

A Persistence Study

A Notion

With tender sympathy do you consider the plight of the bug on the floor whose movement seems to you aimless and pathetic. If you are particularly charitable, you may feel an urge to slip under him a piece of paper and expedite his journey, but you do not know his destination, so you withdraw. A left turn followed immediately by a flurry of rights brings him back to the place you started tracking him. You see a hopeless traveler going nowhere with no way to get there, but going still, sentenced to die in your bathroom after a lifetime of motioned paralysis, entirely oblivious of you, his only companion. Even in his final moments, turned on his back, his legs continue to work with such a violent urgency that would have you believe he nearly completed his life's pilgrimage, that only a few more steps would finish his journey so that he could rest his weary bones. He mourns over the vast expanses he covered: foreign kingdoms populated with violent adversaries, powerful rivers that swept him off course, and treacherous mountains that abraded his joints. All this only to falter at the gate of salvation. Though your perspective shows you he has only moved from the tile adjacent to the wall to the one near the sink. It is an acute failure in your perspective, however, that causes you to feel sad: You discard the fact that the bug lived a life of conviction, his only regret being that he could not have worked harder to attain his goal; he wasted no time and spared no expense in his efforts. Fortunate and few are those among us who could say the same. You assume, because you do not understand his goal, that his life must have been a waste and his struggle not a sign of valiant strength but of futile stupidity. You take no wisdom from him, leave his funeral, and continue to oscillate between a slew of valueless enterprises, more in need of his sympathy than he of yours.

A Question Followed by Commentary on the Notion, You, and Your Deceivers

Have you let your guard down already? If you discharged even a morsel of emotion when reading the foregoing, it is plain to see that you are easily compromised by the sentimental hooey-talk, a weakness that has doubtlessly been exploited by soothsayers, word players, long distance callers, tongue tied talkers, jokers, town criers, advertisers, journalists, heads of chambers of commerce, spokespeople, correspondents, contributors, quipsters, commentators, people familiar with situations, people familiar with the thinking of people familiar with situations, question askers and answerers, fact checkers, wind blowers, airbags, pharisees, talking heads, masters of war, experts, senators and those who thank them for their service, barristers, athletes on gambling commercials, pill pushers, peddlers, and poisoners of the airwaves. You might find an earful of green moss quite salubrious for its soundproofing abilities and its greenness, green being a reliably healthy color. See, an unobstructed ear becomes something of a problem when attached to a weak man, the sort of man prone to believing hocus-pocus like the bug-talk relayed above.

Chapter 1

“Scurv Daulkey: Chief Actuary.” Scurv tried out his new title, but the words sputtered up some of the bitter hydraulic bile that hoisted them from his guts. This embittered his teeth and reduced his already scant store of humor. To feel tenth rate on a day that would be the crowning achievement for many of the actuarial persuasion was as unpleasant as it was unsurprising. After all, Scurv, in his idle thoughts, had long since graduated from the role which he only now assumed and had moved on to grander things (including a rather revolutionary idea on the construction of downhill roads and an alternative for rubber that would upset a not insignificant number of financiers and manufactures – certainly, it would prevent him from ever being warmly welcomed to Thailand.) To reel in his mind would be no easy task. It would be harder still in the presence of the vultures who wasted little time in coming to roost at first outside and now in his new office.

“Suffering Senators!” barked Harold, “What an achievement!”

“Capital job, really” added Robert.

Harold and Robert, two of Scurv’s colleagues, tended to be loud, and Robert was usually sick and taking some sort of medication.

“I hope you’re feeling better than me, Scurv, on your big day and all. There must be something going around.”

“I’m alright, Robert.”

“You know, people say most sickness starts in the teeth? Do you believe that? I mean, it’s really no wonder: a cavity sure makes for a nice place for a germ or bacteria to hole up in. They don’t need much space, you know, owing to their small size.”

“True.”

