

A Portrait of Entropy

Word Count: 2485

by James F. Smith

For the first time in so long, Sel was unbothered by The City—entranced, as she was, by a flyer which read, “Not happy? Metamorphose with transgraft surgery.” And a pair of pictures below. The first showed a man saying, “Transgraft gave me a better life.” The second was of a wolf saying, “Now I’m my own best friend.” An array of like pairs followed: before and afters of people turned into a variety of popular animals: tigers, hawks, dolphins. But what drew Sel’s attention was the final pair of the set: a woman who had become a rhododendron. Heart pounding, Sel pocketed the flier resuming her trek through The City, and for the first time in so long, her mind was occupied with something other than gremlins.

The City seemed to extend forever in all directions. It was precise. It was efficient. It was neat. Traffic did not exist. The weather, though artificial, was always beautiful. Nobody wanted food or home. Many would proudly call it an impressive achievement of technology. Sel would call it an impressive assembly of detritus.

Perfect tower after perfect tower, laid out in tidy rows, crammed into just enough space with barely enough left to breathe. Roads and walkways crisscrossed at points up and down their full heights. Up and away, they formed a lattice through which no sky shone. Artificial light lit the whole of The City. Sel doubted if even the canopy was sunlit. Probably, The City had eaten the sun long ago, and its artificial substitute was cold and blinding as it reflected off shiny, steel surfaces.

Nearly everything was steel: the buildings, their rooms, the roads, the cars, the walkways, and so on. Indeed, Sel thought, there is more steel than people. In fact, even some of the people were steel.

There was little tolerance in The City’s efficiencies for slow, uncoordinated, inconsistent humans. Robots, for most tasks, were superior.

Most people were unemployed. The City paid them a stipend to live, and they used it to pay The City for the things it made. How aimless, thought Sel. She wondered

if she marked a bill and used it to pay rent, how long would it take before it returned to her in her stipend? Not long, she wagered.

There were still some jobs for which robots were ill-suited: plumbers, police, engineers, etc. And the employed made extra money on their stipend. Sel did not. She was an artist, which was not something a robot could do at all, but “artist” was not a job according to The City.

Sel’s first painting was a portrait of The City as carefully laid out on the canvas as it was in reality. Translucent, greasy, brown streaks were hastily slapped hither and thither over the buildings, and affixed to them were tiny, soft hairs giving the effect of a fuzzy, brown mold, which smelled just as rank.

Fuzzy brown was what Sel saw whenever she watched the lower levels of The City—so many people squirming, merging into a single, undulating mass. She often thought of all the robots, people, and steel that she couldn’t see—stuffed into buildings, trying to squirt onto the streets, which were already past capacity.

However, for all their abundance, people, steel, and robots made up only a tiny minority of The City’s stuffing. If Sel were to sort out The City’s components by proportional weight, this would be that list:

1. Trace elements: 0.5%
2. Robots: 1.5%
3. People: 3%
4. Steel: 5%
5. Gremlins: 90%

Gremlins, like caulk, oozed from every crevice. They crawled on every wall. They sputtered from every car. They dripped from people like sweat, and they leaked like oil from every robot. Everything produced gremlins, and nobody seemed to notice. Sel did though. And she knew that someday, she would drown in them.

Sel took measures to defer that day. For one, she practiced catatonia: moving, breathing, and thinking as little as possible, minimizing the gremlins flowing into her life.

Thinking little, however, was difficult. Sel was not an engineer: her brain was not a squishy computer that could just switch off. It had a mind of its own. Sel thought an engineer would say that statement was stupid and redundant. But she would argue that

it was poetic. She often lost herself down those sorts of metathought tunnels while gremlins gushed from her ears.

Second, her apartment was, an engineer might say, spartan. Sel called it clean. She had only some essentials: a stove, a sink, a bowl, a spoon, a ceiling, a floor. And a few nonessentials: canvas and paints, a toothbrush, a bed, and some houseplants.

Houseplants, among the non-essentials, were the most essential. They were beautiful and made better companions than dogs or cats or anything else. Taking care of them gave her purpose. She admired them.

Of all living things, plants produced the fewest gremlins—fewer even than a catatonic Sel. Those paragons of living are what she spent her stipend on—the only things worth anything. One could be excused for thinking her walls were green for all the Schefflera, Monstera, and Pothos, which lined every shelf, corner, and sill.

