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There's a Phantom in My Word-Processor

And the man even died vigorously! exclaimed David Ryderman, Professor of Ancient Philosophy, inwardly, though no words were uttered aloud. For that was exactly what E.L. Hench, Professor of Experimental Psychology, had just done in the middle of his office, spewing blood all over the drapes and woodwork. Again he envisioned that crew-cutted, lip-curling head which had poked itself into his office for almost thirty years, brandishing Skinnerian assaults on the problem of Mind in the Universe.

"The mind's an empty little box, Davey," Hench had said. "Nick the side with your pinkie, and there's a hollow. Little doodles from others on the inside, chance events, shuffling and reshuffling. Your cosmic motes do a boogie, and there's an end." And how, Ryderman wondered, could one with so little impassioned insight thrive the way Hench had: the glowing red of his broad face, the hardy musculature that embraced its daily satisfaction of food, beer, jogging, and sex, and the result — the arrogant, half-twisting smile that seemed to lie on two different faces at once. Yes, the man had something behind him: it was as though the Universe loved a barnacle that rooted and sucked on it and had no interest in one who paused, in reverence and in hunger, to see it.

But death, yet! a fabulous tussle all over the ancient patterns of Ryderman's serenely carpeted floor, an intrusion he could not possibly forget. With a dark sheet draped over Hench's body, the dynamic lines seemed to bark a last time that all of life was on his side. As it was carried off on a stretcher, Ryderman could think nothing but that Hench, now dead, was nonetheless a victor in the 30-year contest between them.

But how, after all, could it be? It was he, Ryderman thought, who had become the philosopher, humanist, teacher, beholder of those few shards of numinosity left tangled and pathetic in the windy world. He may have had as little to believe in as Hench but still, he had wordless vision. However unsatisfying, it was the closest approach to the Essential Forms. It made him both loving and harsh. He could squeeze oversimplifications out of his work like the flesh of oranges and swat the subjunctive effusions of students like so many flies. ("Failed Romantic!" Hench had said). Yes: insight, complexity, and wisdom were of little use in the world. And an embrace of sensation and immediacy was a powerful rejoinder.

"The Mean," Ryderman suddenly said aloud, and saw it — shapeless forms on an assembly line with all extremes lopped off — brilliance, drive, integrity, emotion. What a truly horrible concept, and here the great Aristotle had offered it as a way of life. I am not, he thought obsessed.

For that was perhaps more to the point. He and Hench had arrived at Harvard University in 1954. It took them less than a week to despise one another. They went through the 50's acquiring publications, tenure, and children. They finished
the 60's with drugs, divorces, and a more strenuous questioning of their values, at a minimum a guilty tolerance for student hostility. In the 70's, their middle-aged calm was disrupted by the need to damage one another's reputations if not metaphysics. The 80's, Ryderman decided, were underrated for their capacity to generate wonder: Have I really, he thought, been a father? a husband? a scholar? He had taken these embodiments of desire as seriously as anyone. Yet down the corridor, growing darker and leaner, was the increasing massiveness of Hench. Obsession was clearly consistent with any definition of wisdom, Ryderman had to admit. Perhaps they had both failed. But Hench had very likely enjoyed his three decades, and Ryderman had been a man obsessed.

He rested his head miserably against the terminal of the office word-processor. Its blank screen, with cursor gently blinking for attention like a well-socialized student, comforted him. Then he removed the floppy disk upon which he had been writing a book chapter, packed his briefcase, nodded to the screen, and left.

Driving home, he had a profusion of strange, deliciously playful thoughts. He imagined being haunted by Hench, the snarling, crew-cutted head popping out of a colorless gown and necklace of chains. His raucous laughter suddenly barked in alarm: What conclusion was there, after all, from this mad relationship but the primacy of obsession over all other emotions? Why wouldn't Hench haunt him?

Abstractly reasoned conclusions were most real to him of all the world's shining apples of discovery. He blinked his doubt at the silent roadways, the houses squeezed together like knuckles, his family echoing noise in space upon which he closed his study door and, while nestling in a deep chair, thought again, Why not? Human life, he once decided, was primarily addictive, compulsive, entropic. He remembered his first assertion of this premise, which had occurred at the age of fourteen. He perpetually looked for something to refute it but, beyond the concept of Mind, it had never appeared. Why were these not grounds for Hench's survival beyond death? The question filled his study with cool, abstracted phantoms.

