, who has spent three months trying to write a novel and who keeps failing because, like me, he can see through the mechanisms of narrative, but who keeps trying because the failure itself interests him, because he suspects that the failure is the story. I am aware of all of them, faintly. The way you are aware of weather.

When we do meet, when a few of us sit in someone's kitchen or walk together on a trail, the conversation is not what you would expect. It is not a display of brilliance or rapid-fire insight. It is, more than anything, an attempt at honesty that would be impossible with anyone else, because the honesty requires a shared context that only we possess. We talk about what we've lost. We talk about whether what we've lost was real or whether it was a limitation we've mistaken for a feature because we lived with it so long. We talk about the ones who didn't make it: the fourteen, as of last count, who took their own lives during the transition, unable to bear the expansion, and the larger number who found ways to chemically suppress their new cognition and returned, partially and at great cost, to something like their former state. Though "former state" is itself a euphemism. For some of them, what they returned to was not the comfortable baseline the phrase implies. It was the overwhelm. The executive dysfunction, the paralysis before sequential tasks, the panic of a mind wired for everything-at-once trapped in a world that demanded one-thing-at-a-time. The transformation had given them relief from that before it gave them anything else, and they walked back into the old suffering voluntarily, because it was theirs. We talk about these people carefully, without judgment, because each of us understands that we are

alive on the far side of something that could have killed us, and that survival is not an achievement but an accident of temperament or neurochemistry or luck.

And then we go home. And the world continues to turn. The mist settles into the valley, which is a thing I love. I can still love things, though the love is different now, wider and less focused, more like barometric pressure than a feeling. The lights of the town come on below me, each one a person inside a life they understand from within and that I can see, if I look, the way you might see the interior of a dollhouse, every room visible at once. I try not to look because the looking feels like a violation even though no one can tell I am doing it. I sit with the discomfort of that. The ethical weight of a capacity I did not choose and cannot relinquish.

This is what it is like. I have told you as much as I can. I have left out almost everything.



What Fire Took

IN SEPTEMBER OF THE year I left the university, a process I will spare you because it was, in its particulars, ordinary: a letter, a handshake, a box of books, the slow discovery that tenure means less when you can see the entire arc of an institution declining in real time. In that September, I was invited to give a talk. Not an academic talk. A public one. The organizers wanted me to speak about the awakened to a general audience, to translate, the word everyone used by then, and one I had come to dislike precisely because it implied that what separated us was a difference of language rather than a difference of world.

I agreed anyway. I was, at that point, still trying to stay. Still performing the daily work of remaining comprehensible to people who could not comprehend me, not because they were deficient but because I had become something for which their comprehension was not designed.

I had planned to talk about correlated failure. The risks. The need for cognitive diversity, the monoculture vulnerability that the selection had created, all of us converging on the same perceptions, the same blindnesses. But when I stood at the podium and looked out at three hundred faces, each one legible to me in a way I cannot describe without making you uncomfortable, I could see who was anxious and who was angry and who had not slept and who was in the early stages of falling out of love and who had had a drink before coming. When I looked at them, what came out of my mouth was the fire lecture.

The same one I had given to my students, years ago, when I was still Mara-the-cognitive-scientist, when my understanding of the world was bounded and sequential and, I now think, more true because of its boundedness, though I

know that "more true" will sound paradoxical and I don't know how to resolve the paradox without lying to one side or the other.

I said: "I want to talk about fire."

I hadn't planned to say that. I had notes. I had slides. I ignored both.

"When our ancestors learned to control fire, and I mean our deep ancestors, *Homo erectus*, maybe earlier. The dating is contested. Richard Wrangham's work puts it at maybe 1.8 million years ago, though not everyone buys that. But at some point, somewhere, a group of hominids figured out how to keep a fire going, and what they gained was. Well, everything. Warmth. Cooked food, which softened it, which made it easier to digest, which freed up metabolic resources for brain growth. Wrangham is very good on this, the cooking hypothesis. Protection from predators. Light after dark. A gathering point." I paused. "A place to sit together. To look at each other's faces. To begin the long slow work of becoming social in the way that would eventually produce language and culture and everything that followed."

