

Correction 25

by Edith Lyre

Please appreciate the haste with which this report could not otherwise have been written. The matter, as you will understand from my colleagues' prior accounts, cannot easily be held in the mind. What the matter is, I will do my best not to recall until there is no delaying it, but even at this propinquity – writing with this little distance from the thing – there is a sense that I must either rush it out or disappear from existence.

We – to wit, Chalhotra, Chestwick, Hammings, and I – proceeded by the gateline to region 86.16.5 where, on arrival, our intent was to either disprove or resolve discrepancies between said maplevel and the next adjacent. It is not of particular note to this account, but regarding the next maplevel, our colleagues in that region will attest to the existence of no outstanding anomalies, a testament likely to be accurate. (One or multiple of our predecessors on 86.16.5 must, if the institute is not aware of this already, suffer from a degree of attunement frankly too severe for

them to be retained in field, having missed not only what we found, but even skirted their team shy of its influence.) Upon arrival, the source of the conflict was immediately apparent. So overt was the source, in fact, that – at least to my perspective, and certainly to my colleagues’ after I drew their attentions to it – the region appeared more discrepancy than reality. Despite each of our number seeing discrepancies of a kind, it should be said, some saw more than others. Chalhotra for one exclaimed: “There isn’t that much, is there?” as if he would question the adjacent topographers’ good sense in sounding the alarm. Hammings and Chestwick argued his point only mildly, saying, “We’ve seen worse, without a doubt, but this...” and here Chestwick nodded to Hammings, who nodded back to Chestwick then tilted that same chin out toward an especially volatile sweep of discrepancy, “is worth a report, no?” All the while this bitter dialogue endured, I waited, aghast, for anybody to see what I saw: a spilling, molten hot radiance bubbling up the cornvine-ridden stones of a narrow, albeit noticeable trail cut into the surrounding woods. In the glow were visible the spires and dust of a weed-strangled city, its alleys piled with soil and grass and flowers, abuzz with insect-life and winding trees, setting sunrays yellowing the air where clouds of spores floated to catch them – and yet, in the windows and ad-panels and bridges overhead, electricity hummed, bulbs burned bright.

“There are people here,” I said.

“Or, at least,” said Chalhotra, “there were recently.” He pointed, now, to a ripped-open and discarded pile of band-aid-packets, actually quite near our feet, that neither I nor Chestwick nor Hammings had spotted. “If there’s anything else, though, I don’t see it.”

Chestwick began a most unwelcome interjection, and never mind what he said. I could already see the floating wreckage, some miles up, which he and Hammings had earlier observed, and I had no need of whatever they could tell me. Instead, I interrupted to ask that all gathered watch me move. By a few sidesteps and turns about, I positioned myself at the entrance of the trail, then with another two steps back, let myself be soaked in the radiance of the valley beyond.

Now, reflected across my eyes and by the light upon my face, all could see the discrepancy and its enormity, greater in size than some nations and greater in mass than many more. Not all of our number, I shall confess though I shall name no one, reacted with much grace or the utmost professionalism. As you will appreciate, an oversight of this magnitude, written and signed by the authority of our own topographic institute, represented a failure so particular and so morally disturbing to my colleagues that several hours' re-conceptualisation and -habilitation were urgently required. I write this to account for the missing hours in that leg of the timesheet. I cannot account for the many others, but that is, after all, ever the rub in Discrepant Topography.

Advancing beyond the trail and arriving at the fringes of the city – a place which jutted all at once from the earth, with no real suburbs or access roads or the usual mega stations, though a field of debris collected around the edges like an orbital trash-ring – the team at once unloaded our sailing equipment, identified a fair rooftop for reconnaissance, and set to work. Each of our four set out from the one degree-line, tracing every wise of the perimeter's proverbial clock. On return ten days later, no sentience was recorded by anyone, though conflicts with small animals and insect-life had transpired. (Hamming, for his part, contracted a local virus – parasitic *thanotos amesosis*, documented by the previous topographical team – and was forced to induce his own death to prevent neural capture, before being resuscitated by his companion widget.) We had, of course and as all understood, by this time observed only the city-perimeter. Fortunately – as otherwise the true labour of our investigation would be delayed even further – each of our four reports matched to a tee and the perimeter was established. This, at least, we were able to forward to our colleagues adjacent, with the institute's assent. In the silence of their non-reply, all agreed, their sense of relief was palpable.

