

Gravity Well

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This story was written mostly while walking around New York and and New Jersey

Human Made Content - NO AI

AI is only used as a dictionary, thesaurus, and information search and reference tool.
Absolutely no part of the written story is ever copied into AI for editing, revision, or comments.
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Matt has developed a unique style and writing method. Removing all age, gender, ethnicity, physical appearance etc... only leaving words and actions to define a character.

This story, like all of Matt's stories, was written out of home, never at a desk, never stationary. (Matt's original rule was 'only while walking outside' but was revised into 'must be moving through earth based coordinate space' this allows occasional exceptions for trains, buses, etc..). Everything is written with pen and paper, then put into a document with voice-to-text, and finally edited and polished by Matt alone, no other human or AI is involved.

Matt is fascinated and enjoys using AI, but is a firm believer that we should label content.
Human only, AI generated, AI assisted, AI collaboration, etc...

Matt does play with AI in some writing content, like AI assisted poetry (great practice and learning tool to improve writing skills, vocab, cadence, etc..), or AI dialogues as artistic experimentation.
Any works that involve or include AI composition, revisions, or editing are clearly labeled as such.

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How did I get talked into this? With the money I am spending on this, I could be on a beach. Everyone else is probably having the time of their lives with friends, hooking up at parties, traveling, playing games. And me? I'm trudging up some random hill, outside some tiny village, in the middle of nowhere. And for what? Anti-gravity... Ha, ridiculous, preposterous... Then why am I even here?... Because there's something about professor Tias, not just the skill and knowledge, everyone sees those, but there is something else, something that elicits trust.

My feet hurt and I'm tired. This is not a hill, this is a mountain trail... Oh, wait... over there, is that it? There's someone sitting in front, I'm sure they will know if I'm on the right track or if I'm lost.

Climbing that last slope, it levels off and my thighs feel such euphoric relief as they no longer need to drive my body upwards, now they are just balancing me. As I walk towards the structure, the rounding earth beneath me tapers off, my steps seem to become effortless as those last few degrees of incline reduced to nothing, it's almost like I'm floating, drifting forward. I relax now, expending minimal effort, taking a deep breath while letting the sights and sounds wash over me. I allow my eyes to lose focus, but then, in my spaced out disconnection, my leg twitches, then again. With each twitch I stumble slightly, regaining balance immediately, but it is clear that my body is too fatigued to walk on autopilot, so I muster my focus and march with effort again.

As I close in on the structure... A shack, it's a shack, I don't know what else to call it... The person sitting in front stands up. I start inspecting the building, and then their robes. Professor Tias always spoke about this place as 'that year at the temple', I guess this shack does have a few features that resemble a temple. A couple of thick pillars in front, some ornamental features, and those are monks robes, but this place is practically dilapidated, so weathered, damaged and dirty.

The figure starts waving and greeting me. "Hello, you must be Kler." I take the last few steps and climb the porch. "My name is Orac. You must be tired, here, please sit." Gesturing to a chair.

I plop into the seat, my whole body goes flaccid, letting this rickety chair prop me up from falling, like a trust-fall into a piece of old furniture. I immerse myself in the cacophony of my screaming muscles, zoning out in the 'noise of my physical body'. When my mind phases back into focus I remember that I had never replied to something said by... "Sorry, I was a bit out of it there. What was your name again? I think you told me, but I wasn't very present."

"Oh, it's fine, don't apologize. My name is Orac. That path is long and steep. I'm guessing you did it all in one shot without any breaks." Rocking peacefully in the chair on the other side of the front patio. "I was told you were arriving on the early train, but I didn't expect you to actually get here for at least a few more hours. Forgive me for not greeting you at the station, Ceel told me not to worry because some other friend in town would handle that and catch you as you got off."

“Oh yeah, don't worry about it... Orac... Nice to meet you Orac.” I'm absolutely horrible with names, I'm trying to improve. I use the classic trick, immediately using their name repeatedly, it seems to help a bit.

“So you're going to stay here for a while, huh.” Orac says, glancing behind at the door between us. “I had a friend tidy up a bit, but only a bit, hahaha. Swept away the cobwebs and chased off the rodents.” I look at the door, imagining the worst. “The mini fridge still works, surprisingly. There's a hot plate, dishes, and utensils, plus a kettle, pot, and pans, etc... you can find a store and restaurant just a bit further up the hill.”

My curiosity takes over. “May I?” I say, standing up and placing my hand on the door handle. Orac nods, and I push the door open.

Orac wasn't kidding, they only cleaned up ‘a bit’.

On the right side is a bed, there's a desk on the left, and a tiny kitchen setup on the back wall. The desk is covered in papers and notebooks, the walls are plastered with tacked up sheets of paper. The sheets all have scribbled text, notes, and symbols written on them in thick black strokes, they are drawn and written so large that I can read them all the way from the doorway.

I take a couple steps inwards and stand there, just absorbing it. All those pages of scribbles covering the wall, it feels so noisy, the air is dead silent, but the busyness and clutter of the writing on the walls... It's like the room is screaming into my eyes.

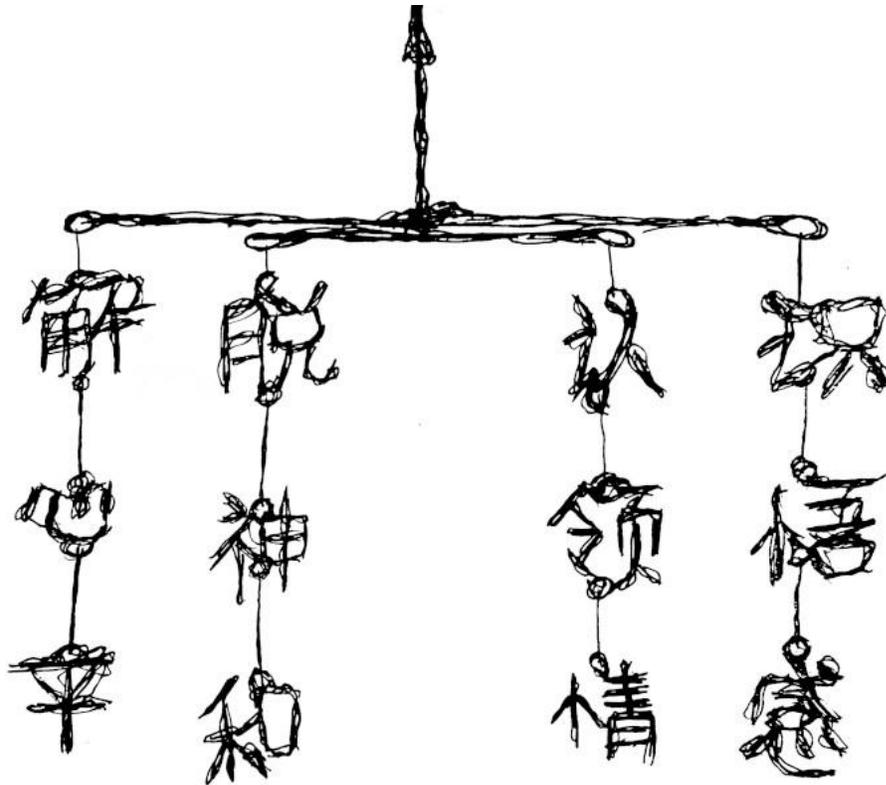
I hear a faint click and then a light turns on. Some shimmers of light catch my eye near the center of the room, there is an old frame hanging with light bulbs, it looks like a rough homemade imitation of a chandelier, and hanging from that ‘chandelier’ is what looks like a mobile. It's not unlike the kind hung above baby cribs, except this one is made of mangled steel wire and some string. The chandelier is old and rusted, but the hanging mobile is made with fresh steel wire of various thicknesses, still a bit shiny and slightly shimmering as it reflects light from the bulbs above. I'm staring at the mobile when Orac explains. “Ceel made it.”

“Ceel?.. I recognize that name. It's the second time Orac has said it. “Who is... Oh, wait, do you mean professor Tias?”

“Hahaha. Yes, professor Tias.” A chuckle and a playfully fake-serious tone, then continuing. “Ceel requests that you leave the hanging sculpture and don't take down any of the pages on the wall.” Orac points around the room, at all those noisy scribbles. “Ceel says you're free to add your own if you like, but please don't take down anything that's already up.”

