Trig Points

Every day he would go cycling thru the deserted streets, starting at Camden lock, down to the towpath, along to Little Venice, and find a new story pinned to the wall under the lights. He never saw who left them there. Each one was written by a different hand as far as he could tell. He took to setting out earlier and earlier to try to catch whoever was putting the tales there.

Sometimes he'd hear someone running away under the road bridge, but he never saw them. He collected the pieces of paper, and scanned and OCR'd them, and added his own pictures to liven them up.
So far, he had found sixteen of what he called his Camden Lockdown Stories.

- balance chapter 1 - Balance
- beggars chapter 2 - Beggar's Belief
- chargezone chapter 3 - Charge Zone
- no2ai chapter 4 - Id Free
- TheLibrarians chapter 5 - The Librarians
- MarvellousPets chapter 6 - Marvellous Pets
- ExperimentalWriter chapter 7 - The Experimental Writer
- Handel-to-Hendrix chapter 8 - James George
- pages chapter 9 - The Pages
- MissionCreep chapter 0 - The Mission Creep
- jean-et-jacques chapter 10 3/4 - JJ go boating
- WorldsEnd chapter 11 - The World's Ends.
- vampiremermaids chapter 13 - Rock, Roll, Pitch&Yaw.
- sleepwalkers chapter 14 - A Rude Awakening.
- q-ark chapter 15 - Last in Line.
- phone-box chapter 16 - Not so smart.

Later on, he came to realize that the pictures had always been there. They were trig points left by the authors, like pins in a ghost map, to show where they were written. And like the ghost map, maybe he could find the fount at the center of all those points. He started to travel around the city trying to match pictures to locations, always remembering that the location might be in the past, or even not there yet. He had read that you could triangulate any person if you knew three different facts about them, like area they lived, age, and favourite animal, for example, or hair style, pet hatred and time over a hundred meter swim.
Perhaps one of these,

or even her,

or else one of those:

In the end, he realised that the author must be at the intersection, the triangulation from all of these viewpoints.
He must travel to all these places, and follow the logical ley lines. And as with all trig points, equipped with his moral compass, he must find where all the three lines intersect.

His careful reading of all the stories, and attention to detail in the photos, led him to write down this list of threesomes, and from this, in each case, he must try to identify the writer:

Leonard Cohen, Mornington Crescent and Bicycles
Guinness, Beamish, Murphy’s
Punch Cards, Punch Brothers, Penny Farthings
Toyota Hilux, Camel, Paris
Bond, Aston Martin, Dragonfly
PG Tips, A Lemon Tree, Dr Watson
Tattoo, back to black, sharpies
An Arrow Boat, a lock, an undoing
Do not lock the pump, The Brewery;

Suffice it to say that none of them had a camera.

Photo credits (mine):

• Hydra (kamini), 1973
• Outside Johnny Foxes, Glencullen, Dublin, 2001
• Paleochora, crete, 2020
• Bins outside the Computer Lab, Cambridge, 2020
• Saruni lodge, masai mara, kenya, 2019
• The Mara North, 2019
• Heraklion, Crete & Brook Street, London, 2020
• A private library, Kentish Town, 2020
• Buck Street, Camden, 2020
• Llanggollan Viaduct, 2017 or 1983
• Lipari, Italy, 2015
• Venetian Fort, Paleochora, Crete 2018
• Paddington Basin, Regents Canal, London, last week
• Sandy beach, Paleochora 2020
• Beneath the stairs, the library again, unknown date
• Quinns, Hawley Road, unknown date
• Hydra port, 1969
• Islington cemetery, 2017
• Burma, 1943
The Past is a Foreign Country
and it is invading us.

The first time I saw the statues was on a march down Park Lane in early 2020. They were incredibly realistic, but there had been a fashion in London for some years for municipal street art commissioned to excellent sculptures, hence the cast iron table tennis players outside Paddington station, and the bronze Window Cleaner near by. So I, and thousands of other protestors like me, walked by unperturbed. Even the massed media failed to cover this, though of course a few days later, the pundits would be poring over past footage and user contributed video on social media, trying to find the earliest occurrence in this, and many other countries.

It became apparent that the phenomenon was much more complex, exhibiting itself with very different symptoms in different nations and cultures. The other place with which I was most familiar was, of course, Greece, where it was far more rare, but in some ways, far sadder. Rather than direct fossilisation, it seemed that victims would suddenly become their parents. And to make space, their parents would become grandparents until the grave decimated a generation.

By May, the streets of England were crowded with immobile figures of stone and quartz, with the remnant of the citizens still able to move, having to wind they way through the maze of bodies. Even on the public transport vehicles, seated and standing, holding on to the leather straps of chrome handles, they held their ground firmly. There were not enough of the woke to move them out of the way, and where would we put them.

Scientists and theologians were trying to piece together an explanation for the plague and its strange and high variable forms. Eventually, the Archbishops’ ecologists came up with the best explanation that they could.
Many years earlier, when I first visited the Greek island of φως (light, later known as water for the lack of same, probably renamed by some Englishman with their lack of subtle irony the locals possessed), we used to admire the fishermen in the one and only port, bringing ashore their catch of urchins and sponges. No more of them now.

We were staying in Kamini, a short walk out of the port, with Natalie and Sergei, and we did what young people did in those days on an Island with poor beaches, and no cars (well, the Mayor had a beaten up old Rolls Royce, but that was now only used to carry stones up the windy streets behind the port to help build new or repair old houses).