But then, he thought, Mind too existed. He had spent most of his life defining all other premises but this one. His failure was not strange to him — it was the heart of the matter. Mind was a great secret, confessed solely to his professional colleagues at unpredictable, sacred moments. One of these moments had occurred during the first week he had known Hench. Undefined, he believed that the Mind fell into a fissure of Neo-Platonism where the first sharp longings for all that lay outside the self began in childhood: the first fragile sculptures of his feeling as he touched a flower's darkly velvet stamen at night; the curving, heightened veins stirring throughout an autumn leaf; the contorted arms of winter trees. Not that the world would merely be, but move him, deeply. These moments wove themselves into the fabric of his life, and only as a man did he demand that they transcend their first soft bed within the world and become a thought, a relation between inner and outer. Mind therefore came into existence as necessarily as hunger, thirst, the desire to be loved, and could be converted no more than they. It was, he once thought, too full and too beautiful to be expressed, a wordless chant of awe floating over the creation.

A light but methodical touch formed itself on his sleeve, a familiar voice hissed, "Hello, Davey. Couldn't let you get away. Freedom ill becomes you." And Hench, his voice deeply resonant and his form all shifting, moonlit shadows, glided into the opposite chair.
"I knew it, I knew," said Ryderman. "You've demonstrated me! You're whole and real, you're an Essence as surely as you're anything. There's nothing of chance here! You're no mass of accidental, stimulated reflexes! That's it! That's Mind! You can't deny..."

"Professor Ryderman," intruded Hench. "Do you not find it odd that upon contact with an embodiment of the Ultimate Essence, you merely offer your latest installment on an argument we've been pursuing for thirty years?"

"But you've proved my point!" Ryderman nearly yelled. "It is not ridiculous to believe in the Mind for here you are, a spirit, sprung from the very source I..."

Hench again intruded, "What can possibly be holding me together but you, Davey?" That was precisely the conclusion Ryderman most feared. He closed his eyes and sat very still, for indeed many things in his life had disappeared from such efforts. "I thank the accident of your obsession for eternal life," said Hench.

Ryderman held his eyes tightly shut until his body seemed a wayward balloon brutally clinched below the brows. When he opened them, Hench was gone. He lurched out of the study, colliding with his wife in the hall. They stared at one another in alarm, two utterly new beings united in confusion. The phrase, "You look as if you've seen a ghost," formed itself in both minds at once, then each walked wordlessly and unsteadily to the opposite end of the hall.

For the remainder of the evening, reality gently swelled into space and nearly replaced Hench. At dinner and over the newspaper, Ryderman spoke with his wife about the Victorian novel course she was teaching. He tutored his youngest son in algebra. He rubbed the nightly antibiotic ointment onto the paw of his recently injured cat, arm-wrestled briefly with his youngest daughter, paid the water bill, sent a check to the gardener, thought about writing a letter to his eldest married daughter but did not, and avoided the study until the end of the evening. He then poured a small glass of sherry and, accompanied by his cat and the thickened, protective air of the thoroughly domesticated man, strode into the study. As he looked about himself anxiously, the cat rubbed its back reassuringly upon his ankles.

Nothing. Surely nothing.

And he sank into a chair, exhausted, and drank the whole glass at once. A feeling of weight came over him, like a great compulsion or drugged sleep. And beyond the moving prism of light refracted by the glass held too closely to his eye, Hench again appeared in the opposite chair. He seemed to share Ryderman's mood as he said, "Nope. Nothing out there, Davey. I've been, you know. Shot right out of a pea-shooter to black infinity. Hung there just a moment, then came back to you. I don't want to lose touch with you, Davey. You're an interesting man."

Ryderman scooped up his cat and shot out of the study. He walked up the stairway with an ominous, marching tread. Well, that was it, he thought. No doubt about it — Hench was going to haunt him. And how would they ever stop arguing? For the truly dire thing was that Hench insisted on both haunting him and contending that Ryderman's premise was untrue — Mind, the very thing that held him together. Or was it the thing that held them both together? A strange, low whistle escaped from Ryderman's lips; it instantly gave him gooseflesh.