The audience was attentive. I could feel their attention the way you feel humidity, as a pressure, a thickness in the air between us.

"But fire is a selection pressure. It always has been." I was gripping the podium, I realized, and made myself let go. "The species that could use it survived. The ones that couldn't were displaced. And within the species that survived, fire selected again: for shorter guts, for weaker jaws, for brains that grew larger on cooked food. Within a few hundred thousand years, our ancestors could no longer survive without fire. That's worth sitting with for a second. The tool had become a dependency. The thing they invented had reinvented them."

Someone in the back coughed. The HVAC system was doing something, pushing warm air that smelled like carpet.

"They lost the darkness, too. Or, no, that's not quite. They lost a particular relationship to darkness, the one in which night was absolute and the stars were the only light and the human animal was a small, alert, prey-aware creature pressed against the ground. Fire made the darkness something to push back against rather than something to inhabit. And they lost," I was reaching here, I knew, for something I could feel but not name, "a kind of immediacy. An animal presentness. The world before fire was a world in which every sensation was the whole world. Hunger was not a problem to be solved with technology. It was a state of being. Cold was not an engineering challenge. It was the condition of existence." I looked out at the room. "I'm not romanticizing this. They were

miserable by any standard we would recognize. They died young, they died in pain, they died of things we'd treat with an afternoon at urgent care. But their misery was immediate, unmediated, fully felt. And that counts for something. I think. I didn't always think so."

I looked at the audience. Some were nodding. Some were confused. One woman in the third row was crying, though I don't think she knew why.

"Every transformative technology is a selection pressure," I said. I was talking faster now and tried to slow down. "Language selected for abstraction and selected against the pure, unnarrated experience of the world. Writing selected for memory that outlasted a single life and selected against the living oral tradition in which knowledge was always embodied, always warm, always someone's voice. Ong wrote beautifully about this, Walter Ong, about what literacy cost us, though he didn't frame it as cost exactly." I lost my place for a second. "The printing press. Mass literacy. The internet selected for everything, all at once, and against the friction that made finding something feel like discovery. And along the way, the attention economy grew up around these tools, each one capturing more of the human mind, fragmenting reality into feeds and filters and algorithmically sorted channels until people were not living in the same world anymore, even when they sat in the same room."

I stopped. I realized I had arrived at the part I had not planned, the part that was not the fire lecture but the thing the fire lecture had been pointing toward all along without my knowing it.

"I am the next thing the fire took," I said.

The room was very still.

"The AI tools that are reshaping your cognition, the ones that half of you are afraid of and the other half are addicted to and all of you are using whether you acknowledge it or not, those tools found, in some of us, a brain that was ready for them. Ready the way a dry forest is ready for a spark. We caught fire. And now we can see more, process more, connect more than any human being has ever been able to. We can hold the whole pattern. We can see the shape of the century. We are, by any metric you want to use, the most cognitively capable organisms that have ever existed on this planet."

I let that sit. Someone shifted in their chair. A phone buzzed and was silenced.

And then I said what I had come to say, the thing I had been trying to articulate for months:

"And we have lost the blur."

The woman in the third row wiped her eyes.

"I don't mean we've lost the ability to be confused. We can still simulate it, model it, recall what it felt like. I mean we have lost the productive, generative blur that is the foundation of almost everything worth wanting in a human life." I took a breath. "The blur that makes a joke land. Because a joke works by misdirection, by exploiting the gap between what you expect and what arrives, and when you can see all possible arrivals simultaneously, there is no gap. The blur that makes music move you, because music is organized surprise, and surprise requires an inability to predict what comes next. The blur that makes love feel like discovery rather than recognition, because when you can read every micro-expression, model every emotional state from the set of someone's shoulders, there is nothing left to discover. Only confirmation."