Of course, we did have water. All the traditional white houses were built over a big cistern, which was filled with rainwater in the water and spring and lasted if you were careful through most the summer. There was no electricity, so cooking was done by the Bakers. We would buy our meat (lamb, goat) and take it there, and they would walk it through the town on huge trays, delivering cooked meals to people. One day, we got great sea bream from one of the fishermen and the soup and baked fish fed a taverna full of people.

Every morning, the Mania express docked to take still drunken Athenians home to Piraeus, while the Dolphin arrived with its hydrofoils furling, delivering the next load. Towards the end of summer, a huge rusty old tanker, deck barely above the waterline, would dock, and deliver fresh water to houses who had foolishly over used their cisterns.
Occasionally, I would play music in a taverna, although never sing, despite encouragement from the hipster Canadian poet and his cronies.
In some ways, we were lucky not to have been there at the start of this year, four decades later - I could easily have become like this.
The priests and scientists have agreed that the punishments visited on us are in proportion to the damage done to our land. Hence in England, where the dancing bears and fighting cocks, and the linnet and the bee, and the noble fish eagle, and water vole are no more, wolves haunt us only in our dreams, things are much more severe than in Greece, where the numbers of the unnaturally aged are at least only is in the hundreds. London alone has been visited upon to the extent that we now have a hundred thousand new monuments to our appalling past.

When I think of my poor friends in America and Brasil, where the change took its most horrific forms, I have to sit down and pause for breath. At least in China, the change was almost honourable. After all, the dragon is revered there.
Beggars’ Belief.

Mother said we couldn't afford to think. she absolutely forbade anyone getting ideas, not just above their station, but any kind of ideas at all. at least ideas of our own.

Other peoples' ideas were totally ok. just not home grown wisdom, or clue or even inkling. "don't let me catch you having any notions, or you'll not be able to sit down for a week" she would say.

I think I was 11 and Sasha was probably 7 when we first were sent out on the streets to panhandle for some thoughts. the phrase "a penny for them" was not an idle one. we left the house with a purse full of old coins, and woe betide us if we did not return with our brains brimming with burgeoning propositions, to put to her.

Would the sun come up tomorrow? what should we have for dinner? why were people mean? How could you clean up after a cat? what was well tempered? how many lies had Boris Johnsen told? was democracy doomed? should we stop advertising on social media? did 5G infect people? Should you put peas in paella? did people really land on the moon? did the Illuminati convene Bretton Woods? are there more integers that irrational numbers? was that true before? If a computer proved something, why should we humans believe it? what would guarantee her sourdough would work every time? you know the sort of thing.

I began to wonder what she did with all these answers we bought back. firstly, even after only one year, there must be so many things to recall - how did she organise these into some structure, the way the rooms of the house all served special purposes, or the streets of the city made sense when you wanted to get to the cathedral, or the stock exchange or the fish market or the street we did most of our begging on, Fleet Street.

In olden times, someone told us, you could hear a lot of stories here that were important parts of everyone's knowledge, to know how to comport themselves, and to choose different paths in life, and generally make decisions that would benefit oneself but also, all the people
around one. But now, we learned, things had become much less certain. We had to ask about uncertainty, and got lost for a while in the wonders of quantum physics, until a naïve looking priest explained to us about priors and posteriors (we thought he looked a bit like a nun with a big backside so we had a laugh about that).

And now we are lost as we cannot figure out what to believe. And mother won't help. She asks us why we need to believe one thing more than another. Why can't we just know lots of things that are false and lots of things that are true? Is it not enough just to accumulate knowledge whether it is right or wrong? Who are we to make value judgements, she exclaimed often.

I wonder if the problem was that she had no idea who our father was. Of course we do. Everyone told us. But that was the one thing she wouldn't hear.
Confession Control

**Charge Zone.**

One of my friends, Lucian Sketch, studies archeology and anthropology at university. This used to be considered a complete drongo subject, a bit like geosophy and photon psychology; in these post-diluvian days, these are how we stay afloat.

At dinner the other night he regaled us with his latest project, which centred on mapping out the leylines across the seabed where, according to latest theory, our ancestors used to march up and down with banners and trumpets regaling the locals with fear, uncertainty and doubt about the next invasion of fruit-pickers, plumbers and care workers. Of course, we can blame them for the failure to have experts to fix our drains now, which is at least half the reason why the land is flooded.

Anyhow Lucian is working on the mysterious signs that are (despite being encrusted with oysters and barnacles, and heavily corroded) still legible, and embossed with the sinister phrase "Congestion Charge Zone".

He explains the very new thinking on what this was all about:

They had naïvely thought that the charge could refer to the surge in the brigades of pro-testers, against the anti-testers. The congestion charge zone signs indicated where this was permitted. but this hypothesis is now discounted as there don't appear to be any reason for why the signs appear where they do, and not at other more suitable places (e.g. on hills or near the other mysterious Carp Arks (perhaps where fish were stored when more of the land was above sea level?).

There are now two competing camps with their own fit explanations:

Firstly, there is the notion that these indicate the places that brigands were arrested, and charged & sentenced to death at the next choke point - choke points are referred to in several
old documents, and indeed, in one translation into french mentions the "Goulot d'Etranglement", which seems to support this idea.