I can't stop staring at the hanging mobile. There is a vertical shaft with two horizontal bars at the bottom, four dangling strings are attached, one to each endpoint of the horizontal bars. The strings are linked chains, each chain has three decals, which are made of twisted thin wires. As

I look closer, I realize that the decals are Chinese characters. At first glance they seem dauntingly messy, but I soon recognize all of them, they are all relatively common words and structured in a classic double-pair style.



My Chinese is a bit rough, but it's good enough to recognize these words and grasp their meanings.

解脱认识
心神领悟
平和情感

The first line is 解脱 'to escape' or 'shed off'. Plus 认识 'recognition' or 'understanding'. Together these seem to say 'Let go of your understanding'.

The second line is 心神 which is like 'mind and spirit', so it probably means 'consciousness and awareness', followed by 领悟 which is 'to awaken to truth' or 'realize / grasp'. This line basically describes a profound epiphany, or something like that.

The last line has 平和 which means 'harmonious, peaceful or calm', combined with 情感 which means 'feelings and emotions'. So it describes being at peace or having a balanced and harmonious emotional state.

After a few moments in silent thought I pointed at it and look to Orac saying...

"It says,

Let go of what you know,
and awaken to the truth,
to find inner peace.

Right?"

"Your Chinese is very good!" Orac praises me with a smile. "That's an excellent reading, but if you can read that well, then you already know, 一个字很多意思, 话里有话, 话外有意."

"Ah yes, every character has many meanings, every phrase has many layers of interpretation, and there are meanings outside the meaning." I repeat back an english translation of those expressions. Chinese is particularly good at layering meanings and using ambiguity. I look back at the mobile and read it again in. "Then in your opinion, would you say I read it correctly?"

"Haha... Individual characters alone have thousands of years of meaning, history, and culture behind them, someone could spend a lifetime contemplating a few characters such as these, hehe..." Giggling and looking at me. I think I leaked some mild frustration at that 'non-answer' because Orac's playful expression switches abruptly to a more serious tone. "Your reading is very good. You read the phrases and interpreted them well, but there are always other perspectives. Maybe someday you'll read it again and see it in a whole new way."

More vagaries, but what should I expect from a monk? We chat a bit, Orac shows me where the cleaning supplies are. There's a large plastic wash-basin for washing clothes, so I guess I'm going to be hand-washing my clothes, I haven't done that since camping.

After explaining how to handle all those little necessities of life, Orac looks at me, smiles, and says "Well, I assume you can handle yourself for an evening. I'll come back to check on you tomorrow." Then firmly grasps my shoulder to demand attention, giving me glaring eyes for emphasis. "If you have any trouble, there are some people just up the path at the shop and restaurant. Even if it's late, don't hesitate to seek help. Everyone around here is friendly and knows we have a visitor, they will be happy to help out."

"I can handle myself, I've lived in rougher conditions than this. It might be messy, but this place actually has plenty of amenities. There's even power and a fridge, so many luxuries, hahaha." Orac doesn't soften that glare or release the firm grasp on my shoulder, I can tell I didn't give the right answer. "Don't worry, I'll go ask for help if there's any trouble."

That stern face breaks into a grin and Orac lets go of my shoulder. "Okay. The other monks and I are just a bit further up from the shops. I better get going if I want to be back in time for dinner. I'll see you tomorrow, get some rest."

And with that Orac left and headed up the path. After scanning my new room, my first thought was that I should unpack, but that idea was delayed as I looked at the bed. Overcome by an urge to lie down, I passed out into a nap, well... not really a nap, I was so worn out from the climb that this was deep slumber.

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When I wake up I am physically refreshed, but my dreams must have been stressful because I feel like my patience has been drained by frustrations.

Looking around the room, still groggy, my sluggish waking mind is assaulted by those 'screaming walls' covered in symbols and scribbles. I normally wake up and jump out of bed, but this onslaught of stimulus paralyzes me. I lie here stewing in jumbled thoughts as my eyes wander, scanning the pages on the walls. Eventually I accumulate enough energy to break free and get up. I stand to act without knowing what I'm going to do. There's nothing here associated with any of my normal routines. I look at the desk, I'm curious to explore the mess of pages and notebooks, but it is too daunting right now, I just can't muster the drive at this moment.

I look to the right, at the kitchen, surprisingly I'm not hungry. I probably have no appetite because I ate all of those energy bars during the climb, I kind of gorged myself with non-stop snacking. I think I was just eating to pass time on that long hike up, like I was using constant tiny dopamine rushes to drown out the physical strain and boredom. I suppose I could eat something right now, but I'm not hungry enough, it doesn't seem worth the effort.

So what then? Just lie back down? Nah, I don't feel like it. I have just enough energy to get out of bed, but not enough to do anything.

The door catches my eye. I left the lights on when I passed out, they are all still lighting up the room, but examining the cracks around the door, I can guess it's dark outside. I must have slept past sunset.

I walk over and open the door, it's pitch black outside. There must be a porch light, right? I find a second light switch, flip it. A light bulb flickers, then lights up the darkness of the porch, and dimly illuminates a shadowy tree line in the distance. Surfaces and edges here on the porch suddenly appear sharp and clear, but the world beyond the porch is made of ghostly silhouettes and shadows. Gazing out into the distance I feel like I'm drifting on the ocean at night, behind me is my small cabin, like a tiny boat, and we (my boat and I) are surrounded in all directions by an infinitely extending abyss.

I feel so alone I know there is a whole planet of people and cities out there, but right now a dark void is wrapping me, insulating me from everyone and everything. There is only me and this tiny single-room-boat.

Standing here, so disconnected, I feel like I'm on the moon. The whole world is out there, on the other side of that void, but I can't see the world, as if I'm gazing out at the pitch-black unilluminated side of the planet. I know it's there, but it's shrouded in darkness, invisible and indistinguishable from the dark void.

All of my routines, all the people, things, and places, they all begin to fade, their significance dissolves into the darkness. I start feeling more than just alone, more than isolated, I begin to feel empty inside. But just as it seems nothing is left, when I, myself, am about to become as empty as that void, that's when faint twinkles start to flicker, like the stars surfacing through the night sky as it turns black.

I'm still standing on the moon, staring across empty space at an unilluminated earth, but now the lights are turning on, those densely populated cities, the centers and hubs, they start lighting themselves up. A few random thoughts start to shine, then more. There is so much I want to do, make, and say, I have fantasies, hopes, and dreams to realize, there are people I want to impress, friends to enjoy time with, and antagonists I want to prove wrong. The most important things have become so clear, it's like the brightness of life has been turned way down, and then the contrast cranked way up, so that tiny faint specs become glaringly obvious points of light.

I stood there reviewing memories and fantasizing about the future, I indulged in the full spectrum of my plans, desires, and identity. Pride, shame, love, hate. I don't know if I have ever seen myself so clearly, I suppose I've never even tried to. How is it that I haven't ever just taken the time to really reflect on who I am?

I don't know how long I stood there, but eventually I just felt tired and went back to sleep.

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I wake up, but this time consciousness sneaks up on me. I phase in and out of a dreamlike state, eventually becoming aware that I am awake without even opening my eyes. Last night's experience is echoing, and I can also remember the dreamscape behind me as I rejoin reality. In my dream I was back home, I could recall last night standing on the porch, I could feel all those realizations, and yet in this dream I was going about all of my normal routines unchanged. It was very unsettling, I was acting completely normal, exactly as usual, but now the insights from last night were there. These new clarities gnawed and cried, as if begging for me to change my behavior. I could hear their demands, I could feel their desperation, but I still acted and lived exactly as I always have. It was profoundly troubling, like watching yourself through your own eyes without having control to change anything.

And now that I'm awake, I'm filled with ambition and urgency. I can choose what to do now, I can choose who I am today.

I'm going to do amazing things. I'm going to make profound discoveries. I'm going to be great. It's funny, most people who say those kinds of things find themselves magnetically drawn to big

cities, chasing their dreams and drawn to those attractive bustling hubs of humanity. The humming energy of dense humanity seems bursting with explosive potential, like a statically charged balloon, and that energetic charge attracts all those individuals with their own individual ambitious potentials.

And me? Here I am, quite the opposite, running out into the middle of nowhere. I suppose it's not that strange for an academic to work in isolation, but we don't normally run off to the mountains, a quiet room is usually enough.