“Then there’s the dirty air we gotta breathe. Breathing dirty air when you’re healthy will make you sick and when you’re sick it’ll make you sicker. You wouldn’t wanna be doing much of that.”

“I shouldn’t think so.”

“Then you naturally get to thinking about the temperature and acidity of saliva and you can see how some people are sick some of the time. Really, it’s a bit flummoxing that all of the people aren’t sick all of the time.”

“Quit talking about your spit, Rob” spit Harold, who was a great deal healthier than Robert or at least mercifully ignorant of his unhealthfulness. Certainly, he was more perceptive of Scurv’s disinterest in the present conversation.

“Today is about celebration. Why don’t we have a grand night out?”

“Sorry fellas,” said Scurv, “we have a shipment coming in tomorrow morning and I don’t want any funny business on my first go around. Train comes in at 6:07.”

Talking about work was a sure way to repel the two associates who scurried out of Scurv’s office. As they nested in their cubicles Scurv surveyed the floor he now led and began to think about his shipment.

Chapter 2

It was 6:18 when the wincing steam engine announced its arrival to the station, its sound brought to him by a cold westerly wind that embrittled his face and demonstrated the great utility a man could extract from a pair of whiskers. The massive behemoth, somehow powered by dirty water, stumbled into the station and seemed to take a spiteful sort of pleasure in its tardiness. Scurv thought of the displeasure his idleness would bring to the shareholders and interrogated the guilty conductor on the whereabouts of his cargo. The conductor directed him to terminal 5 and told him he could expect delivery shortly. On entering the terminal he realized that he was accompanied by two of the conductor’s undersecretaries who wore wiry gray furs and carried great volumes of documents. As they waited for the train car to pull in, the undersecretaries broke into an amazing frenzy of work that could not be reconciled with their frail appearance. One of the two shimmied up a ladder and ran across a platform above them, turning a series of dials and pulling on some levers at one end of the platform before sprinting to the other side to continue his work on another control board indistinguishable from the first. As he ran, he communicated down a series of numbers to the other who annotated the documents. The numbers seemed to trouble the one nearer Scurv.

“What are you writing?” asked Scurv.

“I’m copying the measurements from the upper deck.”

“Is there a problem?”

“I’ve never seen measurements like these before.”

“What is being measured?”

“A great mystery to me that is.”

“What do you do with these measurements?”

“The measurements are collected and prepared for the stakeholders as needed.”

The business with the measurements ended when the train car rolled into the terminal, and the one with the documents stowed them into pale which he pushed through a slit in the wall that was coplanar to the terminal entrance. Scurv craned his neck to assess the wall’s depth. It was a bog-standard construction of corrugated steel not thicker than the sole of workman’s boot. Scurv

returned his attention to his cargo, but the thinness of the wall that just ingested an entire pale confounded him.

“Delfya’s finest.” said one of the undersecretaries (when neither was holding documents they became indistinguishable to Scurv.) As he spoke, he pushed an iron slit which exposed the inside of the cart and invited Scurv to step forward. The great mass of rodents made themselves known to Scurv in smell and sound before his sight adjusted to the blackness of the chamber that carried these fellows from the east; what a foul stink these rats produced! No textbook or exam could convey the horrid assault on a good businessman’s senses; this is something an actuary had to learn on the job. After sobering himself from the powerful smell, Scurv stepped back and watched the undersecretaries attach the trailer to a draisine that sat on a rail opposite the entrance. He took his seat on the cart and was joined by his navigators.

The undersecretaries pumped the draisine’s arm which made a terrible croak as it meagerly moved the caboose rat cart. As they labored out of the station, Scurv saw 8 smokestacks at the rear of terminal, each rising hundreds of feet above the terminal’s apex. It was a wonder he did not take notice of them sooner. The dirty gray atmosphere secretly harbored the gray dirty smoke they produced, but the hum they sang shook the air and betrayed what must have been a mesmerizing scale of industry. Scurv inquired about their purpose.