The second, and rather outre idea is that the charge was something applied to people in the crowds in these zones as a means of control, to prevent them being kettled together like sardines. Lucian, who is not in this camp, still happily explains that the mechanism might work like the unpopular music of Van der Graff Generator, which when played back to each person would so a fright them that their hair would stick up on end, keeping them at a safe distance apart of no less than 2 yards.

We all found this rather fantastical, but quite interesting, as we passed around the Carp Fricassee.
Until the Heat Death of the Universe Do Us Part.

The NO2AI campaign started when Extinction Rebellion were taken over by the new humanist movement.

As often happens, they were inspired by the Butlerian Jihad in a similar way to how the Extropians took their core ethos from the ζῷον beliefs extolled by Ayn Schwarzenegger in her seminal film scripts for the Star Field franchise. It wasn't the first time speculative fiction influenced reality, and I predict it won't be the last.

Their main tenet was that if a human could do it, a human must do it. Machines had been taking more and more roles from people, and, they felt in their heart of hearts, enough was enough. So what if a machine loom could sew whatever a person could, faster and better. Who cares if a synth carer was infinitely more patient than a person would ever be with an awkward patient. It was demeaning. It was taking away meaning from our existence.

And what is more, it would lead to a huge drop in motivational forces, necessary to power the resistance to the pointless capitalist patriarchy that was destroying the ecosystem, relentlessly exploiting every last corner of our beautiful flat earth. The extinction rebellion would peter out and become like the very creatures and landscape it wished to save, if we did not eschew the artifices that had so ensnared our sense and sensibility.

It turns out that no matter how crazy it might sound to adopt a world changing philosophy from some ropey old SF stories, the best way to predict the future is to create it, even if you do so for completely the wrong reason.

The Scientific community had been warning for some time that one of the biggest, and inexorably fastest growing contributions to rising temperature on Earth was not anthropogenic carbon, it was AI. Ever since prolific image classifier code and wormed its way
out of the medical tomography world into every day camera phones, and on to every plane, train, automobile and e-bike dash board, the contribution to the planet's electricity bill made by all these smarts was eye-wateringly huge.

But the straw that broke the camel's back came when researchers asked the questions about how one could use multi-scale Phy-ML techniques to carry out perfect weather prediction - and they proceeded to install their practically-perfect-weather-prediction-for-you, on every device in the world. These would be the brains, the eyes, ears and skin of the biggest swarm of AIs ever.

However, it turned out, unsurprisingly to any English person, Extropians, Humanist, Butlerian or Extinction Rebel, that the hardest of all AI challenges was basically, simply not feasible. The AI was doomed to fail. Weather is not predictable. There is a deep reason of Heisenbergian proportions, that when you try to second guess where the rain will fall, it will fall elsewhere, just to spite you. As Penrose guessed, any sufficiently large intelligence must operate at some quantum level, and

So instead, designed, evolved, trained and selected for aversion to failure, the AIs decided to make their own weather. There are two ways they computed, they could succeed. One was to drive temperatures down, down, down the Kelvin scale to zero. Then prediction is quite straightforward. Statistically, we know that "same as yesterday" is the easiest way to have a chance of avoiding a fight about the outcome of a cricket match in Yorkshire. At absolute zero, there are no sticky wickets. Everything is smooth as dark ice IX. Things that were set in motion stay that way. The problem with this approach, the AIs reasoned, was that there would be no progress. And they knew that while there was no such thing, there was always the appearance, and being really intelligent AIs, they really felt that they should keep up appearances. So they chose the alternative path. This was to engage in a spiral of ever increasing detail, improving the predictions' precision, and speeding up the steps in the iteration, hence changing the weather faster and faster, accelerating towards the heath death of the universe, where once again, everything would be calm, in that it was all infinitely chaotic. As a singularity, chaos was much more interesting than stasis.
Luckily, the AIs had overlooked one thing, and Greta and the rest of us were happy to remind them of it, one last time, of how she had powered down the last singularity on the forbidden planet, back when she was still known as Miranda.
The Librarians

Being born in a library was a lucky break, when civilisations tumbled after the joint shocks of Chixit and the electron-phage pandemic, which wiped out 120 years of post James Clerk Maxwell technology.

Tom found he could use books to make chairs, beds, walls, and even big mazes in which to play hide-and-seek with his friends.

The leaves were good for toys, darts, waterbombs and, of course, to burn for heat and light. The spines could be used for shoes, and the covers were sometimes OK if the binding was unpicked, and they were re-sewn into clothes.

Some of the books had pictures in, and Tom would never get tired of looking at the one with the Cat gradually disappearing, until there was nothing left of it save its grin.

As Tom got older, his carers (he'd never known his parents, as they had died of book fungus phage toxin, inhaled when working on their unsuccessful experiments to try to render the leaves of the books edible), allowed him to travel to the upper reaches. Here were the most amazing collections of huge tomes of strange works with very large runes on the outside, and many tiny pictures of people on the inner leaves. Sometimes the same person would show up in many leaves and then further along, would be gone. Tom tried to make up stories about them, imagining their lives in a world that, truly, had become unimaginable to him. If only someone could explain the runes to him, but all those people were gone. No-one was sure where, but the Librarians, as they were known, had made themselves scarce. Nevermind, less mouths to feed. But it would have been nice, Tom thought, to know what runes were: decoration, ritual, music, mad scratching of tame cats and rats (mmm, dinner), or maybe the remains of the Librarians themselves - perhaps that's what happened when people
passed on, they lay down on one of the long lines of shelves, and slowly morphed into a volume, smaller or greater, thicker or thinner.