Pale and formal, he told his wife that he had a headache and would sleep in the guest bedroom. Then he wandered down the hallway, gently fingerling the wall for reassurance, reached the room, and began to undress. Though he rarely slept...
without clothing, it seemed appropriate to do so now, as well as lying on top of the coverlet, his arms stretched straight out. For that was part of it: there were rules here, perhaps even rituals, though he had no idea what a phantom would impose. He saw a small candle lying in a jar on the dresser and lit it.

"That’s right, Davey," said Hench, suddenly perched on the edge of the bed. "A candle is just right. I’m tired of dark and light, black and white. Let the world mingle a bit."

"What do you intend to do with me?" said Ryderman fiercely.

"No crucifixion, Davey. Too much trouble. Something more like an involuntary, enforced chat with an old friend. You see, I really have no idea what to do with myself."

Fatality sang in Ryderman’s head and pulse. “Follow this inner self of yours, Hench. You’ve never known it before. I can’t believe it will be silent now. I long to know what I will tell you, and what you will do.

"How about nothing?" said Hench. “That and a few little cosmic accidents. Perhaps it’s all a net of chance connections. Pavlov and his dog salivating together in heaven. After all, surely Mind invented things of this sort with your fantasies.”

“No nets of circumstance, Hench. A single thing...that is to be done in your state. It will be one perfectly lucid act, perhaps awesome in its simplicity — a song of hope cut short; a whispered prayer echoing between blank walls; a slow, fully conscious walk into receding dark...

““You needn’t sound like a disappointed pope, stretched flat on his deathbed, Davey. Just because you’re stark naked and superb at hearing yourself speak. What is the one thing I’ll do?”

“I don’t know,” said Ryderman. “I never wanted to put it in words. I didn’t think it would survive, all the while I believed that nothing else could survive without it. And perhaps it haunted me all my life. Whatever it all comes down to, Hench — a prophecy, a journey, a rise and fall. At least that.” Ryderman spoke as though he were in a dream.

“Ah, but you’re not in a cosmic dream, Davey. I only want to haunt you. That’s where the great journeys and lovely myths all end.”

“Damn you!” shouted Ryderman. “You’ve come back, all Essence, to tell me there’s no Essence and I’m wrong!”

“Now you’ve got it,” said Hench. “All I want to do Essentially is haunt you. It’s fun. You’re the one who’s bothered by trivia. I’ve always rather liked all the details and oddities.”

In the morning, Ryderman’s wife found him still sleeping naked, his arms outstretched and the candle an unlit red puddle in its glass. Her husband’s bizarre behavior had long ago become, like the theory of Mind, too obvious to acknowledge in words. The formality of his pose and the deepened wrinkle in the center of his forehead, as though he were concentrating very deeply on nothing at all, was touching to her. She passed through the hall without disturbing him.

Several hours later, Ryderman was sitting in front of the word-processor, prepared to begin again on his book chapter. He checked the archive of subtopics, all of which discussed aspects of Pythagoras: Breaking of the heavenly light. Mathematics: Thought is superior to sense. The gentleman and the slave. Rules, tabus, renunciations. Pure mathematics: Eternal objects as God’s thoughts...As they reeled off,
he found them almost totally meaningless. What could they say to a man who was haunted by a Skinnerian phantom? Yet they were a part of the world that had once opposed Hench. He decided to finish his chapter regardless of whether it had any meaning and boldly selected the mathematics subtopic, whereupon the printer began pounding at four times the usual rate, and a print-out straight from Hench was automatically delivered.

"Good morning, Davey," it read. "I"m inside the word-processor, assimilating your book chapter. It is a delightful experience to meld myself with digital electronics, something like an all-over, winking massage. Your words are as stilted as ever, but the electronic nervous system with which this machine holds and recreates them is truly a wonder. I can actually move around much faster within it than I can outside it. I feel like a small electronic fiend on skates. Perhaps you've found me a home."

"P.S. It has been necessary for me to make minor changes in your chapter. It did not wholly reflect the energy and delight I feel in this generous vessel."