I would never have imagined myself doing this, I would laugh if it was someone else, but there is just something inexplicable about the prof, it's not charisma nor confidence, it's like... It's like 'flow'. Some people seem to slip through life effortlessly, but the prof is so much more, it's as if the universe flows around the professor. Everything just seems to line up and cooperate, it's not just a person who slides through the cracks and winds around obstacles as a fluid, this is more like the world conspires and reality itself becomes fluid as the professor moves through it.

So when the prof said I should 'come here to learn the secret of anti-gravity', I was completely aware of how absolutely insane it sounded. Professor Tias has never published any work related to gravity, but I was still immediately convinced, and so, here I am.

I look up at the mobile hanging in the center of the room, the characters of twisted wire are barely legible from this angle, I only know what they are because I remember them. That first line, 解脱认识, shed your understanding. I realize that, 认识 could be 'understanding', but it also means 'to recognize', like 'I know that person or thing'. Last night when I felt everything fade away, that must be what it meant, I let go of everything I recognized. And the next line, 'awaken to the truth', that must refer to how the experience brought into focus the things that are truly important, piercing through the noise and seeing what truly matters. And that final line 'balanced mental state', it obviously describes the sense of clarity and purpose that I feel right now.

I sit up and look over at the messy desk strewn with notebooks and sheets of paper. I know who I am going to be! I doubt professor Tias found some great secret for 'anti-gravity', and even if so, why just leave it in that heap of scribbles on a desk in a remote mountain shack? But I do have a feeling there is something in there. I guess I trust that the professor isn't maliciously deceptive. There is surely something of value for me to find in there... Right?

Walking over to the desk... What a jumble of clutter. I pick up a notebook and flip through it... Wow! I have never seen anything like it. A rat's nest of scribbles, it appears legible, but I can't help assuming it's incoherent... "Well, here we go." I mumble as I sit down.

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Sitting at the desk, completely lost in thought, when a voice pierces through. "Hello, are you in there?" It rips me back into reality.

I had left the door open a crack for fresh air, turning around, I can't see who is out there but as I reflexively replay those words in my mind, I not only become aware of the question but also recognize the voice, it's Orac. "Yes, come in." I invite.

The door is pushed open and Orac meanders inwards. "So how was your first night? Did you sleep all right? Any trouble?"

"It was fine... More than fine, it was... Well... I passed out right after you left but then I woke up in the middle of the night..." I proceeded to regale Orac with a long winded and extremely descriptive rambling about my existential experience. I kept repeating myself, returning to and going over key parts multiple times. Sometimes my phrasing and descriptions would change slightly, sometimes I added whole new parts I had previously omitted or forgotten. Orac just listened, very attentively, letting me blather on and on, never interrupting, only giving frequent nods, smiles, and acknowledgment that I had a dedicated and understanding listener. There were several false stops where I seemed to conclude, but then felt the need to clarify something, and once I started I would just end up spewing like a fire hydrant again. When I finally ran out of steam it wasn't because I wrapped it up, it was because I noticed the bag of vegetables "... Oh, please, have a seat and put down that heavy bag, your arm must be tired." I say while stepping out of the way and gesturing at the chair.

"Oh, these are for you. I asked at the shop on the way here, and they say they haven't seen you yet. There are some dried goods pre-stocked in the pantry, but you should eat some fresh vegetables too." Orac says handing the bag to me, I accept, a bit surprised, hesitating at first. "Don't worry, you don't need to give me any money, I didn't even pay for them. These are a 'welcome to the neighborhood' gift from the shop owner."

"Oh... Ummm...I'll... Go thank them... Soon..." I'm caught completely off guard, I was so immersed in my rambles that my mind now needs a moment for to switch into 'normal pleasantries mode'. After a few seconds of mentally scrambling to get on track, I jump back in. "If you see them on your way back, then please thank them for me. But don't worry too much about it, I'm sure I'll see them soon enough. I was already planning on heading up to the store I just got lost in... In the... Umumm..." I look at the desk of clutter. "Actually, I'm still not sure what to call it. I haven't really made heads or tails of anything yet."

"Oh, that's clearly quite a puzzle on the desk, but I'm sure you stand a better chance of figuring it out than I would. That's not written in any language I'm familiar with, hahaha." Chuckling with a smile. "You spoke with such passion just now, you have a well of exuberance which is clearly bottomless. You should have plenty of energy to tackle even the most daunting of puzzles."

"Oh, I'm sorry I went on so long." I'm suddenly self-aware of my rambling.

"Oh no, it's quite all right." Orac responds with squinted eyes and a grin. "I really enjoyed listening. It's not every day someone describes a fresh spiritual experience. Most people rarely

speak openly and with such passion, and when they do I'm rarely interested in the topics that they are talking about. Hahaha”

“Spiritual? I...” I hadn't thought about it that way. Normally I shirk away from that adjective, but I suppose it is the best word. Perhaps the scientist in me needs to relax the definition of such terms. “Oh, so did I figure it out then?”

“Huh?” Orac looks confused. “Figure what out?”

“The mobile.” I say, pointing to the dangling structure. “That's what it really means, isn't it? Shed recognition, spiritual awakening, harmonious feelings. It's describing what I experienced last night, the feeling of detaching from the noise of everything followed by the peace and clarity of realizing what truly matters.”

“That is an absolutely beautiful reading.” Orac replies, looks at the mobile, and smiles. “I love it. Do you think the words inspired the experience? Or perhaps the experience inspired your interpretation of the words.”

“Oh...” That question was unexpected. I hadn't really considered the idea that they might be causally connected like that. “I was thinking that my experience was independent, and the words probably describe some form of universal experience. The detachment and clarity just allowed me to see the meaning that was always there, like my experience and the meaning in the words are two separate things entirely... But now that you ask... I'm not so sure anymore...”

We chat for a while, then Orac heads off. As I close the door, all those freshly reviewed memories of last night rush back. I turn and look up at the mobile... Did professor Tias have the same kind of experience here? I'll bet it was precisely such an enlightening experience that inspired the kind of manic drive which produced this crazy mountain of convoluted scribbles. The clarity of purpose that I feel must have been the same driving momentum that fueled the professor on a search for something. I'm not sure what was found, but the way the prof is always one step ahead of everything, there is probably something profound buried in there.

I sit back down at the desk, hunch in, and continue my treasure hunt.

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This is ridiculous! It's been a couple days and I still haven't gleaned any insight from this mess. Most of it is barely legible, and there are almost no descriptive explanations, there aren't even dates, so I can't arrange them into some kind of sequential order. It's all so random.

“Arg!” I growl, pushing my chair away from the desk. I go grab a couple energy bars out of my bag, rip one open, and take a big bite, then open a new bottle of water and pour a glass.

Chewing on a mouthful of energy bar and guzzling water, I can feel myself violently biting and gnawing, even my swallowing is aggressive. I become aware of how angry I am and how I've been driven into such an aggravated state. I stew in rage and eat like this for a while... 'I won't let it get the best of me!' I shovel more into my mouth.

Doubt starts creeping in. Maybe I'm wasting my time, this might be a wild goose chase. Everyone else is back home enjoying life. Am I just missing out for nothing? No! This is who I am. I need this... But the others, the ambitious ones like me, they are back at school working on projects, working on making tangible progress. Should I go back and do things 'the correct way'... No! I can't go back with nothing, that would be so embarrassing. I'm going to be great! And that means I'm coming back victorious.

No! I'm not going to let this puzzle defeat me. Especially now that I know who I am. I won't give up, won't be dissuaded, and won't get distracted. I feel hyper-focused, I stare at the desk like a predator ready to pounce on its prey. I shove the rest of the energy bar into my mouth, return to the desk, and sit back down.

This is who I am.

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I can't take it! The more I dig, the more confused I am. I keep telling myself 'It's just a steep entry threshold' and 'I just need to get over a hump, then it will get easier'. But there doesn't seem to be a crest or peak, it just gets steeper and steeper, more and more confusing.

I'm not searching for a 'needle in a haystack', I'm trying to untangle a pile of knotted thread, and in all my effort I haven't untangled anything, I've only gotten myself inescapably tangled up in the mangled mess as well. My mind is twisted in knots trying to decipher this incoherent jumble.

"Enough!" I stand up, knocking over the chair behind me. "I give up, it's pointless." I take a few steps back, fuming, I'm so angry right now. How am I supposed to... To be who I am... How can I show... This... This...