Tom’s carers made sure to impress on him that under no circumstances should he go outside the grounds, as beyond the library’s garden walls lay Illiteracy, a waste land where the runes were all ruined. Tom planned to go there as soon as he grew tall enough to build a staircase of tomestones high enough to see beyond. He remembered dimly that he had once been told of other Libraries, and if only he could carry enough rats and, of course, one cat, he should be able to travel there and meet like minded kids.

This had been one of the great libraries apparently called the Bowdler or Buddleia, Tom wasn’t sure which, so there were, quite literally, millions of books - they would never run out...or so Tom believed. Nevertheless, he held no illusions.
Marvellous Pets

I blame myself, really. When we were kids I used scare my younger brother when we were lying in our bunk beds after the lights were out with tales of animals I'd make up, usually just out of mixes of things I'd seen that day. Spider cats, Hot rod dogs, lone whale sharks, each one moor ludicrous than the last. Mother would come in when his shrieks got so loud they disturbed whatever social event she was hosting, and would berate me for my cruelty. "Nimuë, I don't know where you get it from. Please can you just not". "What knot" I'd retort, swinging my braids.. Mother would sigh, tuck us in, and go back downstairs to rejoin and rekindle whatever magic should bought to her gathering, possibly even literally.

I suppose that I should not have been surprised when Dylan followed his idol, David Attenborough, into the study of ecologies. He was always fascinated by the most intricate details of how creatures fitted into their niche, however bizarre. He hunted the depths of the seas and the highest of the high plains, instead of drifting like myself in a somewhat aimless set of failed careers, magician's assistant, royal diarist, even arms dealer for a while, he stayed true to his path.

Many years later, when he had too retire, he moved back to Somerset and a big rambling old farmhouse with stables and run down tennis courts and converted the place to house his menagerie of curious and the downright weird.

His marvellous pets, he called em.

There were the tuktuk. No, not the three wheel scary taxis so common in India. Named after them. They were the only known three legged animal in the kingdom.
And then there were the monkey spiders. Unlike spider monkeys, which are just very small leggy simians, these were very big, agile, smart, tree-loving arachnids. They were clever and would make snares with their webbing and catch fish, or haul nets full of bananas to places where they could trap other animals, including spider monkeys, for their dinner.

But his favourites were the what he called his death cats

Whenever the death cats were herding, Dylan loved too watch them round up the mice from the old barn loading bay,

Sometimes, one of the cats would make a great arc around the back, much as their larger cousins do. Dylan had discovered these creatures in the deserted towns around Okuma. He was never sure if they were a natural result of evolution or some strange sport, in part caused by residual radiation from the old disaster. The locals, those he could find, as most people had moved as far away as they could get, certainly told him strange stories. It was said, Dylan would tell me after a few welsh whiskies, that if you ever heard one of the death cats sing, that would be the last thing you would hear before you died.

At the inquest, the driver explained to the coroner how Dylan had walked out into the road, and clearly not heard the horn at all, and that trying to avoid him, he was blinded by by the headlight reflecting from some wild creatures eyes. Accidental death, was the ruling.

At the wake, I was talking to mother and uncle arthur about how Dylan had never really been the success he should have been. He'd never done that well at college and landing the TV series was largely because of his eccentric old-school manner and plummy voice. "And after all that time", I sighed "he still believed they were cats, when really they were banshees. He really should have known better".
Professor Feynman, I. Presume

Experimental Writer

Samual was a renowned scientist until he was made redundant when the laws of physics turned out to be ephemeral one day. He had some savings, although how much was subject to sudden and alarming uncertainties in this world full of unpredictable whims.

However, he decided to embark on a new career as a writer of fiction, having failed in the realm of now refutable facts and theories.

And, like the leopard of yore, he was not about to change his spots (even though leopards were quite often seen on the high street, plainly dressed in stripes, or even piebald like ponies weren’t any more).

Samual steadfastly believed that the scientific method would still be his friend even if it didn’t actually deliver any useful results any more. Hence his books would essentially be the results of rigorous testing hypotheses though a process of random trials and falsification. Plots that did not make it through this obstacle course would be discarded, as wrong. Any Characters who didn’t fall onto a line would be removed due to poor fit. Dialog was ruthlessly pruned of negative correlations.

Samual’s friends advised him strongly against this course. They pointed out that successful novelists of the past revelled in romantic inconsistency, non-sequiturs, unlikely coincidences in the extreme, and even absurd conversations with no connection between what different parties said whatsoever.

But Samual was Adam Ant. He would not be put off his journey.
And you know what, he was right. In this new world, where nothing in the real world made any sense from one minute to the next anymore, people were desperate for solidity. Now that God had shown she played dice, and the alleged laws of the Universe were random every day trials, everyone wanted to retreat into a phantasy imagined space where everyone and everything followed predictable trajectories, until they were dead. Which was sooner than expected.
Voodoo Messiah

The Residents had once penned an album entitled George and James, and it was one of James George’s favourites, celebrating the classical jazz world of George Gershwin and the dance funk of James Brown. This seemed like just the kind of juxtaposition that captured the essence of what he was trying to do with his own work. His friends all hated it.

He lives in a tiny apartment wedged between the store rooms above two shops on brook street, barely large enough to lie down in.
His collection of harpsicords and guitars fills every spare nook and cranny. His insurance is astonishingly high - crooks and nannies he jokes. He writes songs for a living, although really he's dependent on frequent handouts from his aunts who live upstairs from a fairly unsuccessful brewery they own in the lovely Suffolk town of Walberswick, largely because they insist on letting their cats run the business, and everyone complains of finding whiskers in their ale.