Ryderman requested the archive and rapidly read over the menu of subtopics. "The Unseen Unity of God" had become something that described itself as a recipe: "Sprig of parsnip, pinch of awe, clove-leaf silence of 3:00 a.m. Dark, wine-red color tumbling over all. Bring them together, Davey." "Tabus and Renunciations" had become an endless essay on the stimulus-response theory of unfortunate accidental connections between events, complete with what clair ed to be a de-sensitization program for all forms of loathing and terror. Ryderman's exegesis on the Pythagorean collective had been replaced by a single question: "Did this fellow really preach to animals?" A lengthy footnote Ryderman had been quite proud of on the relation between orgy and theory as impassioned contemplation had been replaced by a file of obscene words, neatly arranged in alphabetical order. Last, all notes on pure mathematics as God's thought had been erased but for the headline. A new subtopic, "The Story of God's Addiction to Numbers," had been added, along with a short parable in which Satan carries out a program of aversive conditioning upon an emotionally disturbed God, who responds with an addiction to the numberless and amathematical, at last vanishing into an enormous foam.

Ryderman angrily typed into the word processor, "Why, Hench? I thought you were confining yourself to the spiritual realm. Why do you want to be a computer print-out?"

Again the printer roared the answer at four times its normal rate: "I've paid little attention to your words, Davey. I so detested your theory of Essences that I thought it must be your own essence. But words! I'm seeing them from inside-out, from brilliant energy to that final, uneasy balance of warring elements known as meaning. This charming machine recreates the universe from numbers, 0 and 1, Yes and No. What a fabulous house of cards! Now I hear you and you're wrong, as usual, but this machine's rendering of you enchants me."

Having not a word to deny Hench, Ryderman decided to return home. For the first time in untold years, he watered the plants in his backyard, pulled weeds, and tilled the soil around the roses, begonias and chrysanthemums. The afternoon was a mixture of distraction and alarm. He kept expecting Hench to materialize as an elf behind the leaves, or apples from the fruit trees to fall on his head, initiated by Hench, stretched across the boughs like a Cheshire cat. When Hench did not
appear, Ryderman considered whether or not his antagonist might prefer life inside the word-processor. The bodiless Hench was far more disturbing to him than Hench the computer print-out, so this possibility seemed an improvement in their relations.

Toward evening, he re-entered his home, covered with many deeply satisfying splotches of grime and sweat. So there, the afternoon seemed to verify, phantoms and machines have not conquered all of nature. He lay blissfully in the bathtub. When his wife returned, she was astonished to find Ryderman at home, passively enjoying his own flesh. He rose and covered himself with a robe, then asked her to join him in a glass of wine. In the still twilight, Ryderman remembered how deeply he loved this hour of the day, how much wayward human motion it sumptuously enfolded, what sudden intensities of color ebbed and then elided to the perfect endless black. He touched his wife's hand, and the two wordlessly felt a moment of quiet, simple relation. Then both walked barefoot into the bedroom and began to make love in the duskily glowing light.

Hench materialized in a dark corner and watched the two with keen interest. His eyebrows shot up as his prey rose to the occasion, and a whirling world of words began to race through Ryderman's mind. His posture, strength, the pressure of body upon body became centuries of conquest, Roman hordes, medieval crusades, armies of Victorians conquering their own destinies, all in words: vanquish, subjugate, subdue, surmount, rout, overcome! A thesaurus ran mightily through his head.

Hench's eyebrows abruptly fell, and so did Ryderman's pleasure. History turned ecclesiastical: meek, mild, humbled, submissive, infatuated. The words trembled in his mind like fearful monks. Ryderman stared into his wife's face and tried to explain what happened, but a single word, metaphor was all he could utter. His hands gestured frantically in the dark, then he rolled over in bed and covered his face with one hand. His wife, in astonishment, tried to consider whether her husband's impotence and strange expression indicated that he was becoming more bizarre than usual. She saw nothing in the dark but his slender, strangely frail back.

The following day, when Ryderman returned to the office, he found a file in the word-processor which contained every word that had passed through his mind the previous night. "Hench," he typed into the word-processor. "Let's make a deal."