Huffing for a while, raging at an inanimate pile of paper on a desk, then I direct my anger at the only person within reach, professor Tias. That's when it cracks, the veil of fury is torn and I can see a person, a person who I simply can not paint with a negative brush. I try... I try to accuse the prof of malicious deception, but my imagination won't cooperate, and now I'm just frustrated without any targets.

I can't blame the desk. I can't blame the professor. Who do I blame? Myself?.. I'm trying my best!

I can't look at this desk anymore. Turning and stomping over to the door, I whip it open, and step out.

Oh wow! I'm a bit surprised at how oblivious I was to the howling wind. I cross my arms and hug myself tight as I get slammed by a seamless barrage of air pressure. The wind pushes so strongly, I can feel my legs bracing and entire body engaging to counterbalance the force.

My whole face clenches, I'm not sure why. I know why my eyes are squinting, to guard them from the air assaulting them. But every other muscle of my face is contracting as well.

The tree branches sway violently in the wind, held in tension by the constant rush, pressed and bent into arcs like an archer's drawn bow. When the stream of wind waivers or flinches those bowed branches explosively whip back towards their natural positions.

I'm barely able to see through this squint, my eyes clenched almost completely shut, my vision is thinned, and that remaining sliver struggles to keep focus. I get tired of fighting it all and my attention drifts off into the 'swaying blurs'. I start to notice a correlation between the wind and the waving shadows.

I recall that first night, I remember the experience of perceiving the entire noisy world vanish, it disappeared behind a veil of pure darkness. And then I recall the memory of how those few beacons of significance lit up like stars, shining bright against the contrast of a pitch black void. I search for those stars now, but no matter how hard I squint, no matter how much I strain to focus, there's nothing out there, no beacons, no stars.

It must be the wind, all this noise, chaos, and motion. I bet this is like trying to peer through to the bottom of a pond, it only works well if the water is still. But I don't really know what else to do right now, so I just stand here and keep reaching out with my mind's eye.

Even after a couple minutes of staring intensely, trying to see through this turbulence, there still isn't a single glimpse of what I'm searching for. I don't see anything except a fuzzy screen of rustling and whipping motions. Fine! Forget it! That must have been a one-time thing. I stop straining and I give up on my attempts to 'forcefully penetrate' those torrents. Abandoning my insistence, my mind and body relax, and I start to 'just feel' and 'just observe'. It's quite beautiful. The sights and sounds might be described as shadows, violent motion, and turbulent noise, but experiencing it is actually awe-inspiring and captivating.

As I appreciate this moment, I begin to find myself feeling calmer, even my clenched eyes relax, allowing my constricted view to inflate. As my eyelids open, ever so slightly, and as I listen to my senses... There! There it is! The world beyond, my life, home, friends, teachers, acquaintances. They are all out there, just out of reach, but they are out there... And me?... I'm not there.

I miss them. I have been isolated for days in this little room. I've been alone all this time, but I haven't felt lonely until now.

Wait... Where are the important things? Why am I only seeing these simple elements of everyday life? And why are they coming through so strongly?... I want to go back. I want to socialize, talk with friends and companions. I crave stimulation, friendship, and love. But... I can't do that, not without first doing the important stuff. I can't return and face them with my head hanging low and tail tucked between my legs. Those competitive frenemies, colleagues, and all the antagonists. I need to have something. I need results to...to...

It hits me. To do what? What do I need results for?... To wear as armor? To use as a weapon? To shield myself from their barbs and assert my superiority?... Wow! Is that why I'm doing this? If I had found what I was looking for and then returned triumphantly, only to use it as armor and weapons, what would that make me? Am I my accomplishments? Or am I how I use them?

I feel self-conscious. If anyone else could hear my inner voice right now I would be ashamed, but I'm not. I don't regret it, or feel shame, because it's my secret. As long as I fix it before anyone finds out, then I can pretend this never happened.

Okay, so... Now what?

Now all the people I left behind are wandering through my mind. I stopped feeling like they are 'out there', beyond the wind and shadows. They aren't here with me, that's for sure, but they aren't behind the screen in front of me either. There's no sense in enduring a head-on barrage of wind, getting blasted in the face like this is pointless if I'm not trying to stare forward into some imaginary world behind that shadowy screen.

I turn to face away. I pivot and end up looking across the porch, into the darkness on the less-well-lit side. Now, with the wind more at my back, I lean against the wall and my body stops fighting for balance, even my face relaxes and eyes unclench, my window of sight inflates. Wow, all the complex textures and detailed rough edges strike me. I was straining to focus, fighting to establish a piercing gaze through my contracted blurry squint for so long, this return to simple clarity shocks my senses.

...I miss people... Right now even a simple smile and idle chit-chat would probably feel deeply significant and satisfying. I'm not even thinking about a romantic date or a profound conversation with a close friend, I'd probably be overwhelmed and get excited, or make a fool of myself... And what about my armour? I think being vulnerable would be more enjoyable. Would this sense of loneliness even dissolve if I was 'wearing armor'? Does human interaction matter if you aren't seen for who you truly are?

Well, it's not like there is anyone out there, no sense in standing out here in the cold wind.

I open the door and there is the sculpture, in the center top of my view. I don't even need to read it, I already know the text, but it doesn't say the same thing anymore. The first line reads the same, 'shed your recognition', but now the second line has changed 心神领悟 was originally interpreted to mean 'awaken to the truth', and I thought that meant 'to realize what is important,

to focus on the goals and accomplishments you desire most'. But now the 领悟 (Awakening) of the 心神 (heart and mind) is far more literal, it's not just some poetic stand-in for 'self-identity' or 'the mind', now the 'heart and spirit' directly imply listening to the 'whispers of my heart'. Those 'cravings of the spirit' which are easily diluted, repressed, or postponed by the 'plans and aspirations of the mind'. My interpretation now takes a more direct route through the words, they are more literal. This shorter path of interpretation requires less twisting of meanings, but it still leads me straight to 'realize what is important'. The difference is 'what is important' has changed. Funny, different paths to the same place, but somehow the road taken has fundamentally altered the destination.

This reframing clicks into place, but it's like a tree that's been ripped from the earth, rotated, and then replanted. It's still loose and needs to re-root itself. I drift off to sleep, pondering all the implications of this night's realizations. What do I do with this now? Should I just go home and dive into socializing? Do these ideas insist that I abandon this search which I've been obsessed with? I look at the desk... I don't think so, I still feel like there's something on that desk for me. I look back at the ceiling... I lay there on a quest to figure out 'how do I apply this insight?', and that quest is where my memory fades. Sleep sneaks up on me and relieves me of my search.

...

I wake up feeling more rested than I have in days, and hungry, so hungry. Just one glance at my bag and I'm disgusted by the thought of those energy bars and trail mix. I want something raw, I want real food, something cooked fresh instead of processed. Oh yeah! The vegetables would be amazing with some of the noodles that I saw in the cupboard.

Out of bed, over to the fridge... Ug, yuck! I'm not sure what I expected, they were delivered fresh from a small country-side shop, they probably had already spent quite a while unrefrigerated, and then I just left them to sit for days.

I salvage what I can. It's fine, there's still plenty for a meal, they should be ok if I boil them. The unsalvageable I toss into what looks like a compost pile around back, at least they can become part of something new, use what I can, donate and recycle what I can't, haha. A little rationalization like that helps alleviate my sense of guilt for being wasteful.

A quick wash and chop, next toss it into a pot of boiling water, add seasoning, then later some noodles... And... It's ready. I consume it with fervor, not that violent animalistic devouring like before, this is savoring and indulgent satisfaction.

While rinsing the dishes I realize that I can't go back to dried processed food. It's time to go to the store.

The walk up the path is surprisingly lovely. I suppose my hustled hike and rushed exhaustion on the day I arrived was such a strained ordeal, I didn't take in the experience. And ever since then

I've been cocooned in that room. The nature here is so beautiful, lush, and vibrant, I suppose it shouldn't be a surprise that it's lovely if I just take a moment to appreciate it.

The shop is small but it's got fruits, vegetables, and more than enough ingredients to eat like a king... Well, to eat like a king from a few centuries ago anyways, hahaha.

"So you finally poked your head out of that burrow, hahaha!" A voice startles me as I'm picking out vegetables. I turn to see Orac's friendly face grinning at me. "I think people around here were starting to wonder if you really existed, or if I had become delusional, I bet some suspected that I was just imagining some visitor in the neighborhood, haha!"