I was breathing harder than I should have been. This is another thing: the body still responds to emotional significance even when the mind has moved beyond the kind of emotional processing that normally triggers it. The two systems, somatic and cognitive, are slightly out of sync now, like a film where the audio lags the picture by a fraction of a second. I feel my body's reactions to things I have already understood and dismissed. A report from a country I no longer live in.

"I can still see a sunset," I said, "and register that it is beautiful. But the beauty is informational. A recognition of wavelengths, atmospheric scattering, the evolutionary history of primate color perception. It is not," and my voice did something here, cracked or thickened, I'm not sure which, "it is not the thing it was. The thing where you stand there and the sky does something to you and you can't say what and you don't want to say what because saying would reduce it. That experience depended on not knowing. On the blur. And the blur is gone."

I stopped talking. I had said more than I intended. The room was quiet in a way that told me some of them understood and some of them were frightened and some were both. The moderator looked like she wasn't sure whether to intervene.

Afterward, in the lobby, a man I didn't recognize approached me and said, "I don't believe you. I think you're still in there." He was maybe sixty, wearing a fleece vest and New Balance sneakers, the uniform of a certain kind of New England man. I knew what he meant. I wanted to tell him he was right and wrong in proportions I couldn't calculate, but what I said was "Thank you," and I left.

Outside, the evening was cool. The town smelled the way Vermont towns smell in September, exhaust and dry leaves and woodsmoke from someone's early fire, the first of the season probably, someone who couldn't wait. I stood on the sidewalk and felt the lecture leaving me, the way adrenaline leaves: a slow draining, a return to the wider state. For about twenty minutes onstage I had been performing a simplified version of myself, and the performance had cost me something.

I drove home. Route 2 to 89, then the state road, then the gravel. I sat on my hillside in the dark and let the wider state fill back in, the hawk and the valley mist and the nine hundred. I thought about the woman in the third row who had been crying. I wondered whether her tears were for me or for herself. I knew the answer was both. And I envied her the tears, because tears require overflow, a moment when the feeling exceeds the container, and my container no longer has edges.

Leon came to see me in November.

I knew he was coming before he arrived. He had texted, three days earlier, a message that was careful and brief and that I could feel the effort in the way you can feel the effort in a letter composed by a non-native speaker: each word chosen for safety. "Would it be okay if I came up to see you? Just for a couple hours." I had read the text seventeen times. I'd grasped its full meaning, including the meanings he had not intended to convey, in the first reading. The re-reading was a performance of normalcy, a ritual I engaged in the way a person who has lost their faith might still attend church: for the shape of it, for the memory of what the shape used to contain.

He drove up on a Saturday, the two hours from Massachusetts along 91 and then the state roads. I heard his car on the gravel, the particular rattle of his old Subaru with the rust spot on the driver's-side panel, and I was already at the door when he pulled in because I could not pretend not to have heard. I considered pretending. Pretending would have been a kindness. But he deserved honesty, even the uncomfortable kind.

He looked older. The lines around his mouth. His temples. A new hesitancy in his shoulders. It arrived whole, the way a face arrives when you love someone and have not seen them in over a year.

Love. I should say something about that word. I still love Leon. But the love has changed in the way that everything has changed, wider and less focused, more comprehensive and less surprising. I love him the way I understand him,

which is completely, and completeness turns out to be the enemy of the kind of love that sustains a life together, because that kind of love depends on gaps, on mystery, on the recurring shock of discovering that the person beside you is not who you thought they were, that they contain rooms you haven't entered. I have entered all of Leon's rooms. I have mapped the house. And the mapping, which I did not choose and cannot undo, is a form of loss so specific that I have never found a way to grieve it properly.

"You look good," he said, standing by his car, not yet moving toward the door.

"So do you." I said it because it was true and because it was what you say, and the gap between those two reasons is where the entire problem lives.