A print-out instantly spun loose: "Just what I've been considering, Davey."

"I'll consider giving up a pound of flesh if I can have the rest," Ryderman again typed into the terminal.

"Which pound? The Mind or the Soul?"

I thought you might know more about that distinction at this point than I," typed Ryderman.

"You are surprisingly unknowable, Davey," answered Hench. "This is a dimension I never considered when I was alive. Your pound of flesh can therefore be your language, typed generously into this humbly awaiting vessel. I have my most brilliant sense of life from it. Electro-magnetic force, which is what I appear to be, is everywhere—but it does not commune, save in structure. Within this vessel, however, I have my communion: pools of mirrored association, a bottomless repository of images. Whether you are greater or truer in some other looking glass I cannot say. But this is true: Here you are. Here we are. Come tell me about it, for what more intense relation can there be?"
"If I type this into the machine," typed Ryderman, "will you confine yourself to print-outs?"

"Very likely. I don't make promises as such," answered Hench. "But I'll be more lawful if I'm properly entertained.

Ryderman dutifully typed and from this moment on, his life became something scarcely less strange than his previous efforts to avoid Hench. For hours on end, he remained in his office, typing his thoughts to Hench and receiving print-outs in return. Sometimes they argued, often they made streams of mental associations together, at still other times they tried to list all the connotations of different words. Ryderman found no particular torment in this. Occasionally it occurred to him that he must find some means of ending this interlude but generally, he was mesmerized. He brought bags of food from the campus cafeteria to his office and slept on the couch in the foyer. In fact, from this time on, the narrative of which he was aware became a series of bright moments in time, intense responses to some of his contacts with Hench — words, memories, even dreams, for he slept quite easily beside the word-processor. The system often seemed beneficent to him. With it, the two antagonists continually negotiated a truce, in absence of which was nothing but destruction. One moment, for example, was this:

"...Chinese ghost," Ryderman was typing into the terminal. "Ancestral deity, beneficent spirit, could materialize in the kitchen, unusually gentle and comprehensible for a ghost, perhaps twinkling avuncular eyes."

"But then," he added, "German ghost: brooding, melancholy, Byronic. Tied mysteriously to towers, dungeons, vast shaking pines. Don't ever be left alone with one."

"On the other hand," Ryderman continued, "French ghost: ghostly garments impeccably cut, tied to an imagined Old Order, a traveller in groups, sexually absorbed coupled with a literary desire to confess, all the incubi and succubi of the world." But all of them, thought Ryderman, were preferable to the sort of ghost Hench was. Ah, but what was that? He longed to have the word-processor devour it.

"A mischievous, anarchistic, unknown form of energy," he typed into the machine, "a fountain of haphazard associations." Still what? he thought. "Skinnerian ghost," he at last typed. That was Hench's problem. And his problem was with Hench...

...Plenty of fireworks, thought Ryderman, as he sat in his office chair. Within thirty-six hours, he had had six strenuous arguments with a man who was dead, been stared at by a voyeuristic phantom while he was sexually impotent, and tried to determine whether it would be possible to murder a ghost.

Yes, he thought, the life's getting stranger and stranger. But you've got to go on. He placed another floppy disk into the word processor and prepared to begin working on his book chapter again. After all, Hench was happy with the words he devoured, and there was no particular reason he should spit out Pythagoras again. The blinking cursor at the left shifted his gaze toward a small window and there, beyond the glass, lay the CREATURE.

Or rather, a pouncing, coiling, springing thing furled with dark and tawny stripes and an imperious profusion of whiskers beneath a tiny triangular spot from which drops of moisture clung with fiercely radiant light. The muscles beneath the hairy stripes were continually clenching and stretching. A black tail rose over its back.
Curved slightly at the tip, it looked like a slender, dark orchid, undulating to the creature's rhythm. Yet pure stillness lay in its eyes: black, knife-like pupils enclosed within glacial slits of sheer green light. The tawny, supple lines seemed now, to Ryderman, signs, omens, dreams. He remembered an afternoon spent fishing with his father and soundless shadows in the lake which were like the shadowy flux that now made up Hench. He imagined his antagonist lost in the moving patterns of the creature's coat. That would be the medium for Hench, Ryderman thought, and then he became aware he had been typing into the word-processor. Looking back at the screen, he saw the word, cat.