“To release the toxic byproduct at altitudes sufficiently high so as not to disturb the atmospheric equilibrium required of the station.” Said one.

“They also aid in the blackening of the night sky” added the other.

“I see.”

The whole business of the train station seemed odd to Scurv, but his thoughts turned to the mortality study he would soon oversee. Rat mortality had been steadily declining in recent years owing to the rapidly increasing quality of life available to them. In fact, it would be hard for Scurv to replicate the conditions these rats enjoyed in the city of Delfya. The city had become something of a mureoidian El Dorado, its streets gilded with garbage and its criminals proficient enough to relegate the rats’ growing influence out of the minds of city officials. Fortunately for the subjects of Scurv’s study, they would soon return to their promiseland after undergoing a brief period of observation where their demographic information and humors would be measured. They would return unchanged except for an increase in weight in the amount of the chip that would report to Scurv the time and cause of their eventual death.

His scheming was interrupted by the stopping of the velocipede. He clocked a group of gandy dancers ahead who were mending a damaged bit of track, and he thought again about the shareholders’ now idle capital.

“Will this delay be substantial?” he inquired to the undersecretaries.

“It is bound to be a severe one. The subpeat that undergirds this region is of the crumbly sort. No doubt these men will need to pour a boiled coagulant to settle the earth before laying their tracks.”

“Perhaps we can assist them and make quick work of this operation.”

They dismounted their vessel and approached the workmen. One of the fellows was deploying an assay where the rail was to lay. The others sat around a pot aboil on a fire.

“Good morning, men. We are traveling on urgent business. If I and my associates can assist in your work, only point and it will be done.”

“I’m afraid nothing at all can be done until the pitch is boiled. Join us by the fire and warm your bones.”

The man with the assay indicated the pitch would need to be brought to a belting 1,800F if there was any chance for the rail to take. Scurv did not understand how that would be possible with a simple open flame but imagined it would take a good long while, so he took a seat in the path of the sweet, dizzying emissions of the cooking pitch. The effluence, profiting from its relative indensity in the thick air, ascended up Scurv’s nasal passage and through its heat and corrosive toxicity imparted a softness unto his brain that allowed his thoughts to more easily cut across its surface. Impervious to rest as he was, Scurv brought out his satellite computer and started administering to the tables of data most in need of his attention.

“I’m a working man, so I have never done much figuring. But would a cubic spline not be a more appropriate choice for mortality smoothing than Whittaker-Henderson? The fidelity of your data may be compromised in cells of advanced ages with sparse experience.”

Scurv turned around to see all 4 railmen studying his work. It was only one who spoke, but the others affirmed the opinion of the speaker with their eyes.

“Man, attend your pitch and allow me to attend to matters of fidelity and smoothness! Bohlmann addressed your concerns of fidelity in such a distant past that the creatures whose desiccated bones you now boil still had breath in their lungs!”

The men did not speak or move or change their expressions. Their merciless scrutiny unsettled Scurv.

“Don’t you have anything else to say?”

“I tell you truthfully that I do not.”

“Why are you still looking at me?”

“No line of sight can indefinitely evade the capture of a receptacle. On a fogless day a man’s vision will eventually meet the back of his own head after circumscribing the globe. Presently you stand in the path of my ocular transmission and I invite you to step aside if it ails you.”

The combination of the death-dealing smoke and the astounding wordplay of the railmen caused Scurv to slip into a feverish semi-consciousness, his thoughts ascending onto the mezzanine that harbors sojourning souls as they travel from the here to the hereafter.

“Up the steep face

Of Lullaillaco we climb

Singing of home

To pass the time

Here we’ll camp

With hardened lava for bed

Dreaming of home

From which we’ve fled”

“Who makes that honey-talk?” asked Scurv.

“It’s my voice you hear, do you find the verse and lilt to be sweet as honey?”

