

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/4

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The Extender

Our city is an island, a thing inherently centered around itself. Nearly every inch is covered in towering structures, the newest always taller than those that came before, and their construction is highly original, one as thin and sharp as a needle, another made only of glass, paneless and glittering like a blade. Despite the buildings' beauty, it is not wise to get attached. Our city's creators tear down their constructions as quickly as they rebuild them. As dwellers here, fellow pursuers of progress, we are at peace with such a cycle of destruction and rebirth. It's as they say: the light that burns twice as bright burns half as long.

Streets, begrudgingly carved for necessary vehicles and hapless travelers like me, tear across the terrain like chaotic scars on a meticulously constructed face. It is important to remain vigilant on one's daily path: there's always a plethora of recently drilled holes to contend with, and stray bits of stainless steel are known to plummet from hundred-foot-high scaffolding; the right of way is always given to the excavators or dump trucks, engines thrown into reverse or thrust forward seemingly at random.

The safest space to walk, and to admire from afar, is along the walls, the city's rectangular periphery. Four gravity dams surround our city, six-hundred-foot-high concrete barriers to the thrashing ocean beyond. Waves pound at our walls like ticks of a metronome, or a healthily pumping heart, around forty beats per minute. My mind no longer entertains the threat of flood, nor do I hear the sound of the crashing waves; their rhythm files into the caves of my mind, the shadowy recesses of subconscious behaviors, nebulous observations, and on occasion, buried treasure, but I do not waste precious time there.

I'm an Extender. My job is to extend the minds of others.

Before there were Extenders like me, most people used bits of technology. Computational devices, visual communicators, nano transmitters for music or other forms of entertainment. Even before that, Extenders were just pieces of paper and pencils. Each of these objects allowed the owner to access an external intelligence, bringing their own mind to a new plane, a higher level of potential. Of course, there are obvious inefficiencies to each of these legacy methods. Computers do not speak our language and a piece of paper doesn't give any feedback on one's ideas. Only a person can properly extend the mind of another person.

On my first day as an Extender, I learned the sequence that the Principals follow to track their progress. It's called the Fibonacci, or the sequence of the golden ratio, but when the Manager sketched it for us on the board it just looked like Fs and numbers. F0. F1. F2. F3. F4. F5. F6. It didn't seem to matter, for the purposes of working with the Principals, that there were actual computations that corresponded with the Fs, but to me, that was the most interesting part. I scribbled the formula on a scrap of paper and crumbled it into my pocket for safekeeping. Now, when I'm at home in my compartment waiting for a job, I often find myself writing out the sequence, following the formula, watching the numbers compound and

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grow. I've actually created a little game with myself, seeing how far I can get in my calculations before I get summoned. More often than not, I only make it to F10 (55), but once I made it all the way to F50 (12,586,269,025). That was a particularly slow day.

My compartment is located under the North Middle of the city, so I don't have any wave echo or sink hole and water erosion hazards. I pay for that, of course, both in terms of less space and higher rent, but overall, it's a decently comfortable place, with room for both a sleeping pad and a small desk. I overheard once that these tunnels were originally built as a transport system, an investment made prior to the environment becoming hostile and unpredictable, and that the city's inhabitants used the tunnels for daily travel and lived in the buildings above. I'm still not sure if this information can be entertained as anything more than a childish fantasy, as its factual accuracy seems dubious at best. For a city-dweller to somehow inhabit the creations above is as irrational as it is implausible, and yet, I find my thoughts coming back to this myth more than I'd like to admit.