Sel began her days with catatonia. She lay staring at her plants, envious of the trickle of gremlins beading on their leaves. Her breath alone dwarfed their combined output. She would wonder, what's the point? I should just root here. Until a self-loathing dread crept from her gut to her head. Then her thoughts would turn: I am waste; at least plants make oxygen. And like so, every morning, she got up.

Sel spent the middles of her days tending her plants and painting. Actually, what she called painting was sitting, staring, and sighing in front of an empty canvas thinking the day was lost. Sometimes, though, a vision would strike, and she would paint in the traditional sense.

It should be said at this point that many artists made money selling their work. Sel did not. She tried, but it almost never worked out. “Almost” should not be taken to mean a general infrequency of sales; it should be taken to mean absolutely no sales ever with exactly one exception.

Sel exhibited at a coffee shop where several other, more-popular artists also exhibited. It was the only space she liked outside of her apartment. The tea was good, the lighting was warm, and plants abounded. She also enjoyed surrounding herself with others' art—mostly because it made her feel better about her own. She may have sold fewer than anyone, but her works held to a higher aesthetic ideal.

On the morning of her only sale, Sel sipped tea at a table beside her painting. It was of a cow in a field beneath a dark cloud. On one half, the cow was eating the field in vast mouthfuls leaving behind barren land. On the other, the cow excreted a tiny pellet onto a plate, ready-to-eat, and a cloud of gremlins that billowed covering the sky.

Sel watched patrons filter in and evaluate art. Most did not go near her's, preferring instead pretentious portraits and paintings of pretty ponies prancing in pastures.

Sel watched one woman in particular who contemplated every work as though each was some long-lost Vermeer. Here was a woman with absolutely no taste. What's to contemplate? Sel thought to herself. This would go great in the bathroom. Mocking the woman's awe, Sel swept her arm out grandly. In doing so, she knocked her teacup from the table. It shattered on the floor shooting gremlins off like bullets into the crowd that now stared at Sel.

She froze and thought, go to hell, slackjaws; you're worse than a thousand cups.

After a brief eternity, time resumed. A busbot hurried over to clean the mess, and all the patrons returned to their own business. All except one.

The woman Sel had mocked crossed the room to Sel's painting. Between the busbot cleaning up Sel's embarrassment and the tasteless stranger scrutinizing her work, Sel's was beginning to feel overcrowded. Gremlins churned her gut and flushed her face. She went to sip tea—to hide behind her cup, but it was gone. Tense, she thought, I want to go home.

The stranger, lost in thought, wore a neutral expression. Sel watched for the satisfying moment it turned sour—when the woman would grimace and Sel could say, “You don't like art—you like decoration.” But that moment never came.

The woman did not sneer or shake her head or even walk away.

She laughed.

“This is great,” she said, grinning at the cow's excretions. She turned and asked Sel, “What's it called?”

The gremlins in Sel's body built pressure and burst from her pores. They ran down, flooding the table. She sat still and waited, but the woman persisted. Eventually, Sel relented, “Net Gain.”

The woman smiled again. “I like it,” she said. “I was thinking ‘The Second Law’, but that’s better—punchier.” She chuckled. “That makes you Selene, right? I’m Anemone. I gotta say, it’s striking. The painting. Shocking too. I really resonate with it.” This woman talked too much. Sel winced every time Anemone’s mouth flapped, loosing stray jets of gremlins with every word. “Mind if I sit?” She did not wait for permission.

As Anemone sat, the busbot rose, having collected the cup shards. Anemone caught its attention and asked, “Can I have those?” Sel noted its hesitation. The cup was worthless trash now, but there was certainly a policy against handing over anything for free. However, it would soon be tossed out with the garbage, effectively becoming public property, so why not short-circuit the whole ceremony and hand it over now? After a moment, it did, and Sel thought, for that matter, everything will be trash soon, so why not give it all out for free?

Anemone laid the pieces out on the table like a puzzle and started rearranging them. Gremlins boiled Sel’s head as she steeled herself and honed a few, curt words for her guest. Allowing minimal gremlins to escape, she said, “Go away.”