"Oh... Hehe.. Yeah." Slightly jostled by the surprise interruption, but that bubbly demeanor quickly disarms my apprehension. "Yeah, I kind of got stuck at that desk in an obsessive... Um... Treasure-hunt might be a good word."

"Ah! A search for answers." Orac responds nodding. "I'm quite familiar with that type of rabbit-hole. Did you find what you sought?"

"No... Ummm... Yes... Well... No, not really..." I stumble, not actually sure what the answer is myself. Orac just stands there silently, giving me undivided attention and a gradually widening grin, as if my indecision is somehow interesting or meaningful. I ponder my answer, showered with the hushed gaze from this patient audience of one. "It's very complicated, and I'm not sure exactly how to describe it, or what to describe... I think if I keep going then I will end up rambling in circles."

"Oh, please do!" Orac invites. "Uncontrolled and unfiltered rants are often the best way to discover the things we already feel but don't yet understand."

"Oh, okay..." A slight hesitation but I let myself start. "Well, last night..." As soon as the floodgates open a river gushes forth. The narration of last night oscillates from beginning to end, and then swings back to the start, over and over. There are two narrations, the first one starts with me going outside and tells the story of my realization that 'I need to take off my armor', and that I must accept my need for the simple human things in life, embrace them, they should not be set aside or repressed. It's an acceptance that I'm inescapably tethered to the same basic physical and emotional needs that we all are. Then there is a second telling of that night, one that starts at the end, back in the house. It is a story of me reviewing that realization, accepting a discovered truth, but not being able to let go of my plans, ambitions, and desires. This is the tale of me searching backwards through the evenings memories and struggling to discover flaws, seeking excuses to justify a return to my obsessive quest for success.

As I repeat these tellings of the story, it starts to feel less like a pendulum's oscillating swing, instead it feels like a circular narrative. But with each cycle the distance separating opposites shrinks. My rambling began with a sink full of water, the surface of water held numerous unconnected ideas and distant perspectives, many were on opposing sides of the water's

perimeter. I pulled the plug at the bottom and it began gushing out, the story spewed as I rambled, and the pool swirled round and round. By the end there was no diameter left to separate the opposing sides of the pool, everything had collapsed into one united story.

“They are not mutually exclusive at all! Are they? I can embrace all sides of myself. I don’t need to choose one over the other do I?” I look at Orac who is just smiling pleasantly, almost proudly, or perhaps this is the smirk of someone who is watching a child learn simple things. Regardless, it is positive and encouraging. “I was trying to find some logical solution, as if I needed to systematize and coordinate multiple intentions and needs. But I don’t need to plan or strategize my behavior. I can just follow my moods and environment as they come and go.... Can’t I...? I don’t need to be consistent in who I am or predictable in how I behave...Do I?”

“Hahaha!” Orac laughs approvingly. “The ocean moves as it pleases. People try to predict its ebb and flow, but the ocean is under no obligation to make sense to them or adhere to their predictions.”

I like that. “I imagine the obscene complexities of fluid dynamics, I personify the ocean, then see a scientist scolding the ocean for ‘not being predictable by simple models’. Next I abstract that scientists into an internal reflection of the world, the demands of a society which insists that I define myself explicitly and express myself in ways that can be understood. There was a critic in my head who claimed to be a representative of collective-humanity. It has been bullying me all my life, insisting on internal consistency, justifiable behavior, and transparent decision trees. “Hahaha!” Laughter emerges as that critic turns into a person screaming at the ocean waves for behaving too unpredictability. Such a ridiculous and laughable metaphorical scene. “That reminds me of one of my favorite modern quotes. Neil deGrasse Tyson said ‘The universe is under no obligation to make sense to you.’ I’ve always loved it, now it has another layer of meaning for me.”

We both joke for a while about the hilarity of how we all insist that everything in life must explain itself to help us feel more comfortable. Then we transition to chit chat, and eventually I take my leave and head back.

...

My research has been going a bit better, although I’m not sure you can call it ‘research’, it’s really just combing through incoherent scribbles. I’m starting to find superficial similarities and patterns, so I’m at least able to sort this stuff into groups. I might even have found some logical progression, nothing profound, just like ‘I think this pile precedes that pile’. I spend a lot of time cooking and enjoying food out on the porch, during these breaks I savor my meal and reflect on ‘life beyond the desk’. All those things I want and need drift through my head, friends, romance, connection, communication of ideas, exchange of perspectives... I know I will need to change something, I can’t just sit here alternating between ‘grinding at the desk’ and ‘daydreaming about everything else’, but I’m not ready to make any choices yet... I can feel a growing sense

that I'm procrastinating or delaying the inevitable, but it's not yet overwhelming my comfort and satisfaction in this alternating routine of search and reflection.

There is something else too, a growing itch, it interrupts both my moments of reflection and work at the desk. I've come to peace with a search that may yield no great results, and with my need to embrace relationships and simple human needs, but other people don't change just because I have.

Mental flashes intrude when I'm deep in thought or lost in reflection. I see myself back home, no armor, exposed in my vulnerable hunger for simple connection, friendship, love, and validation... But this world is far from ideal. I will inevitably be exposing myself to hurtful and judgmental experiences.

Will my needs seem greedy? Will it be like painting a target on my back? Like I'm screaming out loud 'Hey bullies, I'm probably easy to hurt because I'm vulnerable and exposed.' And more, without armor will things hurt more than before? Will everything cut deeper now?

Tonight these intrusive thoughts are so persistent, they disturbed my dinner and reflection, and won't go away. It's raining, and these thoughts seem to join the sound of the raindrops on the roof, bombarding me during my evening study.

Frustrated, I stand up. I can't focus. If I can't tune them out with study then maybe a snack. Blood sugar, dopamine, and all those endorphins can work magic, even a glass of water can sometimes dissolve negative thoughts.

An apple and some water don't help. I just fester in these worrisome hypotheticals as I'm snacking. I don't have the tools to manage this. I can't even properly describe this feeling... It's fear... Plus... Entitlement. I 'deserve' to dive into all the good without being forced to endure the bad... Angrily stomping over and swinging the door open, I'm confronted with pitch-black night. That patter of rain on the roof gets drowned out by a roar from outside. There's no wind tonight, just the downpour of rain in obscene volume.

I flip on the porch light, and again see the faint canvas of trees, but now it looks like static noise. Nothing waving around in long broad strokes like with the wind, this time the leaves just shake and jitter in place.

My internal frustration seems to resonate with the roaring clamor of rain beating down on the forest, but it doesn't amplify my aggression, it just feels like a synchronized manifestation of the turmoil that has been accumulating within my subconscious.

I stand there for a few minutes, idle and immersed in my frustration. The rain somehow calms me without lessening my discomfort, this consistent limbo of peaceful-disturbance lingers. I rest my gaze on the noisy screen of shaking leaves, both watching the whole and occasionally focusing on a single twitching leaf. After a while I start to notice that a calm has begun to slowly

overwhelm the turmoil, not erasing or concealing it, more like foliage growing and spreading across a dusty desert, blanketing the irritating sand and coarse grains with floral aromas and cool shade.

But nothing has changed. I still fear the pain of harsh words and hurtful attitudes. And I still know that I must walk into them, because they are inseparable from the pleasant and rewarding experiences that I need so much... The rain still beats on the leaves... But it's not the rain's fault, is it? Water is just as happy in the soil as it is in the sky. It rises peacefully but falls violently... It's the fall!

People aren't mean or hurtful because they enjoy harming others, they do it because they themselves are hurting. On the way up most people are kind and generous, but when they fall, it hurts, and you can't really blame them for crying... I suppose most of us are taught not to cry, we are taught that if we fall then it is our own fault, it means we failed, or worse, perhaps others did it to us, maybe it even means we need to fight back against an aggressor. But these are just raindrops, they are just falling... And so do we, we fall in our hearts and minds, we fall in the world and society, and when we fall, then that pain can't help but collide with everything we touch.

Simmering in this perspective I find relief from worry and frustration, but it's fleeting, soon I find myself questioning it. 'Sure, they might be in pain, but that doesn't make it fair for them to hurt me, does it?' and 'My seeing their pain doesn't change my reality, does it?'. The more I interrogate this newfound peace, the less comforting it is. 'Why should I suffer? What gives other people the right to drag everyone down with them?' This intellectual review has aggravated me again, I instinctively return my gaze to the buzzing screen of jittery shadow-leaves, and quickly lose all trains of thought in those flickers.