Being as dedicated to my job as I am, it's difficult to know when I'll have any extended periods of free time, but when I can, and the environment is stable, I like to work up a sweat at a game of frisball, or see a projection at the Southern Wall. I even fell in love once, but not with another city dweller per se. I'm young and I tend to find others my age relatively cruel, so instead I fell in love with a building: the aura around it, the promise of it. It captured my imagination. Four floors, seventeen windows, fourteen winding stairs to the arched maw of a front door; built of foreign stone, soft and malleable, carved with swirling patterns, worn down by our harsh environment. The foundation appeared to be slightly crooked, but she stood self-assured nonetheless, squished between two massive concrete slabs of construction zone, a couple of tower cranes hovering nearby like a pair of praying mantises. I knew it could never be, and yet my insides ached to sit on her paneled floors, to smile up at her high ceilings, scattered with stars.

For a week, I came back every day and we ate an afternoon meal together. It was the time of day when she was at her most majestic, the sun shining through her south-facing windows, shimmering down at me. In the depths of my mind, I could hear her tinkling bell of a voice. The dialogue sparkled between us. She told me about the others that had loved her, fabulous individuals that painted scenes from their dreams and played instruments until their faces turned blue. It pained me to see that she was quite alone now, and by the end of the week, when I came back with my crumpled brown bag, the cranes had already demolished her. I sat on the dirty corner and ate my protein bites, my heart pounding away, far faster than it should have.

The company that matches Principals to Extenders is called A Measured Mind. On my first day, they'd rented out a meeting room, booked in a state-of-the-art group workspace, in order to train our cohort of hopeful Extenders. I remember taking out my filtration tube, pleased to be in a space with a purifier, and wondering if I might be able to enjoy such a luxury on a weekly, or perhaps even daily basis if I succeeded as an Extender. I took a few deep gulps of air, the experience like quenching a lingering thirst. After our brief training in the sequence, the Manager gave

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me a nano transmitter, a simple device that alerts me to when I'm being summoned by a Principal. It's been three years now since I started working as an Extender, and it's been better than my prior gig, working as a precious metal delivery Driver. The terms at A Measured Mind are more generous than most companies: they give us five percent of the session fee, plus tips if the Principal feels we've been particularly helpful. It's usually a pretty good bet that if the Principal reaches another level in the sequence while we're together, I'll get a decent tip, something like ten percent.

Today, I was summoned to meet with a Principal, along with two other Extenders. The Principal that had hired us was a level F39, so he, like most at his advanced level, was going to be using all three of us in parallel, a model not unlike distributed computing, where Extenders act like processors. We were standing in front of him since there was only one seat at the table. I didn't mind the arrangement, standing tends to keep me more alert, but I did find myself worrying, as I often do when a Principal opts to skip the behavioral synchrony warm up - a few squats, a quick sun salutation - that our cognitive flow might be stiff, at least for the first few minutes of the session.

I considered him for a moment before we began and found nothing remarkable about his appearance. Most Principals are innovators, those that construct the city's buildings at the pace of innovation, and he dressed just the same as the rest: grey slacks, blue button-down, platinum watch. He sat back in his chair, his body signaling that he was relaxed, while his face told another story. Each of the muscles around his eyes seemed to be pulled taught and his thin cheeks stretched like buckskin over bones that steeply angled toward his mouth, forming the thin line of a deliberate frown. Before him on the table sat an architectural model of a building that I assumed he was hoping to originate. Many of the Principals do this, bring renderings or physical replicas of their work, but my reaction is always the same: a greater sense of purpose, a proud swelling in my chest. To wonder if one day, I'll get to walk by the real thing, the actual building, and know that I helped it come to life in the mind of the inventor by using my own mind. To know that even the tiniest fraction of its existence was because of me.

Once he'd briefly looked us over, the Principal signaled at the model building on the table. "Observe and associate," he said. We immediately assembled around the table, one of us on each of its sides.

"Corkscrew," I said, starting the group off. I usually sense that I'm the more senior Extender in the room, and therefore instinctively know it is my job to assert myself first.

The others joined in:

"Spiral staircase."

"Double helix."

"DNA of our city."

"Pointed cat ears."

"Two antennas."

"Cocooned caterpillar." The Principal bristled at this, so I changed

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tack. "Tallest."