All that remained was to fill out the inner contours and unexaminable semiperimeters of the city proper, while doing our utmost to contrive the nearest-best gesture which would suffice to account for what these depths entailed. Here is the bit I have not wanted to write about, as you

see it was suggested we navigate to the physical centre of the city, by our best guess, and endeavour then to radiate outward – in spirals rhythmic with one another’s – toward the perimeter we had already reified, but coming in, and definitively so, there was no centre. Now, many peoples of many cities may claim their city lacks a centre, devised of many hubs, sprawled out in such-and-such a manner as to be untriangulable, &c., &c. But in truth every city has a centre – or so we had found after rigorous examination, on every occasion throughout the many— or— but never mind the age of the institute. Often, you see, though, it is not *people* whom that particular city chooses to centre. (Of course, wherever this occurs, people are confused and say “ah rhizomes” or “ah nothing matters” and turn to either violence or meditation, but all that is well-enough in its own way, and people, as they are, cannot be otherwise and nor should they.) Still, this city in fact – and there are no rules of course and, trust me, I know better than perhaps anybody the importance of there being no rules, no absolutes in our line of work, and yet I tremble as though I were a zealot of some genre, fearing to blaspheme – contained no centre. There was a positive nothingness at its core, and we are all of us veterans in this role and have seen our share of positive nothingnesses and whatsits, the nots that are not not but never were, and so on, that people – again, we invoke their kind – say elude description, though obviously they do not. What – I believe – not a one of us has seen, however, is a centre that is not a centre but is not not a centre, such that there is not even a thing to speak of, is rather a city, but a city that at its core is— and here, surely, you see my pain? Even to refer to the city’s core is to begin to refer to a place entirely other, that on 86.16.5 is nothing better than a hypothetical, an unimaginable one at that.

You may, reading this, now be of the impression that what I found so unspeakable was this positive nothingness, but how far from right! Even Chestwick understood that this was the discovery of our lifetimes. The depression into which Chalhotra had sunk following the discovery of the past topographers’ failings had been washed away almost instantaneously, as if it never arrived. Hammings for his part was as yet delirious following his death and resurrection and so benefited from some elaboration. (We took an hour aside to carefully explain what we together as

a party had discovered, not wishing him to get left behind.) We did, however, not know how to map it. A city without a centre? All the pages of all of our many kinds of books were the wrong shape for something like that, and as nobody knew a better shape, the task now was to invent one and would we even, once it was invented, be the right sort of beings to scrawl upon the pages of such a book? In what dimensions would it exist? Chalhotra has prepared a report answering these many questions, which I recommend be consulted in complement with mine. No, but – but now there is no escaping it. There was perhaps a person. Perhaps he was not a person or was now and then a person. But not at all times. I will use the pronoun *he* for him as he told us many longwinded stories about himself, in several strains of perspective, and whenever he spoke of himself in the third, yet *did not* use that pronoun, he felt a need to elucidate “this is when I was such-and-such or this or that and so here I will be *x*,” but whenever he used *he*, for whatever reason, he chose not to explain himself. Thus, I inferred, he was trusting us to assume the correct pronoun was *he*. He dwelt at the edge of the positive nothingness, where it looked as though he had dwelt for perhaps near as long as our institute has been active, leading us to wonder whether the builders of the city around us were not the original inhabitants, but some later people who could not see either him or the nothingness, severe anomalies that they were, and had maybe fled when their population’s attunement waned. We asked him to look away from the positive nothingness, if he could, so that there might be something in his mind or vision to which he could speak – so he could regain access to language. I can see past the horizon, he said, and the world around. My vision is wide enough for me to get all that, not only the hole.

“It is not a hole.”

No, but if you like I will move, though I cannot move myself. I wound up this way – *in a meditative pose before the nothingness, as a mountaintop monk before a sea of fog* – over a long time, and not entirely by my own will.

Indeed, he had no command over his own body, and we were obliged to lift and turn him about, to control his legs for him. At last, we brought him somewhere we could all sit down, and everyone was comfortable, and commenced a little interview, beginning with the usual sort of first contact questions. Have you had other encounters with our institute? Do you know what a dimensional maplevel is and, if so, can you confirm that you are native to this maplevel? How many are you? &c. Then we asked, of course more to satisfy our own curiosity than for any other reason, “What’s it like living in a city with no centre? As far as we know yours is the only one.”

He answered, It had a centre once. And so began the narrative I have been so loath to share.