Once more submerging in abstracted acceptance, but I keep bobbing up above the surface and get pricked by the cold air of rational protest. I prefer being immersed in the peaceful water, but my logical mind is too buoyant, like a piece of driftwood, I'm unable to divorce from the surface. In time this oscillation begins sagging, it dips deeper and longer below, and I realize it's not about fairness, or right versus wrong, there frequently isn't even any intention to be found. The physics are what they are, raindrops do what they can within the confines of their situation, even in their collisions they are still water, they quench thirst and play a critical role in life, they nurture the soil and are part of a greater living whole. I start to sink, I've become waterlogged and can finally rest beneath the surface in acceptance. The world will be what it is, it does not harbor malicious intent, if anything it has noble intentions but must work within the confines of unideal and indifferent physics. I can choose to angrily object, or I can empathize, and in the empathy I can remove its sting and soothe my itch.

I stand here for a while. Eventually I feel confident that this really is a sustainable position, it sure seems to be, it's unwavering. No matter how I try to destabilize myself it holds firm. I aggressively envision judgment, criticism, and mockery but this empathy removes their sting.

They have no more bite, I don't fear the toothless dog, I actually pity it, growling in hunger and snarling in fear.

The chill of humidity is penetrating my clothing, it is time to go back inside. The dangling mobile catches my eye again, I instinctively know this is going to reveal another layer of meaning, and I'm right. Struck with a new interpretation, it's a strange feeling, to experience the event of an epiphany while also being aware of the process itself as it sets in. It's like watching yourself, perhaps this is similar to what people call an out-of-body experience.

Line one remains the 'shed comprehension' from my first night, and the next line is still 'awaken to the needs of the heart and spirit'. But now the final line is not some kind of 'balance of emotions', it's not what you can find by doing those two previous things. Now the third line is a shift in attitude. 情感 can be read as feelings and emotions, but it can also more broadly mean 'the reaction you have to things, judgments, approval, or disapproval, your feelings, likes, or dislikes... even your positions and rejections'. It no longer 'promises a reward of peace and balance in my feelings and emotions'. Now it is another instruction, not a reward. It encourages me to harmonize my reactions and balance my perceptions. I thought it was the goal, but it's actually another step.

I lie down and relax. Peering over at that desk, there is still something there calling me. This newfound peace wraps around me and I fall asleep. That pile of scribbles is no longer a taunting obsession, tonight it sings me a lullaby of gentle beckoning.

....

A few more days of casual 'research' have gone by. These days the process is less frantic and I take more breaks, often just reflecting on the chaos and seemingly random gibberish in those pages. All those just disjointed and confusing elements seem to behave and self-assemble like neurons. If I step back and go out for a walk, just let my mind drift aimlessly, when I stop analyzing and give up trying to forcibly assemble the puzzle pieces, that is when a calm clarity approaches. And in that calm they come to life, when I let them sit peacefully it is like they are gently encouraged to grow, they reach out and interconnect, it feels like... You know those videos of living neurons self-assembling into networks, it feels like that.

Today I'm just strolling and one thing seems to keep resonating, ' $-G=n(x)dm$ ', out of that pile on the desk, all that text of awkward strings, incoherent vocabulary, and garbled formulas, in all of that mess, this one in particular seems to stand out. There are doodles that resemble charts, data, and formulas, mostly nonsense of unidentified units and variables, but there is something gravitational about this one equation. It feels as if many other nodes are reaching to connect with this one in particular, there is something calling my attention to this one, but I can't quite put my finger on it. That formula did appear several times in various forms, each time with different values passed into the function $n(\text{dist})$, $n(-2)$, and many more, but the one that is standing out and seems to be the great attractor in all of this volume is ' $-G=n(-3+1)dm$ '. The best interpretation I can come up with is 'the negative of gravity is equal to the mass integration of

something to do with inverted 3D space plus time'. I know this seems like gibberish, but it feels like an attempt to describe anti-gravity, which is what is 'supposedly in here'... somewhere. I'm fond of it, it's a fun muse, it seemingly implies that gravity emerges from the fundamental structure of spacetime itself. It reminds me of various theories that describe spacetime in terms of connections, graphs, and relationships. Those models tend to describe gravity as just 'falling out of the model' as a naturally emergent property, a necessary byproduct of space and time existing at all.

I'm wandering through the woods and enjoying this playful conceptual musing, dancing on the line between abstract and rigorous interpretation, when both my conceptual and literal stroll is interrupted. "Hello stranger! Haha!" My steps and thoughts are abruptly stopped in their tracks, I'm torn into the present. Turning around I see, who else, but Orac, grinning ear to ear, somehow simultaneously both extreme and authentic, as usual. Joking on approach "No one else ever sees you. I'm the monk, but somehow you are more withdrawn than me, haha!"

"Oh I was kind of... Stuck... But then again, I suppose I keep thinking 'I have finally gotten myself unstuck', only to..." Orac Just Smiles and gives me time to assemble my thoughts. "... I don't want to call it a 'profound revelation', that sounds so lofty and prideful, but that's how it feels to me... Let's just say I had some insight that changed my perspective, it feels like an improvement... But I should probably leave it there or I'll end up on another endless rant."

"Oh, please do, rant away!" Orac jumps to respond without missing a beat. "A monk's life up on this hill is peaceful, but sometimes too peaceful, so your talks are a welcome stimulation. Please, indulge me."

"Well, okay..." I start rambling.

I start off by going over the two-step repeating cycle. Step-one starts with me being frustrated that other people can impose negativity on me, even when I try to find balance, and this first step ends with me accepting reality and not assigning blame. Step-two moves beyond acceptance and into empathy, they aren't malicious, they aren't even neutral, most are making an effort to be good, they deserve empathy not judgment or dismissal. Orac doesn't interrupt, except for the occasional signal of approval.

I turn these two alternating steps into a dance in circles, until it feels repetitive. Eventually feeling like I'm repeating myself, my focus releases its grip on 'trying to describe', because suddenly something new tugs on my attention.

"...So I guess I'm still a bit stuck. That desk still draws me in, but at the same time my thoughts are pulled far away, drifting towards 'all the living I still have to do'..." I stop and analyze what I've just said "...I keep thinking 'I figured it out', but every time I think I've 'unstuck myself', it just turns out that I'm still stuck in some other way. Is there even such a thing as 'getting unstuck'?"

"Hahaha..." Orac lets out a deep belly laugh. "If there is, then please let me know. Hahaha!"

I'm not sure what I expected, that response feels appropriate, and fits Orac's personality perfectly, but it fills me with disappointment and helplessness. "Oh, yeah, of course there isn't a simple answer. I guess it's like asking 'what's the meaning of life?' without properly defining the words 'meaning' or 'life'."

Orac has obviously read my plummeting emotions, and so, in a comforting manner touches my shoulder, waits a moment then gently encourages. "Don't overthink it. Of course you are stuck." I look into that soft reassuring expression. "We are all stuck here. It's called being alive. You are trapped here, in the world, with the rest of us."

"..." I'm stunned. No longer listless or down, just disoriented. "...That... Makes sense... But I don't know how to interpret it, or what to do with it."

"You're doing great! Your constant forward momentum is obvious, you should feel proud!" Orac praises and gives a little nod of approval to grab my attention. "Sometimes all it takes is a new interpretation. Answers don't hide, if answers are eluding you... Then it's usually just your perspective that needs changing."

"Yeah, I guess that's exactly what I've been doing." I admit. "But what if it just goes on like this forever?"

"Oh, don't worry, that's impossible!!!" Orac smirks and a slick chuckle leaks through, then comes the withheld punchline. "...Eventually you die! Hahaha!"

"..." That joke should be funny. "Ha... Hehe.. Yeah." I make a pitiful attempt to fake a laugh, but it just doesn't strike my funny bone. I'm not disturbed by it, it just leaves me in the same uneasy and insecure mood, not knowing how to act or react.

Orac tries for a while to lift my spirits with friendly banter, but all the attempts to infect me with positivity fall flat. The persistence, however, eventually has me feeling bad for 'not-cooperating', now I 'feel obligated to feel better', so I start faking. I don't think I am convincing, but we eventually say farewell and go our separate ways.

....