"A twisted diamond necklace."

"It reminds me of another building in our city. The Arnold."

At this observation, I gave the Extender who'd said it a sideways glance to warn her that she ought not continue down that mental pathway, but her eyes were still focused on the model, her speckled brows furrowed so that they nearly touched. A wooly worm of a brow. The association moved me to smile, but my expression faltered when I noticed that the Principal was glaring at her.

"A brilliant stone-" I began, but the Principal held up his thin, veined hand and I stopped.

"How could this creation possibly remind you of The Arnold?" He asked. The other Extender's cheeks reddened in shame. The third Extender didn't look at her, but instead continued to stare blankly at the model.

"The concept is similar," she ventured, before giving me a glance. I realized suddenly that she was new and I nodded at her, encouraging her to go on. Debate is a method often used during sessions, and even though it can be uncomfortable for the Extender, it is often quite rewarding for the Principal. I've even seen a few debates lead to a breakthrough.

"The Arnold was built to resemble the diamond necklace Ralph Arnold once gave to his wife. It had a helix-like shape, with a gem-encrusted facade. About ten years ago, I think, it was the tallest building in the city, and was unseated by-"

"Dead-end thought." The Principal said, stopping her. I tilted my head to the side, glancing between them. The Principal had risen from the table and, although around my size, he easily towered over the new Extender. At the time, I was startled by his response, since I found her answer quite helpful, but I quickly reminded myself that innovators do not like to be compared to others, and perhaps such a pathway would block this Principal's ability to push through to the next level. The new Extender bowed her head.

"Revert to first principles," the Principal said, taking his seat again. We quickly rearranged ourselves, forming a line at the side of the table, giving each other hopeful glances in the process.

The success rate of reverting to first principles is similar to one's chances of getting heads in a quantum coin flip: the Principal gets the outcome they want about half the time. To be honest, I'm not always certain when a Principal succeeds in getting to the next level, since it all happens in his own mind, but usually he'll say something like "that's it" and conclude the session. The times when the Principal leaves disappointed, seemingly without a breakthrough, are the times when I assume they have failed, and, more importantly, we have failed them. The tips always confirm my suspicions.

"I need to get to F40. I need to build The Grayden in two weeks and sell it in twenty-four hours for three times the cost," the Principal was saying, outlining the building blocks of his creation's foundation. "That gets me to the IRR I need. If it takes much longer than twenty-four hours

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to sell, then I need to sell it for a higher premium, get another turn on the multiple, get it done at closer to four times.”

This is the part I don't have much interest in, mostly because the turns, the times, the IRR, it all seems rather precarious to me, so I let my mind wander as he reviewed the terms and allowed myself to wonder if I'd get a chance to see his creation in real life. Once, a couple of months ago, I actually got to meet a building that I'd worked on with a Principal. It wasn't to my taste, just tall, rectangular, like a dense gold bar, and it didn't survive long since it was sold in two days, torn down on the spot, but for those two days, I got to watch it stand and, well, let's just say it was the most ownership I've ever felt over this hard sea rock of a city in my entire life. And it felt like magic.

When the Principal had finished reviewing his goals, we all waited a beat and then said in unison: “We will help you reach beyond.” A Measured Mind tells us to say this and I have to say, the Principals do seem to find it comforting.

“Question why it deserves a premium, and then we will debate,” the Principal said, his eyes fixed on his creation. “Go.”

“What material will the facade be?” I asked, picking up on the word the new Extender had used.

“Diamonds and stainless steel. Next.”

“How many other buildings boast such materials?”

“Only two others on the market. Next.”

“Will it be the tallest building in our city?”

“Of course. Five centimeters taller than The Henry, erected today. Let's go, guys, next.” The Principal said. I shifted slightly, noting his discontent.

“How much further will the human eye be able to see from its peak?”