We survived a series of wars, he said, intersecting maplevels, dividing our world into several fractured plateaus, and here – on this plateau – a decision was reached that we would continue to survive by accepting the fracture, using it. Ours became a discrete sub-level, delinked from the other regions – from a grander, more vast structure, all of which was once our world. The blurry geosmotics surrounding the inhabited centre are not our creation, but we understood that if we detached ourselves, then they would protect us: we would not be found so easily. This valley was found once, aeons later, but by people fleeing the regions from which we broke. Will you get a reward? You are the first aliens to have found our little realm since before the wars, and as further aeons passed after those refugees came, built, and went again, that is... I suppose no one remembers us by now.

For whatever reason – I suppose they needed not to – and despite the shattered skeletons and fallen edifices and billion screams still echoing in the mists, the refugees could not see the miasma of plague which now engulfed them. But they did not hide in the valley as we did, and some dwelt as agriculturalists in the geosmotic foglands. So, when the hour came, there was an exterior and interior to their civilisation – where ours, you see, was all interior. They quarantined the valley, the city and, once all within had submitted to the pit, rushed in to collect gene samples,

tech data, what relics survived of their culture, then fled once more. And throughout it all, I endured, invisible to them. First, I will ask: what's the worst pain you've felt? You are old enough, good visitors, that surely the worst of what you recall pales against the tenth or hundredth most harrowing of the pains you've forgotten. But – knowing it is not the worst outright – is the worst of what you remember not, then, a kind of entrance, a cusp before another, unrememberable world? That world is my world. That is where I live, and it is there those refugees were brought. They would see me then, on their way down the pit, peripheral glimmer on the edge of oblivion – as the embers of a better choice now forsaken, maybe, or an ever-burning, static eruption, a fire from which they were glad to have fled. But they saw me. In its workings, the second occurrence of the plague was not dissimilar to the first, as in my time, when it coursed the nerves of my people and at last destroyed us all, they too glanced my way and considered my example. Then, some came to my side, comrades in this condition, and sat with me for spans of time as long as any world is vast. But at last, they succumbed and since then I have – far, far longer than not – been alone. The pain is no greater for it, nor any lesser. I do not resent their leaving, and in all they enjoyed longer, wiser lives than most mountains. As yet do I. You are travellers, though, and skilled ones at that. You wish to learn something.

Chalhotra asked him whether the nothingness had, on appearance, manifested as the centre of the city or whether the city reoriented around it. He explained that, in truth, he never knew cities had centres. We laughed at him, he laughed at himself, then he said, When you arrived and asked about it, the principle was obvious. I answered at once, for that reason.

“Were you embarrassed,” I asked, “not to have known?”

He shook his head. If I were, he said, I would have told you, entertained myself with the sympathy you all would show me, and embarrassment, even in a vacuum, contains pleasures of its own. But, as my condition assigns, I will never experience anything so pleasurable as embarrassment, ever again.

“I see,” I said – and I did.

Would you prefer to explain, in that case?

So I did. Turning from the man, hoping it would be the last glimpse I had of him, I once more called my colleagues’ attentions to me and put the matter as gently as I could. To begin with, I asked if they recalled the atrocity of 2.33.9, whereupon a civilisation unfamiliar with the ecology of the maplevels or even with maplevels at all – which, on its native maplevel, had conquered near-all of its galactic set – breached a lower level and there renewed its march of conquest. All nodded, recalling how the invaders met a small albeit superior defence, were infected by it, and unfamiliar with vibrational diseases, they brought it home, contaminating their entire civilisation, leaving nothing but a dark and empty set, trillions of thriving planets now barren but for those few lifeforms too simpleminded to imagine they could end their own existences, though even those retained the disease, the pain. But this person was not simpleminded, and yet he endured. His disease, I told all gathered, was of that same type, albeit natural. (Unlike the manufactured variant designed by the monsters of 2.33.9. Torturers of worlds. After the calculus, a billion agonised suicides was the accepted cost, in order to preserve a mere one of their own. Survival is no excuse for atrocity: one of our institute’s oldest principles, which we must treasure. Yet 2.33.9 does indeed survive, but of course – but of course.) Somehow, here, this person had decided to live, had been deciding, for aeons beyond account. “I do not know how,” I said, “or why.”

“And if that is true,” said Hammings, “is he not responsible for keeping untold quantities of suffering in play?”

Chestwick rolled out a gesture to indicate Hammings had a point.