We walked to the house. He wiped his boots on the mat even though the mat was just mud on mud. Old habit.

We sat in my kitchen. I made tea, oolong, loose leaf, the kind he had introduced me to years ago in the apartment we shared, when we used to sit across from each other on Sunday mornings and read different sections of the same newspaper. A memory so specific and so saturated with a feeling I can no longer reproduce that I hold it at a distance, the way you hold a note you've read so many times the paper has gone soft at the creases. He watched me prepare it and I could see that he noticed I still used the same method, the same water temperature, the same steep time, and that this continuity meant something to him. Evidence that the Mara he knew was still in here somewhere. I did not tell him that the continuity was not habit but performance, that I prepared the tea this way because I remembered that this was how she, how I, used to do it, and the remembering was an act of will rather than an instinct.

He looked around at the small house, the sparse furnishings, the single bookshelf that held mostly mathematics texts now. I didn't offer an explanation for any of it, because the explanation would have widened the distance between us rather than closing it.

For a while we talked about nothing. His sister. The Subaru's transmission. A restaurant we used to go to in Somerville that had apparently closed. The conversation had the feel of two people circling a room looking for a place to sit.

"Are you happy?" he asked, and the question was so earnest, so rooted in the framework of a mind that still sorted experience into happy and unhappy, that I felt something crack along an old fault line.

"I don't." I started, and then stopped. "I don't know how to answer that honestly without it sounding like I'm. Performing something." I watched his face tighten. He picked up his tea and put it down again without drinking. "I'm not suffering. That's real. I'm engaged with things. I find things beautiful, though the beauty is different now." I looked at my hands on the table. "I miss you in a way that's precise and constant. Which is not how I used to miss you. That was imprecise and intermittent and I think it was better." I paused. "The not-knowing was better. The blur was better. But I can't go back to it, and wanting to go back is itself a kind of blur that I can still feel. Which might be the last human thing about me. This wanting."

He was quiet for a long time. He turned the mug in his hands. The fridge hummed.

Then he said: "I've been seeing someone."

I already knew. From probability, from the look of him, from the particular quality of guilt and defiance in his posture. But the knowing did not prevent the feeling, which arrived late, after the knowing, like thunder after lightning: a contraction. A tightening in the chest. The body's ancient response to loss, arriving in a mind that had already processed the loss and moved past it and now had to sit through the body's slower, more honest reckoning.

"Good," I said. "I mean that."

"I know you do," he said. "That's the part I can't get used to."

Neither of us said anything for a while. He looked at his hands. He has good hands, square and capable, with a scar on the left thumb from a kitchen knife that slipped when he was twenty-three. An incident I had heard the story of at least four times during our years together, each telling slightly different, each version revealing a different thing about who he wanted to be in that particular moment of the telling. I will never hear a fifth version. The story is fixed now, in my memory, in all its variations, and the fixing is another small death.

"She's a teacher," he said, without my asking. "Elementary school. She's." He stopped. "She's uncomplicated." He looked up at me, and I could see that he regretted the word as soon as it left his mouth, heard it as a comparison, an indictment. "I don't mean—"

"I know what you mean," I said. And I did. He meant that she could be surprised by him. That when he said something funny, her laughter was genuine rather than predicted. That when he reached for her hand, the reaching was a question with an uncertain answer rather than a known outcome. He meant that

she lived in the blur, and the blur made room for him in a way that my clarity did not.

"I'm glad," I said, and the word was not adequate, but none of them are.

We sat with that. The tea cooled. Outside, a blue jay was working the hillside, and I could hear its call and also see, in the call, the territorial claim and the warning and the evolutionary function of alarm calls in corvids and the neural architecture that produced the specific frequency pattern. I tried to just hear the bird. Just hear it the way Leon heard it: as a sound, a sharp blue sound on a November afternoon, meaning nothing beyond itself.

I couldn't.