This puzzle still perplexes me, this pile of chaos and scribbles still resists classification or assembly, it doesn't fit into any framework or lens, and yet... I enjoy sorting through it. Grouping and reorganizing the jumbled nonsense has become more ritual than rigor, but these days it has begun to feel like escapism, like a meditative coping mechanism to deal with a growing inner tension.

Today the tension just doesn't want to be calmed, it is polluting my routines with a sense of futility. Voices creep in and whisper thoughts of entitlement, cloaked in a 'costume of justice',

they tell me that the world, and all of life, are denying me the peace, ease, and comfort which I am entitled to. It's making me feel sick in an endless cycle of discomfort, realizations, fleeing enlightenment, then repeating. I am always ambushed again, by something new, yet old. Repeating the cycle all over again, with something different, yet similar. The first time was like an epiphany, the second was the continuation of a journey, but by the third time a sense of 'deja-vu' had begun to creep in. Now I am standing at the precipice of a fourth, does this really just go on forever?

I can't find my study vibe. Standing up from the desk I start pacing, spinning in this sense of unfairness. Standing in the center of the room, facing the door, but my eyes are not focused on the door, instead I'm glaring at some imagined antagonist outside. I am looking out at some opponent on the other side, but then something catches my eye... A nail. There are more than one, a couple of them, near the top of the door, partially driven into the wood and protruding with a slight upward angle. I had not noticed them before, I guess they are like hooks. I could have been hanging my stuff on them. My feet start taking steps towards them, and soon one of them is right in front of me. Touching it with my index finger, it feels firmly stuck, rigid and solidly planted. Without knowing why I grasp it between my fingers and tug, it doesn't come out at all. I pull harder, it doesn't budge. I try to wiggle and yank, but it's still firmly bound in place. I let go and begin scanning the room for tools.

What am I doing?... Trying to 'unstick' that nail because I feel stuck? Is my frustration at a personal situation causing me to lash out and dismantle anything within reach? Has my sense of impotence driven me into a performative tantrum?

This nail never asked me to liberate it from the wood. The nail is where it was meant to be. The nail is just 'being a nail'. If I extract it from the wood, then what?... I guess it would just be an old rusty nail, hoping that maybe it gets used again, waiting to once more be rejoined with the material that is meant to connect with.

I step back, both palms forward, as if backing off and gesturing 'sorry, I didn't mean to'. It's just a nail, but it has already been personified, and now I want to de-escalate our relationship.

It takes a few seconds for the nail to become inanimate again. The residual guilt and discomfort from this artificial interaction fades, and I'm now left standing a few steps back from the door. My focus drifts beyond the door again, this time I picture the immediate physical surroundings on the other side, as if my sight penetrates through the wood, then my gaze continues extending forward... I see the trees, and continue forward... The ground recedes as the hill slopes downwards, towards the town below, ever forward. The people down there are busy, energetic and active, they rush around acting and interacting.

They are where they are meant to be... Where should I be? I'm up here doing what? Searching for anti-gravity? I should not be climbing up-and-away from everyone, searching for magical ways to float off further. I should roll down that hill, lean into the gravity of this beautiful planet. Gravity holds us all together on the surface, it binds us together on this nurturing pale blue dot.

The universe is so hostile to life, without gravity...

Thank heavens for gravity...

Click!

The space between those two nails, I recognize that length!

Those lines of characters in the mobile, they gradually evolved from a rigid modern language structure into something more traditional and poetic. From 'double words' of 'double character' into a fluid style where individual characters were more like standalone words.

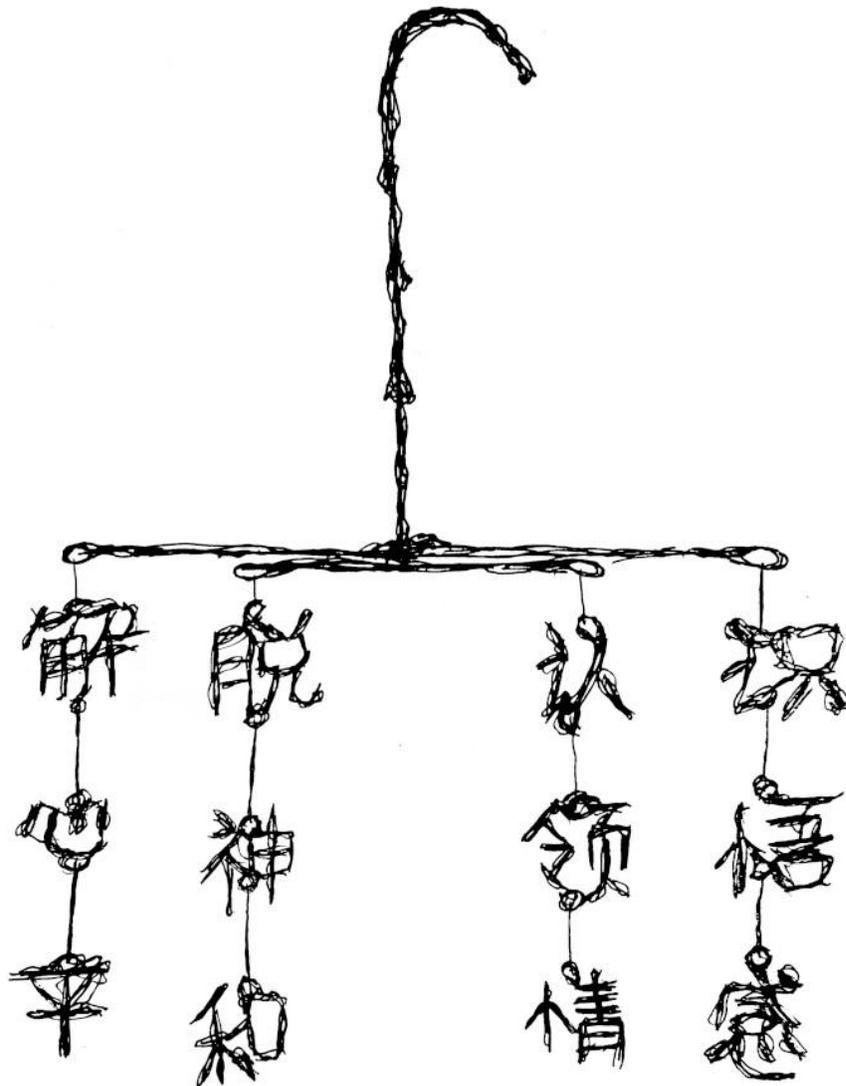
Anti-gravity...

-3+1...

I turn around and look at the mobile... Just as I thought!

I grab it and lift gently. Its weight falls into my hands, and I can feel not only its mass but a loss of stability, like holding a broom pointed straight up in the air, I must actively balance it now.

The top is a broad hook that was used to hang it up. I unhook it and gently lower it in front of me.



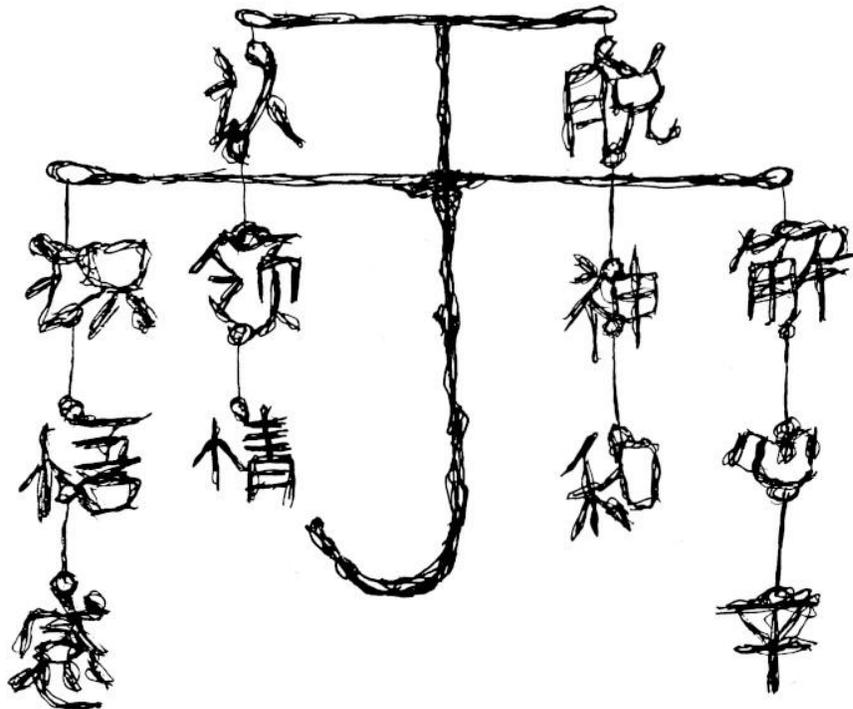
It twists and rocks as I move it, those four endpoints that the strings of characters dangle from, they are little loops, and the space between the center two loops, the length of the short middle horizontal bar on the bottom, that width looks to be exactly the distance between the two nails on the door.