Chalhotra said, “If you will yourself through a trillion lives’ worth of pain, there is an ethical toll. A non-trivial equivalence exists between that and having subjected a trillion people to lifetimes of torture. Then again, all were *his* lifetimes.”

“Why did he do it? Somebody,” I said, “ask him for me. I do not want to look at him anymore.” But he heard me.

When the nothingness came, he said, and the disease accompanied, there was at first a tremendous pleasure – though already most had given themselves to oblivion – to be had in playing with one’s focus, first the pain, next the nothingness, you could let it in, you could be the one moment nothing and the next pain, though you could not keep either out. It was nothingness and pain, each as absolute as the other, but your mind could look this way then that way, switching across. It was pleasurable because it was labour, not because of any sensation, as such. To drop pain, to languish in oblivion, to return from oblivion to pain again, either act had merit, a sense of incomprehensible worthiness. We survived like this for a while, before the moments became too thin, and we could no longer see or control the switching. From then on, it was all agony, all nothingness, complete and inseparable.

That is when everybody put themselves in, except my few comrades who, like me, believed that life mattered; that, because we were parts of life, there was labour enough in simply being. In truth, I have no answer as to why they, too, came to leave me. Some thought beneath the pit there could be something else, a thingness at the far end of all the nothingness.

“But there is,” I told him.

But you stop existing on your way through, do you not? Whatever might arise from the maths of it all, it is not a continuation.

I wanted to explain that, on the other side, what arose would be everything that had been or would be, including him as he now was, including him as he might otherwise have been, and more variants, him still sitting here in a million years, him dead in minutes. I wanted to explain that there was, in fact, no way to avoid entering the pit, just as there was no way to avoid not entering the pit, or anything, that it was all one horrid continuum, and that if you thought about

reality for a few too many seconds, sure, weren't we all – wasn't it all – some weird bastard sitting at the edge of a bottomless pit, and suffering. But Chalhotra caught my eye and shook his head no. "In essence, sure, that is true enough."

Then I endure and though I am not happy – I cannot be – perhaps my bones are, or my teeth, or some part I cannot feel where the satisfaction of good and right and useful labour makes a home. If you would kill me, I would not be grateful. What I am doing is no abomination. It is the correct choice. Life matters, as much as anything, will always matter. For whatever reason, I cannot or have never learned how to consider pain when I act. If there is no value, there is nothing, and when there is nothing, then I wait, I suffer – what else, if there is nothing? And if life matters, I wait, I suffer – again what else? If I have to, I will try something, maybe I will beg. Please.

Hamings and Chestwick turned away, to forsake the sight of him, though Chalhotra's gaze was fixed. To Chalhotra I whispered, "His condition will not be any lightened by the news that we will leave him to it. Of course, we're cataloguers, we're not going to kill him. We'll write atrocity in the report and let it all go on. Plus," I glanced about, careful not to catch his shape in my periphery, "if he thinks, someday, someone from the institute is going to come and end his torment, maybe a little kernel of hope will manifest and he'll get the will to put himself in."

At this, Chalhotra swallowed and turned away, each of our company now readied for departure. Of course, I forward this report on the understanding that it be kept confidential. The remaining topography ought to be contracted to a team of higher attunement than our own, some testing being apt, I would suggest, to achieve a low enough attunement that the city, perhaps even the nothingness, be visible, but high enough that the person go undetected. It is not possible to work alongside that presence if one is aware of it. To my knowledge, no member of our institute has made contact with a living carrier of the pain condition, and we acknowledge that some period of quarantining will be necessary. I have done my best to lower my vibrational output whilst penning this report, but traces no doubt persist, and it will be necessary for anyone who reads this

to join us in quarantine, along with anyone to whom its contents are relayed, and so on, until such time as no more than a suspicion of what might have transpired, and a wrong suspicion at that, continues within the institute. By my estimate, that process should have resolved itself at around the quarter mark of our detoxification, and a tally of how many yet survive should, thereafter, be forwarded to the institute. (Information about survival rates will be necessary, so that predictions can be made about the incoming swell of membership once our detainment is concluded, if indeed any of us survive.) In closing remarks, I would like to congratulate myself on banishing the subject of this report from mind, such that I cannot recall a thing I have written, other than that last self-instruction to get myself to quarantine. It is my sincere hope that, whatever I wrote here, you too have forgotten it, and that our time in quarantine together will be unremarkable and easily survived.