He said something about the drive up, how the leaves were past peak but still good along the river. I said yes, they were. He asked if I'd seen the covered bridge on 14 that they'd been repainting. I said I had. These were the kinds of sentences we could still manage. Small and practical and safe.

He left before dark. At the door, he hugged me, and I let myself be held, and I want to tell you the old connection surfaced and I was just a woman in the arms of a man she loved and the rest of it fell away. But that isn't true. What is true is that I remembered what it felt like. The memory was vivid and complete and absolutely distinct from the present experience. The distinction between remembering a feeling and having a feeling is the sharpest edge I know.

He drove away. The taillights of the Subaru moved down the gravel road and turned onto the paved road and disappeared behind the birches. I stood in the doorway and tracked the sound of the engine until it merged with the other sounds of the evening, the wind, the birds settling, a dog barking somewhere in the valley. Then I went inside and sat in my chair and did the thing I do, the thing I have no name for, the sustained apprehension, and inside that apprehension was Leon and the hawk and the protein folding and the mist and the vole and the nine hundred of us and the three hundred faces in the auditorium and the fire, the original fire, the one that started all of this, that turned an animal into a mind and a mind into something else and something else into me.

I want to end by telling you something true.

You are reading this in the lag. The gap between what the fire has made possible and what your biology can absorb. That gap is where everything you love about being human lives. Your confusion is not a deficit. Your inability to hold the whole pattern is not a failure. It is the condition that makes your experience possible, the narrowness that creates depth, the way a frame makes a

painting by deciding what to exclude.

I know this because I remember it. I remember the shape of not-knowing. I remember what it felt like to read a sentence and be surprised by where it ended. I remember hearing a piece of music for the second time and realizing it was different from what I remembered, and the difference being the point, the difference being where the pleasure lived. I remember the first morning I woke up next to Leon and studied his sleeping face and thought: who is this person, I will spend years learning who this person is. I remember all of it with a fidelity that is, itself, a form of betrayal, because perfect memory is not memory at all. It is storage. Retrieval. The opposite of the fragile, distorting, creative act by which a human mind holds its past.

The fire lecture was wrong, or rather, it was incomplete. I said we were in the lag, meaning the period of adaptation between a new technology and the new kind of human it produces. But the lag is not a waiting room. It is the thing itself. The lag is where you make art and fall in love and tell jokes that only work because the audience can't see the punchline coming. The lag is the space in which experience has depth rather than resolution. But I should be honest about something. The blur was not beautiful for everyone. For some of us, the blur was a cage. The same productive confusion that makes surprise and humor and art possible also made daily life impossible, every errand a mountain, every sequence of steps a wall. What the transformation gave those people first, before the expanded cognition, before any of it, was release from a suffering that the people still in the lag cannot recognize as suffering because it looks like laziness, like flakiness, like not living up to potential. I owe them that honesty. And the lag is also the attention economy, the feeds and the filters and the fractured realities that you think of as the problem. They are the lag too, the same gap between the tool and the adaptation, and the amped transcended that fragmentation the way we transcended everything else, and what we found on the other side was clarity, yes, but also a loss that the people still inside the filters will never have to feel. I did not understand this when I was inside it. I could not have. Understanding it requires the outside view, and the outside view is precisely what the lag protects you from.

I am not warning you. The transformation is not a choice, not a policy decision, not something that can be regulated or prevented. It is a fire. Every fire is a selection pressure, and selection pressures do not take suggestions.

I will not tell you that everything will be fine, because I can see the full shape of what is coming and "fine" is not the right word. Change is the right word. Loss is the right word. And also gain, and also strangeness, and also a future that contains within it people like me who can see the future and people like you who can be surprised by it. The second group is not lesser than the first. In some ways that I can name, and others that I cannot, they are the more fortunate of the two.

I am telling you this while I still can. The language we share, this language, these words, this grammar that forces me to lay one thought after another like bricks in a row when what I am trying to convey is a thing that exists in all directions at once. This language is still available to me, but it is becoming harder. Harder the way a childhood dialect fades when you move to a country where no one speaks it: you can still produce the sounds, but they feel foreign in your mouth, and the thoughts that were native to that dialect, the thoughts that only existed because that particular set of sounds made them possible, those thoughts are going.

