

The Unbinding of Po Chen

by Josh Bevan

Thirteen days before Po Chen's (Chen Yǔxuān) sixteenth birthday, he was diagnosed with what the psychiatrist called Degenerate Virtuality Disorder, or DVD. The idea was that Po experienced reality as though it was an unconvincing façade, or as though it were a poor attempt at a virtual reality. Symptoms, which Po confirmed experiencing, included recognizing human motion as canned animation, solid objects as hollow shells of light with simulated weight, friends and family as benign automatons, and himself as an avatar for some mysterious unknowable 'player' from a higher plane. When his parents considered treatment, they were told that the common cause for DVD was a mistake in gender identification, and so light-seeking and ever-amenable Po, cautiously urged by his parents, decided on his own to become a girl.

Po lived in a time and a place where such a thing was accepted, though even if it were not, it might have gone completely unnoticed, for Po had been an androgynous and girlish boy. Now, as a girl, it seemed to her that not much had really changed except for her grooming and the hormone shots, for the social aspects were lost on such a lonely child, and Po's condition had made her a dire solipsist. Her interior life had grown wildly rich to compensate for the vacancy she experienced in the world, and all of her projects of passion were within.

Po lived on a space-borne city called Poemhold. It had no permanent station. Instead, it followed a looping 25 year long trade route through the solar system, taking hydrocarbons from Titan, rare earth metals from the belt, food from the Martians, and cultural artifacts from Earth, such

as fine wine, yak blankets, knick knacks and sex toys.

The city-ship was made of a habitation zone and an industrial zone suspended from each other by a fifteen kilometer long tether, the zones spinning end over end to create artificial gravity. The habitation part they called the Callisto Swing, because of its shape which was vaguely reminiscent of the rubber seat of a playground swing. Its four corners and four edges bared tethers which joined at an apex suspended high above, and eight gigantic, slanted skyscrapers were built up around the base of the tethers. Most of the population lived in the skyscrapers, while the flat part of the swing was a vast park filled with fake duck ponds, astroturf meadows, hollow hills, and plastic canyons.

Originally built to house 4 million, it had been a ghost town of a few hundred thousand ever since Po was very small - mostly space-born maintenance staff, pirate security and cargo babysitters. It turns out that decades in the void is too lonely for most who have the choice to avoid it. Po's mother, a third generation Callistan, gave birth to her a few weeks too late to have seen the Earth, Po's entire life up to this point having been in the vast emptiness between the interesting bits, the city's holds brimming with dildos and Tokaj.

For her and most of Poemhold's forsaken, the only escape was the bounty of vibrant virtual realities commonplace to this era. The Virtual had many names and natures, but Po sought those Worlds whose presentation attempted to render the non-linguistic, the incomprehensible and the subliminal with as much psychic overload as possible.

It was on a hill of impossible shapes that rolled into a valley of infinite fractal that she and her first Lover stood. They gazed into a cosmic star-eye in the heavens as it fluctuated from vantablack

to searing light, all things around them shimmering in texture from rock to skin, flare to shadow, strawberry to marble and so on. Olfactory and sonic textures were unified with the visual, and all was driven by the two lovers' emotions, though Po could never have known in what way exactly.

Po had always felt disastrously vacant, but on this hill, staring into the false eyes of the digital ghost of a girl she loved, a weighted instinct called out ferociously. It called out a nauseated yearning for unity, not with the ghost, or the girl, but of that thing that was both of them, that void with weight that contained both avatar and operator. This mental object of desire was impossibly unattainable. Yet, inches from 'her', Po could not ignore the red of her lover's lips, the smoothness of her skin, and the gentle joy in her eyes. The depths of that unfulfillable yearning mesmerized and devastated Po, but the hope of youth brought Po back and back again. They held each other in a pantomime, their ghostly bodies slightly phasing into one another, pretending their smiling eyes weren't crying.