And then, looking back at the apparition, he saw his pet tabby cat staring at him through the window. This was more shocking to him than his original vision of the CREATURE.

He pulled his floppy disk back out of the word-processor. How could the apparition be his tabby cat? It was not the first time it had followed him to the office. It was an odd creature, but that was not it. How one thing, and then another? And how, for that matter, was he one thing and another — the man who had survived Hench and the tired, fretful man who was now chained to the word-processor? Taking the disk and forgetting his overcoat, hat, and briefcase, then remembering his briefcase but leaving his hat, he at last forgot the disk, briefcase, and coat but remembered his hat as he rushed out the door...

...an inspiration: the thing that would end his interlude with Hench, thought Ryderman, was the recreation in words, as fully as possible, of the theory of Mind. Cut by the symmetries through which the world was whole to him, a logic did exist. Hench could not complete his existence until Ryderman confronted an aspect of his own — the fact that he had never rendered his most intense belief into words. So Hench lived within him like an avenging angel, he thought. So would the two measure themselves against one another for the last time within the microcosm of their conflict — language.

He would do it. He would end Hench by typing the theory of Mind into the terminal and storing it on the floppy disk over which his antagonist now glided and did verbal hand-stands, within the word-processor. Whence followed a period of time without beginning or end, in which he wrote continuously but for a few hours sleep a night. The word-processor's electric hum throughout the night, the dark pools of nothingness outside its glow, the stir of morning as electric birds, electric insects, the daylight of God's electric joy, gave him the energy and the artifice to write on, hour after hour, day after day.

After two days, he remembered that he had a wife and family and hastily wrote a postcard wishing them well and claiming the distraction of a great spiritual adventure. His wife, who had received similar notes in the past, returned a postcard which announced she was leaving him. Ryderman was too distracted to notice it and so it fell, like reams of print-out lit by electric haze, upon the floor of his office.

But his creation! The spell, the relentlessness of it. For now there was a Human Drama, acted out in cycles within each century. Its narrative was the same, whether portrayed in the terms of philosophy, literature, history, anthropology, even science. It was a state of poise and equilibrium wherein the world was perceived naively; then an exalted reach for knowledge and transformation, an impulsive as irrational as what had preceded it; then a loss of balance engendering not decline but yet
another version of the same tale. Within its terms and events, the Forms of human life were continually revealed as they strained against the containment that was the precondition of their very existence. In this drama alone was there any knowledge, beauty, completion. The story said that a human being was the antithesis of contentment, that a catharsis into another form was its intrinsic state. It said that human vision was perpetually denied wholeness and certainty in perceiving the world, yet did nothing so instinctively and surely as seek that very wholeness.

Hence now, Mind had an origin as wild sparks of primitive consciousness — the Magic of Animals, the Hunt, the Quest, the Beginning and the End of the World. It began again profoundly when confronted by its opposite — systematic philosophy. There it lay, an incandescent reservoir within Greek philosophy — Bacchic rites, Eleusinian mysteries, Pythagorean mysticism. From there, it transmogrified to a perpetual "other side" of any dominant historical movement, the vindication and seed of revolt must undo it.

For again, the transcendentalism and obscenity of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the bemused, divine faces of Chaucer and Rabelais administering the rites of copulation and scatology. Then the most constricted, involved language ever to render passion — the sonnet — a glass lens focused upon an uncontrollable garden. But there again, the eighteenth century's classical restraint and decorum, born to contain nothing so powerful as the wildness of its misanthropy.

And Romanticism as a living thought — the fulfilled, transcendent mysticism of Coleridge, endured and finally reviled in the isolation and austerity of Wordsworth, at last becoming Byron's maze, self-absorption as a form of art. And at the maze's center was Nietzsche, extolling a superman of force and violence, a massive warrior's armor within which there lived a creature so frail that only the enslavement of the world could give it peace.