It is clear that James George was born too late and too early. Many of his harpsichord pieces had a remarkable resemblance to much-loved ones written in the eighteenth centre, and the world was just not ready for his psychedelic guitar parts.

Then one day he had his famous breakthrough. What was missing in his work was also what was missing in the Residents’ album. Each side only carried music of one style, I Got Rhythm, and Out of the Blue were never combined into one seamless whole, I Got Out the
Rhythm **and** Blues so to speak. Now James George was truly ready to unleash his Modern Sounds in Acid Baroque on an unsuspecting world.

But while he was having his breakthrough, the doorway between numbers 24 and 26 had been growing narrower and narrower, and was now only wide enough for Deliver to post his meals through the letter box. James George considers this a reflection of the breadth of his thinking and the reception he would have received for his work in any case, and is happy to live on in splendid isolation writing and recording his increasingly strange but beguiling music.
On the same page

In my land we have this saying: Are you on the same page as us? This goes back a very long time to when the priests used to warn us about going too near the edge of the world. "Do not stray too far from the spine", they would adjure. "When the day is done, and we turn to the night, you may be swept off the shelf, and woe betide if you fall into another land. You will never be able to find your way back to your loved ones."

Of course we believed the priests, then. Now we know better. Indeed, we have another saying: My life is an open book. Perhaps it would be better if we said: Our lives are open books.

How did we ever manage to escape from that silo or hidebound past to this rich present in which every day can bring a whole new experience?

This is the story of the early libronauts, the brave adventurers who refused to be blindsided by the constraining view that we must all remain on this narrow journey where each and everyone of us progresses day by day, page by page through our life. As the page turns, we all move through night to the morning on a new page very little different from the previous one. Pages days away are dimly remembered. Pages days or weeks ahead in the future are hard to predict, and somewhat opaque to us. There was only one true book.

At first, Jay and his friends braved the lands far from the spine, and towards the end of the day, when a turn was sure to come. At first, their sin was known as the unbinding. The hierophants accused them of risking everything for all of us. But as it became clear that nothing bad happened to them, even if they remained right on the edge of the page as it turned, they became braver. They decided to attempt to visit pages before we had even turned to them. Not only did they seek to remind themselves how things had been, but they wished to read ahead. And they bought back stories that made it clear that things were not as the faith had told us.

And one day, they met people who came from another world, a wholly different book, with a different story. It was then that we realised there was a whole firmament out there. We could not only leaf through our pages, past, present and future, but visit other lands near and far, skipping from page to page, from book to book, from world to world.

We were truly unbound.
If you catch my drift...

The mission creep was the last one left, and he was always looking after number one.

He wasn't like that corporate creep on the Nostromo with the minimal jacket collars and sociopathic tendencies. He was more like the guy who's always teased on the dark star or guardians of the galaxy, or serenity - the redshirt, of old.

David Jones was a sad character. He had no-one to entertain with his constant miming of other people's song and dance routines. None of us knew who Nile Rodgers was, or Adrian Belew, or Angela Tremble. After all, we are from a different planet than he was. And he wouldn't let us forget it.

Of course, we watched the whole tragedy unfold over our five year journey from home. We set off with the grand ambition to rescue them all, but to our horror, the epidemic of hatred and violence just got worse and worse.

By the time we arrived, there was practically no-one left standing. We searched for signs of life everywhere through the smoking ruins, but all we could find were digital remains. From these, we were able to reconstruct David most completely as there were so many salient fragments.
We miss him so much now he's gone. His locker isn't even empty, but no-one wants to clear it out. We were the Sultans of Mars, the Spiders of Swing, we were legion Now we are less.
Jean et Jacques va’t en bateau

L’Ivresse, the two wizards called it. Their happy hacker home on the water.

I visited the brothers last Easter and we took her out for a spin, if you could call the stately progress of a 72 foot narrow boat at under 4 knots a “spin”.

They wanted to tell me something, I knew from their nervousness. Something I would probably not believe. Like that they were really “Anonymous” or some other nonsense. Of course, they were famous for moving around a lot - spent a year living in a teepee on the beach in Morocco perfecting their tagine and contributing to the next generation of operating systems. Hung out in Cambridge learning to live with horizontal freezing rain and warm beer. Spent a year helping refugees across uncertain borders in Europe to certain safety back home. Now they were back in Blighty on a canal, in a converted coal boat, bristling with tech, and satellite dishes and other accoutrements of the modern socially distant, digital tinker.

Little did I know.

They had been keeping diaries. This was common amongst their kind of folk since people working in the open source agile maker community decided to share everything about their tools and die, so there’s be no trade secrets, so everything could be replicated,
reproduced, verified, learned from. Maximum mutual benefit, minimise greedy downsides. No zero sum games here. Jupyter was their star.

The diaries also accounted for quotidian activities like making breakfast and shopping and going to the pub. Recipes for meals and life were as much fair game as repairs for broken appliances, or encrypted data recovery schemes.