Burned out of the virtual at the early hours of the morning, Po shut off her headset to find melancholy in the dark chambers of her family home. Sick from the whiplash of lost stimulus, she snuck away to the vast park below, walking slowly between the abandoned hills into the break of simulated dawn. Searching the spinning heavens for a sublime she knew could not be found there, she sat at the bank of a chlorinated pond until the morning brought duck calls and birdsong. She found the speaker array from which they originated in a hidden divot between three tall rocks, and for the next few hours of sorrow, she lied curled in the divot, hoping birdsong and sunlight might fill her up.

Nightly, over a disgusting overabundance of food, Po's parents would question her on the progress and emotional character of her transition. She had long discarded the notion that her body was involved with her condition in any meaningful way, thus her parents' insistence spurred disdain

and evasion. But her intransigence was perfectly balanced by apathy and exhaustion, the mix producing in her a euphoric detachment. She felt that she was floating above her body, a pure and disengaged awareness that could sense the space between things. As the nights carried on, that intoxicating evisceration outgrew all other yearnings.

She decided that it would be better to live closer to death. And so she reduced her meal portions, and took to the habits of night vigils and holding her breath. Gentle asphyxiation and the second breath of morning light put her into that shaking and desperate mode of mind that heightened the absurd senses, and prepared her for those non-linguistic inspirations she had become so fond of. Yearning for annihilation, she broke ways with her lover, and in the comforting sorrow that followed, she explored the psychoactive spaces of The Virtual.

The Virtual afforded perspectives so wildly alien to the human experience that its affect was nothing short of psychedelic, and the violent shifts in embodiment advanced Po's enchanted, increasingly cherished alienation. In The Virtual she could 'be' a civilization, a bacterium, a logic system, a flat-lander, a disjunct dream, abstract phenomena, musical energy, pure evil, or even nothing at all. And that The Virtual flaunted its illusory nature affirmed for Po that the falsehoods of reality could be redeemed by the access they provided to mental frontiers.

For Po that affirmation became necessary to life, and so The Virtual consumed her. But as total immersion set in, there grew an awareness of some gigantic, benign terror hidden behind those facades of light. All Po understood for sure was that nearness to it invited that intoxication which inspires violent, self-immolating ekstasis. To be sure, that terror was not an 'entity' in the proper sense. It was the pure will of a system, like the personality of an ant colony, or the invisible hand of the economy.

She stood again on that hill that rolled down into infinite fractal, and meditated on the terror of the void, seeking to deface its ugliness, for Po had finally begun to reject the instincts and values of her humanity.

When she looked out beyond the edge of some World in The Virtual and saw a sunset or a panorama of nebulae, she knew at once that these sights were mere facades. But she also knew that the virtual world was functionally infinite, that beyond the edge of the constructed regions there was an indefinite void. It was precisely because Po could not find reconciliation between the desolation of that void and its infinity that she found an intense high in it. Gazing thoughtlessly at those facades, she would allow her focus to expand to the volume of the void behind, which, being infinite, cracked her psyche open, and, that infinity being desolate, gave her access to those bright irreconcilable yearnings for familiarity with The Inhuman that make one cry out in ecstasy, even erotic fervor, as one comes unbearably close to the climax of the infinite. She spent day and night in that endless procession of psychotic hallucinations until its spinning, edged delirium turned to violent retching.

By the third dive into that ecstatic abyss, the addiction had become irreversible, and she wrote in her notes that she was to “die a dancing death, die a dancing death, die a dancing death,” in a silent chant.

Nothing in the sparkling whirlwind of phenomena that she lived in proved anything to her. No moral felt binding, or course of action preferable to any other. She did not want to die, but she did not know how or whether her desires related to what ‘should’ be done. She felt the pull of things — the pull of her humanity, the pull of the inhuman — but none of it had any real charge, beside as a network of effects. At once confused and delighted, she looked ahead at the prospects of her life —

the gems and terrors, the bright oscillations of love and sorrow, the sublime and banal, the deplete and boring, the suffering and the sleeping — and she decided all at once that she was in love with all of it, that even if she were to live a life of tortured terror, or vacant idleness, that the violence of being was endlessly rich and delicious to the mind in peril.