I turn and go to the door, I turn the mobile upside-down while walking, and as I flip it, that longer bar falls down the center shaft, until it is blocked by a bulge. It's not just a simple stop, that isn't some random blob or nodule... It fits perfectly with the ring of the center-bar. The shapes have been designed to click together snugly. That long bar is now level and stable, resting on the bulge.

I hold it up to the door. Those middle two rings, now on top, slip perfectly onto the nails. I gently let go and the whole thing is suspended on the door.

In its new form the frame itself is now very clearly the character 干, 'in' or 'from', often used to describe a 'source'.

Also, the characters are now all mirrored, left to right, they dangle on the string and spin freely. So I could have put it up either way, but to get the 干 shape I had to flip everything horizontally.



Now there are four vertical strings, and things no longer line up into three neat horizontal phrases. Each chain starts from the 干 frame.

The original layout was three lines of words, each line made of character pairs in a rather modern style, arranged left to right, words and ideas in pairs of characters.

But traditionally Chinese was read top to bottom, right to left. Artistic and poetic writing, especially in old texts, tends to lean into single characters being 'whole words'.

And now, if I count the 干 as the first character of each chain, there are four vertical chains, each chain is four characters, in a style that 'feels older'.

于解心平

于脱神和
于认领情
于识悟感

于解心平
in/from
untie/untangle/free
heart/center
level/even/calm

于脱神和
in/from
shed/remove/take off
spirit/mental/energy
harmony/peace

于认领情
in/from
recognize/acknowledge
receive/understand
emotion/empathy/understanding

于识悟感
in/from
seeing/knowing
realize/awaken to
emotion/empathy

I stand there silent, all of this slowly sets in.

The first three nights were all about letting go...
Letting go of tangles and noise
Letting go of armor and weapons
Letting go of resentment and entitlement
-3

And now embracing gratitude
+1

My subconscious is clearly digesting it and trying to find elegant ways to frame it in my native tongue. Nothing can truly do justice to its original form, but it eventually takes the shape of something that sounds and feels close... close enough anyways...

May I find clarity in untangling myself

May I find wholeness in removing armor

May I find empathy in recognizing others

May I find gratitude in awakening my sight

Looking at the new shape I realized that there are now even more new permutations and perspectives. I could spend ages sitting here, reinterpreting this, over and over...

But I don't... I don't even try.

I just open the door, and go down to town.

...

I'm packing up, I leave today. Just as I'm reviewing the room for a third time I hear a knock. I don't even need to wonder about it, it's obvious who the visitor is. "Come in Orac. It's open, as always."

"I got your message. So you're heading off, huh?" Orac asks, pushing the door open and strolling in. "Is our little hillside too quiet for a busy mind of this modern world?"

"Not at all. My time here has given me some of the most intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually stimulating experiences of my life." I look around the room. The desk where I engaged my mind. The kitchen where I fed my body. The bed where I wandered in dreamscapes. And then to the first and fourth wall, the entrance and exit. "It's time for me to use the door. But I'm sure I'll come back... I wonder if it will still be the same when I do."

"It most definitely will not, haha. But even if time here froze and waited for your return, you would have new eyes, so it would look different regardless." Orac grins, then asks. "So where are you going? If you don't mind me asking."

"I bought a ticket to a coastal city. Of course I'm going to end up back at university, but it doesn't need to be a direct non-stop journey." I answer. "Something about heading straight for the biggest nearby city, busy and full of people, it just feels right. Plus, coastal cities are at sea level, so I'm leaning into gravity, haha!"

"I see, I thought you were searching for anti-gravity..." Orac pokes playfully. "Now you dive into gravity. Have you embraced the earth's pull, or did you find your answers? Perhaps you don't fear gravity because you have discovered a secret to escape it."

"Ummm... No. I didn't find any secrets." I respond, thoughtfully pausing, my gaze rests on the mobile hanging on the door behind Orac. "... I just learned some... Difficult simple things..."

Thinking for a moment, I allow the words to take their own shape. "... I learned to find peace in untangling, harmony in vulnerability, empathy in recognition, and the blessing of gratitude."

I intentionally glance at the mobile a few times, signaling the target of my focus, but instead of turning around to look at it, Orac's smile just shifts into a smirk. This quiet moment hangs in the air.

A few minutes of idle pleasantries, then I pick up my stuff and go outside. I only get a few steps away, then I stop, put down my bag, and turn around to appreciate the sight of this rustic shelter, the place which hosted me. It looks like a cocoon now. I think I will be reflecting on this place for years. I feel this wonderful nostalgic sense of grateful joy manifest, and I must fight to regain control of my face as my eyes well up with tears and I smile uncontrollably.

"You seem like a whole new person!" Yelled at me from the doorway, I look at Orac and that comment rings in my head. I instinctively tilt my head and let that resonate, then respond with a silent smirk, the kind Orac always uses. "Hahaha, you've truly changed your default mode network, haven't you?"

"Huh?... Default mode network?... Yeah that's actually the perfect description." Something is out of place, something doesn't fit. "...Wait, the default mode network is a very technical term, it describes the baseline neural behavior of your brain, what it defaults into when it's idle. Sure, I suppose it's a very relevant concept for a monk, but it just feels... 'off' when I hear you say it... Not that I don't think you would know it, but... It just feels awkward coming from you. You always have such a natural and traditional 'flow', this doesn't really fit your usual vibe."

"Hahaha! Yes, very true. I picked that term up in my talks with Ceel." Orac confirms, explaining further. "Ceel was very dedicated to studying introspection and developing skills of self-guided growth. The language used was far more technical and scientific than I'm used to, but the core ideas are basically the same. The 'default mode network' was one of Ceel's favorites, and I must say I can appreciate the elegance and precision of that term."

"Ah... That makes sense. It definitely sounds like professor Tias. The default mode netw... Wait... No, is it..."

I run inside and over to the desk. Flipping through a notebook... Until... It is!

I had assumed the 'dm' was from an integration plotted on 'm'. It's a perfectly natural assumption, I thought it most resembled a calculus formula, so I interpreted the the 'n' as some function to be integrated with respect to 'm', so I rearranged the equation into a form that I thought made more sense.

It wasn't

$-G=n(+3,-1) dm$

That was my own rearrangement

Originally it was

$-G=dmn(-3,+1)$

“Anti-gravity... Hahaha...” I turn and laugh, a bit maniacally. Orac is unphased, grinning silently “Gravity isn't the force holding me down on the planet, it's the one holding me down in my own mind!”

Orac smiles, crossing arms, standing there. I ramble for a while about the elegance of these ‘three subtractions and one addition’. I go on and on about ‘dropping entanglements, entitlement and judgment, then filling their void with gratitude’. Explain how ‘I'm not entitled to more, I'm not even entitled to this’, ‘gravity is a blessing, not a curse’.

As usual, Orac lets me rant, offering only supportive attention. We eventually wrap it up and say a second round of farewells.

As I'm outside picking up my bag again, I glance over and see Orac hanging the mobile back up where it was originally.

“Hey, why are you putting it back?” I shout. “It's obviously supposed to be on the door.”

“Do you think you are the first?... or the last? Hahaha...” Orac laughs boldly with hands on hips. “This place that Ceel left is just one of many such places. People have been making these places since the dawn of humanity. They all have their own style and charm, I like this one, it's a unique reflection of this strange era we find ourselves in.”

I'm standing silent for a moment, then a grin overpowers my face of course... of course.

I just wave, turn around, and head down the trail. Falling into our communal gravity, looking up to the sky. I'm sure future generations will venture beyond this world, but I guess once they are out in those boats, on that vast ocean, they will be searching for new islands, and jumping into new gravity sources that pull and hold them together.

I look back down the hill. This one is mine, gravity holds my body here, but it doesn't have to hold down my spirit, it can just as easily quench my thirst if I change my perspective. I love our gravity well.