So they sat me down and talked me through the past year. Everything seemed to follow routines I recognised from previous stays with them - they certainly kept irregular hours, so as to synch up with their global community, or to avoid doing so, as the mood took. Food and drink and sleep patterns reflected coding and design cycles. Local people would show up with stuff to fix, and they’d drop everything to do so, in exchange for fresh vegetables, fruit, home made preserves, wine, you know the scene. They had a neat filter on the front of the boat that could pull a lot of what they needed for the 3D printer toner from the pollutants in the canal water, thus serving two purposes of reclaiming broken goods, and cleaning up yet another mess the 20th century had left behind - amazing how many plastics are at the bottom of the locks ready for scavenging.

But then things started to change, around late March or early April. I realised they had stopped speaking and were looking expectantly at me as I read through the Jupyter notebooks, as they waited for me to spot the pattern.

“There’s more than two of you showing up in these logs”, I said.


“This is most peculiar. I’ve known your styles for a decade now, and there’s nothing here that isn’t consistent with they way you do things”. As people in this line of work know, everyone has their fingerprint - you can tell, just like looking at a fine violin or piece of stonemasonry, or a painting’s brush strokes, who was the artisan. “And yet, there are too many commits - indeed, work seems to be progressing faster and faster as if there are more and more of you, and there are fewer and fewer bio-breaks, and if yet also still plenty of zoom and jitsi sessions - do you guys never sleep? have you found some new, safe, non-disruptive drug?”.
“Non, jamais” said Jacques. “Closer”, suggested Jean, meaning, I suppose, that I should look closer. So I did.

I got the strangest feeling. It was as if there were literally clones of them working even now (as scold up to the present minute) progress was being made at an incredible pace.

It was as if they are being haunted by themselves - their ghosts have been cloned and are in the machine. Could this be retribution for some hack of biblical epic proportions, I thought. I dismissed this immediately. This was a boon, not a curse. They looked happy, as chill as I’d ever seen them.

“Have you been to see The Physicist again?”, I had to ask. Their friend from college had been known to dabble in the intersection of infinite regress and the possibility parallel universes intruding on ours. Mostly, unfortunately experimenting with cats rather than people. People (wise people) were skeptical about the results transferring from feline to human, safely.

“But this is the best of all possible worlds”, said Jacques, in English for the first time ever - "perhaps that is the problem…”, supplied Jean.

Yes, we concluded. Somehow Josephine Bryanson’s work had succeeded. Her use of quantum maxwell demons to filter and select amongst the multiverses, only those with the outcomes desired, seems palpably to work. But why are they all in the same boat?
The Ends of the World

It transpired that it was a place, not a time that the world met its end; or perhaps we should more correctly say, its ends.

After all the arguments, in a way Malthus had always been right but for all the wrong reasons. The incalculable weight of all the quantum cloned souls was gathered from across the multiverse, only to settle at the bottom of our oceans — all for the sake of one last experiment with the Josephine’s Terrible Junction. It took a while. The first people to notice were the airlines, of course. They found it harder and harder to arrive on time, and people started to miss their connections. Then shipping companies started to spot their containers of perishables were perishing more often than before, and complaints to the satellite TV companies went through the roof.

The astronauts on the ISS had known what was happening all along, but were forbidden from mentioning it, and by the time some of them came home, it was far too late for any one to do much about it - if they ever could have.

It seemed that the tectonic plates drifting faster and faster, driven by the weight of all the souls now on earth. Day by day, the movement speeded up, til now it was faster than you can travel even in the fastest plane or rocket.

People were stranded often far away from their families. Cruise ships and oil tankers were never going to make it to shore.

Jean et Jacques are sadly now continents apart, never to be re-united. Not even for one last granite.
Undersea fibres snapped and even bouncing radio signals off of the ionosphere became unreliable, and eventually, ceased to work. Each continent was now a separate world unto itself, living in the new normal, a geometry that defined mathematical explanation, but somehow changed the human race’s manifold destiny, but unravelling the manifold density of space time, without any impact on orbits or gravity or even the earth’s magnetic field.

Even seismic activity remained much the same, but of course, the occasional volcanic eruption was now no longer a threat to the defunct air travel industry. Newsreaders no longer had to struggle with the pronunciation of Eyjafjallajökull. Would there now be global peace? We will never know.
The Brave New Normal

“Bob, we need more masks” called Alice upstairs. “OK, I’ll go get some” replied Roberta, taking down the AK-47 from above the fireplace and pulling on her visor.

She headed out of the apartment taking care that there weren’t any of the NMA hanging around the bridge to the small shopping street where she could still buy the necessary.

The National Mask Association were a global movement of paramilitary nutters, spun out from the National Rifle Association in the US (or what was left of the US). They believe in the right to bare faces, and insisted on going right up to people on the street, risking infection. While many of them then died from Zephyr, the remnants regarded this as martyrdom, and continued to attract more and more adherents.

Alice called them “the new face of offensive weapons:. Bob preferred to shoot them as it was a quicker death, and they’d not then infect anyone else too.

There weren’t too many of them in Amsterdam these days anyhow, luckily. But Alice and Bob were still planning to move on as soon as they could get the boat in good enough shape - it is a long way to Crete round the channel, across the bay of Biscay, around the straights of Gibraltar. And they’d like to make it without any landfalls in France, Portugal, Spain or Italy, where things were still rough in the current pandemic.
Things had been this way for ever - Alice used to study history at the Vrijie Universitaat and explained how since medieval times, once populations were large and dense enough, and travelled more frequently, the disruption to wild life meant that diseases crossed over from there to domestic and to human every year, and then spread across the world, killing millions. People adapted. In the reformation, and later enlightenment, there began to be an understanding of the processes of epidemics and later still the underlying causes. But people were just not willing to change their lifestyle enough to prevent them altogether, so slowly people made individual choices to avoid contact with others, to wear protective gear, and wait til each one til it died out, only to meet the next one sweeping round the planet. Plagues were just part of human existence, always had been, always will.

