

The Probability Theater

by Airan Wright

There is a sprawling metropolis, nestled by a lake, reachable from all coasts. It is a hub; a gathering place of culture, with sights and sounds rich in color and vibrancy. From here it is easy to visit the rest of the continent, spread out on a spider's web of routes built of flexible pavement the color of dusk. Or to, just as easily, stay put and let the world come to you, served on a platter of venues only the locals know of. Small museums, tiny restaurants, theaters no bigger than a hole in the wall. Boutique. Artisan.

It is not unbelievably expensive here, nor is it cheap. The price of things fluctuates from block to block

like bubbles of soap on the surface of a bath, collecting here and there in pockets, bursting only to congregate somewhere else within its friendly confines. But such is the cost of being in the center. For truly "affordable" you must sidestep, taking a train from the heart of downtown out to the smaller neighborhoods tucked into its periphery. Close enough to feel the rhythmic beating of the heartland, yet far enough away to maintain some form of autonomy. Drifting out, steel wheels on steel track, until at last, over a tinny loudspeaker devoid of emotion, you hear your stop called. The name you hear is not important. Every stop is unique and every stop is the same.

Waiting for the train to slow, feeling the loss of momentum, the weight of metal and upholstery pulled to a stop by a gravitational force built from a spinning planet, helped along by cast iron and applied physics. Squealing slippage between wheels and rail a haunting wail announcing your arrival. Watch buildings swing into view through windows tinted a green usually reserved for ripe avocados or granny smith apples.

Doors unfurl on a hiss of escaping air, the pneumatics pushing them open upon conclusion of movement. Beyond, the neighborhood lies visible in a quaint calm, distinctly devoid of downtown drama. The elevated station sits above

structures housing small shops; coffee, art, hardware, fashion, travel. A theater down the street, trimmed in a white marble frieze. Exiting the station down dark wooden steps saturated by time and weather, well-worn divots from those who came before, all leading to River Street. Like its parallel and perpendicular siblings, its name used to mean something. Now it is a simple line on a complex map with no river in sight.

Noonday sun sprinkles the street with a taste of warmth in playful contrast to the pillowy undertones of a cool breeze, tucked around curling and tumbling autumn leaves that drift about the ground. A smell of roasted coffee, it's snaking tendrils of scent escaping around the flow of morning traffic passing in and out of a nearby shop. Tables partially visible through the window, occupied by a cornucopia of personalities, new and old, fast and slow. A busy morning.

Walking by other shops, reflections of wandering individuals and meandering vehicles slipping across the smooth surfaces of glass, each display window a tide pool of proffered goods; rakes, pastries, scarves. Posters for faraway places lay on the surface of the travel agency, each a tiny portal to a distant land.

Stopping at the theater, the frieze around its front a gently moving tapestry in the shifting light of day, shadows growing and shrinking around the tiny reliefs of sculptures telling stories. The muse flits from scene to scene, guiding, pushing, pulling. It sinks a ship, leaving a survivor alone on an island, undiscovered by mortals, home to the fantastic. It flies upon the wind, a torrential gale, leveling rock and tree, claiming souls. It inspires great heroes and orphaned loved ones to action. Below it, an audience funnels in through large doors of polished oak for a matinee performance.

Following the crowd across a threshold.

The front door closes on the known world, leaving behind expectations. Eyes adjusting to a light that comes from everywhere and nowhere all at once, emanating from the walls, the floor, the air. The lobby is slightly dim and tinged of smoke, tastes of acrid sweetness and years of sweat. You can almost touch it, mold it with innocent hands, feel it slip between fingers that search for purchase on its incorporeality. The buttery smell of corn, popped and salted weaves around the smoke, vying for attention amongst the crowd.

A bell chimes once, lights dimming in pursuit.

Movement, the shuffling of shoes crossing over a floor that

has seen more of the world than the bodies that stand upon it. Ceramic tiles of cream and gold, dulled from years of service. Through a simple set of doors, pulled freely outward on silent hinges.