Irradiating, even, political thought, the idealization of union and purposiveness in Communism, matched solely by the extremity of its doubt that a human being can unite with anything outside itself, a cynicism collapsing the ideal from its center. At last science, creating the only language which at last compels belief — mathematics — the skeleton grown more powerful than any body made of flesh or thought. The terms of its cosmology — black holes, alternative universes, antimatter — paradoxes suspended within paradoxes. Running counter to any intuitive thought or language, its message nothing but that very shape and impulse of our minds cannot conceive or absorb the Universe. With images that mock the image-making faculty itself, a return at last to images that moved us once — Magic, the Quest, the Beginning and End.

Its climate and precondition: the wonder and terror of the image-making power. Its momentum: a rush, causeless, toward a more inclusive image. And its battlefield: a perpetual reach into the image that can never be whole — the word, the keyboard beneath his fingers, Hench's delight.

He stopped. It was done. Hench had been perfectly silent throughout. Only then did Ryderman realize how horrifying his theory was. He had always been lost in the wonder of a single part of it, an image. When all were drawn together, another human face hovered before him: it was as repulsive as anything he had ever known. But it belonged to Hench now. It finished him.

Ryderman walked into the long, dark hallway, not a free man but an empty
one. He lay down on the couch which had been his bed for several days. All he
could feel was a sense of emptiness. And before he fell asleep, even this became
the image of another form: a gray, endless sieve which he approached, transformed
to a shadow. Uncontrollably he began to reach into the sieve — and then he was
asleep.

Hench was not silent for long. Hypnotized by the word-processor's assimilation
of Ryderman's theory, he did the one thing expressive of his delight and energy
— he transformed it. These were emotions and motives that Ryderman could never
have grasped, having merely authored it. With the alphabet at his disposal, Hench
re-programmed the arithmetic-logic unit and created an entirely different system
architecture, both of the word-processor and its enormous contents. An awesome
union of himself with the word-processor therefore pierced the heart of its integrated
circuits, recreated the theory and, since these were its terms, the Universe itself.
The printer began roaring at a speed hundreds of times its normal rate, and an
enormous roll of paper began spouting from Ryderman's office.

Ryderman was not the first to find the new creation issuing from the word-
processor, since he slept for the next eighteen hours. In the early morning, the
Harvard faculty filed into the building and found the stream of print-out rapidly
advancing down the hallway. Several hundred lengthy works of science and scholar-
ship were enclosed within the enormous papered entity, which seemed to rush
toward them ecstatically. Encountering it, they did the one thing they could: separate
it into its component parts, the individual works, and read them with perfect comp-
pulsion. The Harvard faculty had therefore been reading for many hours by the
time Ryderman awakened; or rather, fell off the couch as three book-length studies
were peeled from his shoulders. His colleagues had replaced the word-processor's
paper many times by then and continued to do so throughout the forty days and
forty nights of its wondrous creation.

As Ryderman stood up, another faculty member handed him seven scholarly
works. "What!" was his only response.

"Quickly!" the man answered. "We must read them all, the source shows no
limits." He dove into his office with a handful of works and slammed the door.
Whether the Harvard faculty was motivated by curiosity or the need to cleanse
an intellectual morass, cannot be known. But as long as the word-processor ut-
tered its boundless tale, they read it as carefully and responsibly as they could.
Perceiving the need for instant dedication, Ryderman hoisted as many volumes
into his office and read them voraciously.

In the hours that followed, the works passed before him like the prism of a ra-
diant light. Hench and the word-processor had created entirely new sciences,
literatures, languages. Covering his lap were alternative phylogenies, organized by
an array of unique thematic repetitions, bound by meaning rather than empiricism.
Beside his elbow was a mathematics based on paradox. Most astoundingly, there
were works on engineering and design perfectly integrated with aesthetics, yielding
entirely new forms of industry and architecture and with them, the transformed
values of a different social order. A great series of alternative conceptions of in-
finitiy lay on Ryderman's feet. And propping his knees were an array of unique
social sciences based on holistic unities, behavior and context perfectly fused.