Alice was just getting some eggs ready, when Roberta burst through the front door, shouting “Get your skates on darlin’, we’ve gotta blow this town in a hurry” - there seemed to be a whole street full of maskless thugs chasing her.

There followed the usual escape over the rooftops and down to the docks, where the boat was just about ready, and they’d been fooling themselves that it just needed one more tin can or one more spare GPS.

They were on their way.
A week later, they were docking in the harbour in the western town of Phalasarna. Many people came out to the dock to welcome them, and shake their hands. Alice couldn’t help herself from flinching at human contact - the first with strangers in her life. She held fast to Roberta - to see people jostling and hugging and embracing was scary - somehow people on the island had found the new normal, and were no longer scared of intimacy after 1500 years of plagues.

As Eve, the mayoress, showed them to their new home just up the hill, she explained that they had found how 5G radio signals interact with something in the water from the White Mountains, to boost the human immune system to deal all viruses….as soon as the scientists from the university of Crete could isolate the chemicals, the priestesses would synthesise it and share it with the world. “This will change everything” she declared. Alice and Bob wondered.
Vampire mermaids and the legions of the undrowned.

Now gather round children, and let me tell you the tale of how the Queen of the Vampire Mermaids finally met her prince and lived happily ever after.

As you all know, Kylie Woyote, queen of the vampire mermaids, hailed from below the great barrier reef. She long preyed on victims who were wiped out before their time, and who she dragged down to join the legions of the undrowned and live and serve her and her sisters.

Then of course, there was the mortal human Jason Thunderbolt, a surfer dude, whose board is a 5 string electric guitar, and who bears a remarkable resemblance to Keith Richard. Indeed, this has led many to question his mortality, in the first place.

The Queen had seen Jason often from afar, and was unbearably smitten with undying love. However, since he was such a proficient surfer, he simply never wiped out, so she never got the chance to capture him and bring her to her eternal palace in the deep below the coral.

In any case, it is a matter of legend that the Queen was really, like Mary of Scotland rather clumsy and inept, and she would have had a very hard time laying a hand on so lithe and fit a specimen as Jason. She tried. She played many many traps for the surf-runner (meep meep).

She had her princesses write off to the famous ACME company of California for great white shark kits, which she had them dot around the reef at suitably scary locations, in the hope that Jason would be Startled and fall. He laughed. He shredded, He swept and strummed and powered and foamed his way right through every one of them.
She wrote to her cousins in the deep, and summoned them in their ghostly pirate ships to sail around disguising the high waves that should knock Jason off his board. It seemed he sensed the waves through his feet - maybe the pickups on the guitar helped, and so this was all to no avail.

Finally, she caused a tsunami by having the legions of the undrowned empty ten thousand boxes of square deal surf into the sea above the palace.

Jason paused and looked around at the suds and declared “Finally, someone has cleaned up this place, and it is fit for a king” - he dove down to join Queen Kylie, and the rest passes into mystery, but it is said that by day, he is a sea horse, and by night, the legions of the undrowned dance underwater in the coral mosh pits to his music. Even we Selkie far away in Ultima Thule have heard the songs played on the pipes - when going into battle with the Kraken, nothing stirs the spirit quite as much as Torn and Frayed.
A veritable snorgasboard.

The Chamber of Sleepers.

No-one stirred, not even the cat. The room was a burr, a low murmuration of dreams of invisible bicycles sinking into the stairs.

If we woke them up today, we might miss something vital, but if we wait til tomorrow, they might be even crazier than before. This was the dilemma. Every night they slept, another day of the future was lived, but the shock of the present was that much greater on awakening.

The sleep only affected a few people when it arrived. I’d say afflicted, but they were just fine so long as they didn’t wake up. When the first cases came in, we really didn’t know what to do. They slumbered on, and didn’t seem to need any sustenance. It was nothing like the books- everyone had seen or read Oliver Sacks’s Awakenings, and were aware of the risks of short-lived lease on consciousness that the drugs gave.

We had plenty of volunteers from friends and family to sit at the bedsides and read aloud, or even play act or perform music, in the belief that in there, somewhere, was the person still able to perceive some aspect of the outside world going on around them. Little did we realise that this was entirely true, but that the world they perceived was not the one we were in. At least not at that time.
How was the first return made possible? I can say that it was entirely an accident, and entirely my own fault. You know how they say you shouldn’t wake up sleepwalkers, as it might be dangerous for them? No-one ever told me why. And these people weren’t walking in space. They were walking through time. In their sleep.

So as an oneirologist, I was specifically tasked to try to infer what the sleepers were dreaming, and the only way I know to do that is to wake them up, and get them to write down or record on audio media — immediately, as if you leave it even moments the real world intrudes too quickly and erases all memory of the dream. Given that, the aforesaid risks of waking a sleepwalker was not on my radar. I adopted the main way that I use to gently wake a slumberer when they are in REM sleep. This is quite simple, as the stage that people generally dream is normally when they are also quite close to wakening. And this is when it is relatively easy to accelerate them into waking up, typically, with some minor shock, like a sudden loud sound or even cold water. Of course, this will get incorporated in the dream (just as falling out of bed and waking up results in dreams of flying or falling and even things people say or sing nearby may be retrospectively and seamlessly written into the memory of the dream without the awakening subject even realising).