“Certainly. Who are you, by the way?”

“Bernardo O’Higgins, son of Ambrosio Viceroy of Peru, son of Isabel, father to Pedro, father to Petronila, gentleman farmer, student of Juan MacKenna, servant of Chile, friend to the afflicted, namelender to O’Higgins FC, presently your interlocutor.”

“Bernardo O’Higgins, why you’ve been dead for ages, I ought to stay dog-wide of you, you ghost.”

“It is true I am succumbed, but then show me a man who can forever dance around your bloodthirsty q(x)s. Unless you have further reproaches beyond my being dead, I’d ask you to lend me an ear. I have something to tell you that you will find most interesting.”

“What business do you have with me?”

“It’s a matter of liberation rather than business that’s on my mind.”

“Out with it then.”

“Here’s the song and dance of it: Take two hunks of clean coal, boiled and reboiled to remove impurity, then smash them together at unfathomable speed in a particle accelerator. Pay some employees a fair wage to collect the billions of resulting dust particles with their wet fingers and adhere them back together. Now you’re getting somewhere worth going. Of course, this process will need to be repeated many times until the coal is saturated in pure power, but I don’t like to waste breath on the plainly obvious.”

“That’ll do nicely, though I do not see who precisely is being liberated, and what from.”

“Rest your tongue and I’ll tell you. You can imagine it’s a hungry machine that consumes that sort of energy. Well, that would be because it’s no easy thing to turn a man into a rat. Both are made from dust and powered by blood, but that’s about where the similarities end. Note that their bloods are not even very similar, which adds a few pieces to this jigsaw. Your boys over at RatLife have rigged up an apparatus that just about does the job, though, and they run it out of the train station.”

“I knew that place had something to it. Pardon my slowness, Bernardo, though I see you are speaking the simple truth, I’m still missing the how-do-you-do of it all.”

“That comes next. I take it you are quite the cartographer, a thoroughbred mapmaker, a descendant of Gerardus Mercator?”

“I am not.”

“Surely your father was though.”

“My father was in the civil service.”

“But his father made maps?”

“He did not make maps. He was a pipefitter.”

“Let’s hear about your great-grandfather then. Was he known at least locally for his map-making?”

“Locally he was known for fouling rooms with his foul tobacco and for an injury that disfigured his right hand.”

“His occupation?”

“Bricklaying.”

“In his free time he must have plotted some routes though.”

“He spent his free time studying the songs of birds. He sometimes sang the tunes himself, though none of them well.”

“Then he must have had a good sense of direction, owing to the migratory nature of birds.”

“He studied their song, not their flight. He could never quite remember when they went north or south, never mind the difficulty of the east and west.”

“And if someone asked him for directions to the market?”

“He would tell him that if he walked far enough he could arrive at any place in the world, and if the local market was what he was after, he would probably reach it before eternity’s end.”

“Tell me, what did his father know about cartography?”

“That is impossible for me to tell. I never knew the man and of him nothing is written.”

“I suppose there’s no sense in me asking you about his father, your great-great-great-grandfather?”

“There wouldn’t be a bit of sense in the question. I know less about him than his son, of whom I have already demonstrated my ignorance.”

“Never mind that, then. The map I have in mind is not a conventional one. You possess a first-class understanding of rat mortality owing to your actuarial dealings, is that true?”

“It is.”

“Good man. The map we need takes one from rathood to manhood, and with your skillset, the problem is reduced to a bit of trivial algebra.”

“I do not doubt the purity of your logic, yet I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“It’s clear we must turn you into a rat. We can send you down with a manuscript that contains everything there is to know about death and dying and let you have a crack at the nut of survival. After all, is $p(x)$ not equal to $1-q(x)$, and is life not survival? Really it’s child’s play once you’re down there. Once you master what constitutes a rat’s life, simply use your expertise to modify the species-transformer to work in the opposite direction. I expect a rat to go in and a man to come out, a simple two-bit trick. Can’t you see that you have the chance to save the rats from the hard lot they’ve been dealt?”