“Twenty centimeters additional ocean view. COME ON!” He said, suddenly slamming his hands against the table. “I must push through. I MUST.” He continued, but he wasn't talking to us and for a moment I was not sure if he was even fully conscious that we were there, standing before him. Suddenly he looked up. “Work with me, you three! Give me something I can work with here!”

Silence filled the room. After a moment, the new Extender cleared her throat, and I realized she hadn't said anything since her earlier dismissal. She didn't look at the Principal, but instead stared at the model, her cheeks still a bit red. When she spoke, I was surprised by her question:

“What is its purpose? What is its meaning?”

She shook her head suddenly, as though she'd been caught in a day-dream. I locked eyes with her, wondering why I had never heard such a question before; it was simple, and yet, I felt an unusual sense of anticipation, as I wondered what the Principal's answer might be. She dropped my stare and slid her eyes up the table, resting them on the Principal. I followed her gaze, and saw him rise again, the same glare consuming his taunted face. I'd seen Principals displeased with their Extenders before, but

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never quite like this.

“Let me show you how illogical that question is,” he said, standing straight, his hands clenched into fists at his sides. “What is your purpose? What is your meaning?” He demanded, drawing out the final words of each sentence, as though sharpening them with his tongue. “If you can tell me that, I’ll answer your question about my creation, The Grayden.”

The new Extender looked back at him nervously, stammered out something incomprehensible. This response seemed to please him.

“We are also creators,” I said, a bit boldly, but I did have his answer. “In helping you reach another level, in helping you bring this building to life, we are fusing our minds with yours, and in doing so, we are contributing to your final creation, thereby making us creators ourselves. That is our purpose here.”

He rounded on me, his eyes flashing with a sentiment I couldn’t quite place, and yet I suddenly understood why the new Extender had grown so quiet under his glare. When he did finally speak, his words had a force to them, hot like a laser that was melting my insides into a puddle on the floor.

“The pen is not given credit for the author’s story,” he said. It sounded like teaching, but I knew it was not. “The canvas has no control over what colors are blended together to make a masterpiece on its surface. And you. You are a resource and your purpose is to be used as such.”

I averted my eyes and looked at my hands. I didn’t even look at the new Extender, or the passive third Extender to her side. I didn’t participate in the rest of the session. He was not successful in reaching F40. It was our fault.

When I got back to my compartment later that day, I couldn’t articulate what was wrong, but something within me was not quite right. The Principal’s sharp words thrashed around my mind, and I tried to block them out, attempted to push them down into the shadowy recesses, but the thoughts wouldn’t go. It was like I was trying to get rid of too much gunk all at once, and the depths of my mind refused to shut like an over-stuffed waste compactor. In my desperation to make room, I somehow let go; I slipped into the deep, outside of consciousness, and let myself linger there, wondering if I might stumble upon some bit of waste to permanently torch... and that’s when I saw her. My building. She was still there, down past the layers of gunk, around the sharp, thrashing thoughts. I drew her into focus, brought her into the forefront of my mind, and then, present in my compartment again, I sat down at my desk to sketch her, with a pen and paper.

When I was done, my fingers lingered over her fourteen steps, her seventeen windows, her welcoming arched doorway. I had drawn her empty, like the other buildings in our city, but I wondered suddenly if I could live in her instead, just like the myth I’d heard and not dared to believe. It was radical and strange, I thought, debating with myself, but I was not an inventor with creations to be sold. Perhaps my creation could be sufficient in itself; perhaps then, there would be no reason for her to stand empty.

I drew a light in one of the top floor windows and built an overflowing

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window box to bring out her lovely features. A little chair almost materialized without my thinking it, perched by a cozy fireplace I hadn't known existed. She needn't be all mine, I decided, focusing on the top floor; surely I'd be rapt with just one room. I scribbled again, and on some new and distant plane, I left my compartment and slipped through the window I'd drawn myself, sat down on her paneled floors and smiled up at her high ceilings, scattered with stars.