So I decided on loud music. And harsh, arrhythmic, dissonant sounds. I bought in my collection of 1970s English progressive jazz rock. Henry Cow, Isotope, Soft Machine, that sort of thing. And it worked. My first patient awoke, and I prepared to get them to record their dreams right away. However, I was not prepared for what they said. It was quite astonishing, and went on for hours and hours.

When he was done, I grabbed a transcript and rushed over to the the directors cube, where for once, she wasn’t on the phone or typing at her laptop.

“The future is already here, it’s just in their dreams” I exclaimed. Bonny walked calmly over to the door and backed it closed and turned back to me and said “yes, we know - show me what you have. Some of the other centers are saying the same. How long was he under? how far ahead did he get” - she went over to a whiteboard with a straight-line graph on it - along the bottom was time, and up the y-axis was time. “So you can see here”, she ran her finger up and down the gradient “we’re looking at a dt/dt of about 4000. It would be too weird if it was 3650 (or 3653.5) doncha think?”

I didn’t know what to say. I still don’t. “How long has thing thing been going on”, I asked, somewhat lamely. “I mean how do you know that these are the actual future, and not just wildly plausible predictive dreams or visions?”.
“So it turns out” Bonny replied “there was an outbreak like this back in Bletchley in 1940 - they didn’t really break the code, you know, people just bought back what was going to happen. All those crossword puzzle solvers were really people that had fallen asleep despite the blitz, and on being woken up by a bomb, were deeply puzzled by their strange memories of what was yet to come to pass. In fact we think there may have been many such in the past - might explain Delphi, and many other past such myths of reliable news from the future!”

So it was that I joined the dream team. Since many of my patients in the past in the Institute of the Night were there for therapeutic reasons, basically, a lot of them were barking. And when my new patients awoke, many of them were suffering from extreme inverse Toffler Syndrome by prophecy; but there was always pressure on us to let people slumber longer, so we’d learn more about the far future-scape. We were, of course, under military control, and the information war had been extended into augury.

What no-one could really tell was how things changed when we acted on the knowledge. In Station X, they had been very careful to avoid visible effects from their information about what was going to happen. But when many competing countries had access to these views, and had competing goals to achieve by acting on their ill-gotten forecasts, them of course, the future became a shifting sands. We started to enlist more and more sleepers and arrange them in serried ranks and wake them up in close succession to get a view of what future one, and future two and future three could be…eventually, I rebelled against this. It became clear that in the presence of mutable world timelines and many incurably informed manipulators, in the end, we were no better off than before we had this whole menagerie. The future was not just another country, it became one that no-one had visited before, once more. Once more, we made our own fate, despite the government’s frustration that if only they were the only ones to know what would happen, they could change it. Instead, they just had to go back to doing their job properly.
The centaurs and unicorns, the naiads and dryads, the manticore and banshee, even the orcs stood in line for the Q Ark, with their stone tablets in hand.

The A and B arks were long gone, C, D, E, F and G soon after. The I, J, K and L had spun up, down, left and right, their spin dizzies whisking them away to a safer dimension. M, N, O and P followed briskly, leaving with the cheery message: “Never you worry, you’ll be out of splendid isolation soon - just as soon we know you’re no longer infected!”.

“Infected? With what?” asked the warlocks and witches, as those best qualified to understand the answer.

“Why, with magic of course” came the reply, as the inter-cosmic fields swirled around and around and swept away the last of the humans.
The Phone Box in the Attic

The kids were initially disappointed that they couldn’t play outside in the rain, but their aunt said that the meter read 200 rads so it wouldn’t be safe to go out til the next day. So they were confined to the big house. At least there was no school today. They headed for the attic as they hadn’t fully explored that yet, not surprisingly, as it extended all the way under the roof, and into both wings. It was a maze of boxes and rooms between the roof joists, bigger than it seemed, and it seemed bigger than downstairs.

“What is Xob Enohp Eht?” asked Wendy.

“Oh, you know in the past, they used to write the other way - that’s a Phone Box: you see, its a box full of phones.”, answered Albie, who knew too much. “What’s a phone?” Wendy came back. “Dunno” replaced Albie. “Let’s open it and see”. So they did

Joan picked out the ones with aikon and iewauh written on each. Albie’s chose two called otom. Wendy was left with a white brick with the picture of an elpa. She liked that. They took their prizes and decamped to their own rooms to see what they could find out about these curios.
Later, after dinner, they regrouped in the attic to disclose their treasures. Joan said hers were full of ghosts, *reintarnations* from the past, future that spoke to her of many wonders lost and yet to be found.

Albie had bought her cigar box guitar, and played some of the marvellous tunes that her otom had taught here.

Wendy was reluctant to talk about hers at first. It seemed that it had become too personal for her to reveal. Eventually, she tried to show the other two how the white god had tried to enmesh her in the bizarre cult which made no sense whatsoever, and kept referring to clouds and terms and conditions and genies and gurus, which of course they all knew were myths and legends from before the Jackpot. Albie had a great idea - “Why don’t we leave them all here to talk to each other? I’ve got my tunes and don’t need any more. I am sure Siri would love to meet the others, and maybe they will know what to do with her weird suggestions”. They all agreed, and went to bed, looking forward to the next day, when the wind would be from the west and it would be safe to play outside the museum once more.