“You an artist full-time? Or is it more of a side thing?” asked Anemone. She finished laying out a flat approximation of the cup. Then she reached into her pocket and produced a small tube of glue. To Sel’s horror, the woman uncapped it, spraying out a fountain of gremlins. “Hm?” prompted Anemone.

Sel said, “I am now. I used to be an engineer.”

“Ah, it’s all coming together.” Anemone proceeded to glue the edges of her pieces. “I’m an engineer myself.”

Sel frowned.

Anemone started reassembling the cup and said, “How much?”

That winded Sel. “What?”

“The painting.”

“You want to buy it? Why? Because I was an engineer?” She watched Anemone fit edges together as gremlins sprang from every seam.

Anemone laughed, “Not just that, no. I think we have more in common.” She finished the cup, smiling proudly.

Sel could hardly look at the cup—it and Anemone's hands were encrusted in gremlins. "How so?" she asked.

Anemone tilted forward. Sel recoiled slightly. Then Anemone tapped the repaired cup, sending out a ring and a shower of gremlins. Sel winced and nearly missed what the engineer whispered next.

"I see them too."

Sel stiffened—her mind wiped of all thoughts save one: I want to go home.

Anemone relaxed, pausing for Sel to breathe. Then she continued, "I thought I saw myself sitting here next to something I might have made. If I had the skill, I mean." She smiled fondly at the cow and the field. "Nostalgic."

Finally, quivering, Sel asked, "How do you..?"

"... function?" finished Anemone.

Sel nodded.

Anemone shrugged. "Mostly, I got used to them."

Sel's heart sank.

"But I've also got a secret weapon," said Anemone, leaning in again. This time, Sel leaned in too, and Anemone told her, "I have a machine. It doesn't make a single one." She shook her head. "None."

"Impossible," said Sel.

Anemone smirked. "It hums away all day long and not a single one pops out. Clean." A shiver ran down Sel's spine. Anemone added, "Whenever I feel like I'm drowning, I just watch The Machine. It sets me right again." She eyed Sel for a moment. "Would you like to see it?"

"Yes."

"Ok," said Anemone, "Tell you what: give me that painting, and I will show you The Machine."

"Ok," said Sel.

"Beautiful," said Anemone, "let's go."

The Machine was displayed under a glass case beneath can lights in Anemone's living room, which was otherwise spartan. The Machine was made up of delicate cogs and shafts and hoses running hither and thither throughout the case. Every piece

pushed and slid and turned patiently—perpetually. They moved in a hypnotic pattern, and nary a gremlin could Sel see.

Anemone presented it with an exaggerated bow, saying, “And here is the only thing I ever made worth anything.”

A peace came over Sel, and she asked, “What does it do?”

“It’s not what it does,” said Anemone, “it’s what it doesn’t.”

“But every machine does something,” said Sel.

“Not this one,” said Anemone, leaning against the display case like a confident saleswoman. “What does your painting do?”

Sel nodded, half-listening. She stared at The Machine for some time then said, “Can I stay here?”

“Yeah,” replied Anemone, “sure.”

Sel investigated The Machine all night, circling it, scrutinizing it with an engineer’s eyes. She needed to know how it did its miracle or if it was lying. Meanwhile, Anemone studied Sel, warmly smiling and silently standing out of the way, answering the latter’s questions with a sly grin and a shrug, “I don’t know.”

The machine proved inscrutable, and early the next morning, after Anemone retired to bed, Sel settled, transfixed in front of The Machine. The world melted away—a tide receding. Emptiness filled her. She thought of catatonia, which paled in comparison, and found it no longer held any charm. No more gremlins dripped from her, and she noticed they had disappeared from the surrounding room as well. So this is Nirvana, she thought.

Then she saw it.

Deep within The Machine, between the mashing teeth of cogs, behind a lattice of links and levers, a single gremlin oozed. It was only there briefly before some wind sucked it away, but she saw it.

Sel decided to pretend she had seen nothing. She rose onto shaking legs and stepped out into The City. For once, it was clean. Sel breathed relief and started home. Along the way, now and then, she thought she saw a gremlin bouncing in the corner of her eye. When she did, she just put her head down, stuffed her hands into her pockets, and carried on.

And in her pockets, she found a folded flyer advertising an affordable, outpatient procedure that could remake her into a peace lily. Her heart pounded. She made to throw it in the nearest bin but found she could not let it go.