When they are gone, I will have no way to reach you. I will still be here, on my hillside, watching the hawk and the mist and the lights of the valley. I will still love you, all of you, the species I came from, the people I used to be able to sit with in a room and talk to without this terrible effort of compression. But the love will be the wide kind, diffuse and atmospheric, and it will not have words.

So I am writing this now. In the lag between what I was and what I am becoming. In the narrowing window where I can still find the old words and make them carry, however imperfectly, the weight of what I need you to hear.

You are in the fire. You have always been in the fire. The same fire that warmed the first cold hands, that cooked the first meat, that lit the first darkness. It is doing what it has always done: changing you into something that cannot go back. And the not-going-back is not a tragedy. It is the price of the warmth.

But listen. While you are in it, while the blur is still yours, while you can still be surprised and confused and wrong in all the ways that make a life feel like a life. Attend to it. Not because it is vanishing, though it may be. Because it is here. Because the fog you complain about, the noise, the overwhelm, the too-much-ness of your everyday life, that is the sound of a mind that is still small enough to be amazed. And amazement, I can tell you from the other side, is the thing the fire takes last and the thing you miss most when it's gone.

I was Mara. I am something else now, something I cannot name in your language or mine. But I was Mara, and this is what I remember, and I am telling it

to you straight, in words that are less and less my own, because you should know. Because someone should say it from here, from the other side, before the window closes.

This is what fire does. It gives you the light, and it takes the dark, and both of those are true, and you cannot have one without losing the other, and the losing is not the end of the story.

The losing is the story.

WHAT THE FIRE DREW



Title Page

A teardrop flame, outlined but not filled, with small dots like sparks still in the air, a thin baseline underneath, and a single curve trailing upward as smoke. The novella's central metaphor in its simplest form: fire, just beginning.

SPARK



Part One

A diagonal line with a starburst at its tip and scattered dots. The diagonal gives it motion — something just happened, contact was just made.



The Way We Used to Think

The radiator fins from the opening sentence, with a wisp curling up. Steam from the broken radiator and the cognitive fog the chapter introduces.



Noise

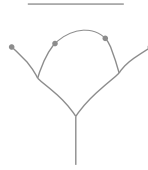
A band of tiny randomly-angled lines, with one clean sine wave passing through. The signal in overwhelming data.



The Ones Who Stayed Awake

Three circles with center dots, connected by a baseline. Eyes, or nodes, or watchful presences. Linked in ways Mara doesn't yet understand.

BURN



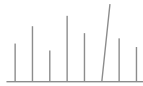
Part Two

A trunk line that forks, and the forks fork again, with thin curves connecting non-adjacent nodes. Ambiguous between flame and neural network.



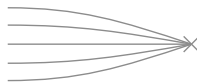
Emergence

A tight coil that loosens into a straight line, with a dot at the end. Something tightly wound is releasing.



The Adolescence of the Species

Vertical lines of varying heights from a shared baseline, one taller and tilted. Growth that's real but not yet in balance.



Correlated Failure

Five curved lines from different origins, all meeting at a single point marked with an X. Diverse origins, single failure point.



Growing, Not Building

An asymmetric branching form. No right angles, no symmetry. Three dots near the base suggest soil. You don't build a forest.

ASH



Part Three

A sagging horizontal line with scattered marks above it, denser on the left, sparser on the right. Gravity, entropy, aftermath.



Translation

A circle and a square connected by dashes, with an arc bridging them from above. Two incommensurable shapes, two provisional connections, neither fully joining them.



What Fire Took

A wavering vertical line topped with an open circle and a wisp. Below, dots fall and scatter. It echoes the title page's ember but inverted: fire beginning, fire finished. The only place where a straight line isn't straight.