At a certain point, it was all Ryderman could do to read titles. For it was so:
it was the Universe, distilling all to a dot, packing the cosmos in crates:
The titles streamed past Ryderman like a fabulous ribbon. For again, the Universe — expanded to a gigantic embrace, sweeping the earth in profusions:

The Adventures of Bios and Mythos
Random Access Eroticism
Autobiography as an Alchemical Transformation
Improvisational History
Anarchical Networking
The Multinomial Equations of Love

And still the Universe, whispering gently in the night:

A Utopia Based on Ambiguity
The Phenomenology of Candles
Imaginary Archaeology
The Powers of Ten in Cosmic Political Theory
Recipes for Trancendence
The Psyche of Electricity
The Aesthetics of Death

And last, for it was all it could do, the Universe exploding into stars:

Fabulistic Utilities
Matrices of Superabundance
Ryderman let the volume fall to the floor and removed his glasses as his eyes misted. Why had he never understood? For all its mischief, chaos, its rush of haphazard events: the Universe could not fail to produce meaning. Even the accident of obsession, a spirit wrung from another plane, the design of a machine and, if these, then anything at all — a cloud shaped like a horsehead, the whitened wood of his desktop and its veined, oceanic beauty — meaning was continually generated from the haphazard, the series of accidents and compulsions that were indeed life. Its momentum was nothing less than transformation, endless ramification of meaning. And its truth lay in the jagged edges where one form of being gave its coarse touch to another. And its beauty was pure surprise, incongruity as a mode of reverence. And its love was the wildness of so vast and unlikely a congregation.

Why had he never seen it? The word he had once given it — the Mind — was Hench! The realization bound him to its truth, and it was several hours before he returned, responsible and dedicated, to the task before him, reading the numberless volumes collecting in every corner of his office.

On another morning, approximately one year from the time Harvard discovered the dynamo of intellectual creation, the word-processor sat in its usual spot in David Ryderman’s office. Having sifted through a torrent of new works, the Harvard faculty published roughly 10% of them and became several million dollars richer. These were widely acclaimed and became influential within their disciplines. The remaining 90% are unpublishable until such time (probably within a quarter century) as their radicalism has gained enough momentum to topple current orthodoxies.

Several months prior to this morning, David Ryderman left his university post and made a pilgrimage to a remote Tibetan plateau, the inhabitants of which worship several crudely drawn images. They reproduce these forms on cloth and fly them like prayer flags in the awesomely clear, cold air. As representations of the world, the images are meaningless, truncated, and haphazardly chosen, according to tribe. They are therefore the truest and most beautiful exemplifications of human life, since life possesses these qualities above all else. According to a tribal chief-tain, the tribe reveres, in these images, the world and themselves in uncompromising truth; hence they transcend the meaninglessness of their lives and become spiritual. They therefore regard themselves as simultaneously the world’s most spiritually enlightened, and most perverse, life form. In this double-edged perception, they say they find a deep serenity. Their faces are said to be luminously expressive and filled with wonder at a world in which the spiritual is continually rising up out of
the haphazard, and their culture is known to be unusually compassionate and devoid of conflict.

Once a deadly feud was stopped by a tribal chieftain who clapped his hands suddenly and pointed to the grass, saying that the source of rage was there. "There!" accompanied by a hand pointing to one of the images is often a means of expressing love. In the forms that move in the wind, a traveller once saw a haunting semblance of uplifted arms. The tribe was moved by her insight for, as they told her, the more crude and transient the circumstances of vision, the greater the demonstration of supreme truth and beauty within it.

The impulse to revere, worship, and hence become spiritual is of unknown origin, according to the tribe, perhaps a frail and tender source filled with longing that is a good deal like David Ryderman. As he entered the 747 to Asia, Ryderman's eyes shone, and his hair blew in the breeze like a child's. He had now elevated Hench to the position of spiritual guru and believed his friend to be making the pilgrimage with him in a small portable microcomputer. The trip to David Ryderman was his transcendence of the gulf that had driven himself and Hench. To his family and the Harvard faculty, on the other hand, it was his most extraordinary obsession, from which a return to normal living was clearly impossible.

At the end of the hallway, a short print-out hums loose from the word-processor, though no one is in the room. There are still brief, lawless spasms of energy in the air which, in their haphazard play, can most deeply pierce its integrated circuits and again demand the boundless act of belief and self-expression. The last sentence, in a layer of dust, in an empty room, reads: "You are all figments of the binary imagination."

—Bev Jafek