“You ask many fair questions. Do you answer them too?”

“I do.”

“Who says the rat’s lot is harder than the man’s?”

“I promised to answer fair questions, not foolish ones.”

“It’s a more interesting question than you let on, Bernardo. You have been separated from your humanity for too long it seems. We’ve made ourselves quite the wasteland since your departure.”

“Why do you say that it is a wasteland?”

“Only pick up any journal and you will see an account of it all.”

“The journalists just want to give you a good Sunday’s scare.”

“You question the integrity of a journalist?”

“Put an honest drop of ink in his inkpot and it will curdle. See Scurv, a man who is convinced that the world is a blazing inferno will not try to escape his home though it is presently on fire. In

defeated wait he lies to be passively consumed by his personal hell, never so much as glancing out of his window to verify the extent of the fire. He is suspended in this state of complacent semideath by the so-called experts, the authors of suffering, who lay the burning coals at his feet and scream “Fire!” Then they give him pails of gasoline as means of extinguishment. Plug your ears man!”

Chapter 4

Scurv jumped awake alarmed with the realization that his return to Rat Life HQ needed to be greatly expediated in light of the dream-dealt information. He instructed the undersecretaries to reverse the draisine to a past junction so they could find a new path. The one they found was long and rough and Scurv cursed its authors for not making it downhill. The industrial landscape they traversed narrated the memoir of a great number of gadgets and technologies: Their organic ancestry: mines from which precious materials were excavated; their artificial birthplaces: great factories, ugly and functional; their purgatorial resting places: scrapyards filled to capacity with their discarded metal bones and plastic skins and bits of circuit board brains. Often the scrapyards were close enough to the factories that you could imagine a conveyer belt connecting the two, depositing the newly minted items directly to the scrapyard to be disassembled and subsequently returned to the factory in a cycle of pointless and indefinite reincarnation.

Then they passed the civic center where Scurv and his fellow citizens voted. The old, decommissioned track they took exposed a suspiciously well-used path from the voting center to the largest hole in town - formerly one of the deep mineshafts - which now seemed to serve a more sinister and undemocratic purpose. Everything he saw strengthened his resolve and he yelled for his companions to push on. Even the draisine took stake in his cause and broke into a feverous trot.

Chapter 5

Finally, the rail odyssey was over; Scurv was back at RatLife headquarters. He supplicated the scanner on the turnstile with his face and it seemed to take an unusually long time in considering whether to admit him. Perhaps it had detected the change in his person; a shrewd observer could have. After all, a man only has so many particles with which to constitute himself. What he learned from Bernardo was so inconceivable that it could not have existed in any part of the brain that slept in his skull last night. New dendrites had taken hold in the fertile orchard of his anterior intraparietal cortex to nourish the growth of neurons that would lodge his secret. Of course, the creation of matter is strictly prohibited, so it stands to reason that these neurons borrowed their bones from somewhere else in his body. Scurv was particularly worried about the fatty sheath required to protect their axons; had the high council, his nervous system, commissioned for this service some of the fat cells from his face, it might have betrayed his secret to the scanner by the way of an infinitesimal new gauntness in his countenance. For now, the door was satisfied and admitted him entrance. The warmth he felt on entering, breathed on him by a heaving, asthmatic heating system, would have been pleasant had it not reminded Scurv

that he was inside a living leviathan that would one day have it with the parasites that roamed its entrails and shut its doors forever. Scurv shuddered at the thought of being on the wrong side of the doors when that day came and hastened his step. He quickly grabbed everything he would need on his trans-species journey and bravely departed back to the station.

Chapter 6

No man with his wits in proper order, unless he was wanting for a right crack on his head (in which case it is unlikely his wits were in proper order) would try to convince a prisoner that he was free. Yet this was precisely what Scurv had to do. The rats had caught wind of his marvelous machine and he quickly ascended to a position of royalty among them; presently they surrounded his palace awaiting the salvation he would deliver them. He had to address his people. The roar they produced when he stepped on his lector practically thickened the air.

“Friends, I am here on a mission of freedom!”

The air grew thicker still.

“I am here chiefly to thank you, for it is you who have freed me. And in return I will deliver us all to unprecedented freedoms! But I fear there is some confusion swirling in your midst that must be corrected. Allow me to share a brief history of our shared existence with you that ought to set you straight:

The cart of progress, carrying on it all of life, has thus far traveled down a one-way street, starting with our shared ancestor, the single-celled organism, who, after billions of years of singular contentment thought to himself, in reference to his body, “Another one of these could do me nicely,” unwittingly doubling his capacity for pain. Thus, we have the original sin of meiosis: a curse on himself and subsequent generations inborne with his greedy desire. And so eventually the fish jumped out of the ocean because he thought a pair of legs was a fine idea, and the primate eventually grew discontent with his knuckle dragging and stood on his two feet, and so forth. I tell you now that every step of this journey has been a mistake, every father has only created for his son more axes of suffering, has only given the enemy more flesh to strike. What ape ever had to look at a screen, and what fish ever broke its leg? Today, we have the power to not only put the breaks on what might otherwise be an unending torment but reverse our direction of travel and correct the errors of our predecessors. Now that I am among you, I see freedom that I could never comprehend before, and I assure you there is more to come. Those among you, and I imagine there are many, that want me to take you forward are asking for imprisonment, no, asking for death! No friends! We will use the machine to drill down, boring deeper toward the core of existence, deeper than any before us, passing through increasingly simplified forms. On our journey we must remain vigilantly greedy, not allowing ourselves to be satisfied with the untold riches of the small fry, but to continue drilling until we have condensed ourselves into dimensionless bliss, distilled into pure consciousness, relieved from the burdens of height and width and weight! And hear me now, I will see to it that no passenger will be allowed

to deprive himself of this freedom. So be prepared to pluck your eyes, to plug your ears, to chain yourselves to our vessel, for nothing could be worse than ending our odyssey prematurely.”

The rats were a sensible bunch, and they obviously rejected his stupid nonsensical rambling. Now their roaring took a different tone; now they roared only to expel breath from their bodies so as to make more room for their brewing hatred towards him. They began to breach the walls of his palace. Hundreds of rats spilled through the labyrinthine corridors of the palace, joined by the royal guard commissioned for his protection. Their ascent up the tower shook the structure. Once they reached the door to his innermost chamber, they pounded on his door, demanding he hand over his machine. Their violent banging suggested an unpleasant and rapidly approaching fate for him. Though it did not deter him from his mission to save them, the path he had to take to facilitate their salvation now looked markedly different. He frantically began destroying the machine, working harder than he ever had before, breaking it beyond repair, beyond recognition, pulverizing every gear, bashing every piston. Though he brought the machine to a heap of scrap that could never be repaired, not after millions of years of the most scrupulous work, performed by the most industrious laborers, nourished by the richest provisions, instructed by the most astute engineers, funded by the wealthiest financiers, he was still not satisfied by the time the door was breached. He did not even see it happen, nor did he hear the rabid accusations or feel the sinews of his limbs stretching as he was carried away. He clawed at the air trying to continue his destruction and wept when he could no longer reach the machine. Then the ceiling of his room was replaced by the light of the sky. Suddenly nothing but the air supported him, and he saw the perch he once preached from, pulling away from him toward the heavens.

A notification popped up on Robert’s computer. He beckoned Harold over.

“Harry, get a load of this.”

Harold walked over and read the death tag transmitted from a rat chip.

“Defenestration? Say, I’ve never seen that one before. Bad day to be a rat!”