Entering the auditorium, searching seats that sit waiting for companionship, their surfaces a faded red and purple velvet with light yellow shades of industrial angles cutting across in avant-garde patterned chaos. Randomly patterned fields of minimalism the same shade of red as the seats play across carpeted aisles rimmed with tiny lights for guidance. The passage of time settled across worn wooden arms, dark red velvet curtains, and the smooth wood edge of the front of the stage like a blanket of memories.

Finding the last open seat as the lights dim. A quiet that seeps out across the hall, tense with anticipation, waiting for the appearance of a conductor. The calm before the storm.

Suspension.

A butterfly flaps its wings.

The silence is a roaring rush of wind, suddenly pulled in with a taut snap.

Look around at seats, empty and new. A gloss shimmers across lacquered wooden arms, cool and serene as an undisturbed lake. The smell of velvet, freshly upholstered,

lingering in the air. Running a finger across the fabric, watching it turn darker and lighter with each change in direction, the fibers affected by a sweeping touch.

Standing up, the room silent under a blanket of calm. Everything and nothing happening at once, open to possibility. A step to the side, then another. Reaching the aisle, feeling the carpet, its patterned dots well measured and peaceful in their sequential assuredness, under foot, slightly softer than the cement back underneath the chairs. Guided away from the stage by lights along aisles, tiny fireflies, anxiously alert.

Reaching the double doors to the lobby, their dark oak awash in intricately carved branches and leaves, a twisting turning tree trunk at its base, bisected evenly. Half the tree swinging away and out over a tiled floor, blue and black ceramic, newly laid and freshly polished to a mirrored gloss. Gold trim at the edges of the room where walls awash in unsteady pinstripes climb toward a ceiling slightly farther than it seems it should be. Melancholy fields the color of cream lightly shaded a shimmering blue along the perimeter by light spilling in around posters hung about the front windows, partially visible on motes of dust.

Past the empty concession stand. The lobby deserted. The front doors open on a vacant street, bereft of movement. The sidewalk outside gently out of focus, undefined lest it be viewed directly face on. Unformed and unfinished and waiting for the turn of a head to cause it to form into being. Fuzziness floats at the edge of view, migrating with every shift of the eyes.

Focus tightens with walking. Turning right, past the travel agency, advertisements displaying remembered places, visited in perfunctory, planned trips; each an escape, if for only a brief moment. An island of quiet, a city of love, a forest of life.

Past a gallery, paint slowly swirling on canvas, alive. Reds curl into yellows, compressing and squeezing. Blues relaxing and, in their passiveness, pushing outward, innocently aggressive. Imagined faces on imagined bodies. Harbored sailboats bobbing up and down. A cornucopia of fruit spilling off the side of a table.

Reaching the elevated train station at the end of the block, its wooden legs protruding from muddy banks of a low, wide river. On the far side, undeveloped grassland tan and yellow, extends up a gentle incline hiding the horizon. Water where tracks should be, coursing serenely, its fluid rapidity neither rushed nor restrained. Wisps of bluebonnet

languish at its sides, dabs of indigo and violet. Cattails, horsetail grass, wild iris.

The stairs leading up to the platform creak, arguing against the weight of the world. Signs for other stations freshly scribed on their fronts in pinks and yellows and reds. The smell of fresh paint, pollen, and wood mixed with warm sunlight.

At the top of the stairs, waiting for a trackless train. The platform is empty, stretching away to either side, regularly lined with benches of rich brown and orange cedar laid atop metal frames painted white. Bespoke canopies reach out, partially covering the platform which, in turn, leans out over flowing water, it's current twisting and turning in curls as it navigates unseen rocks below its swirling surface. Bright blue mats of molded plastic textured with an offset grid of small dimples warn feet from falling off the edge.

To the left, a canyon of buildings rises up along the perimeter of the river upstream, hemming in a thin walkway on either bank. Light reddish-brown rocks lined with ornamental switchgrass define its path, ebbing and flowing with each bend. Coasting through the chasm a flock of birds fly freely, swinging into view in unison. They move on an unseeable current of air, drifting effortlessly just above

the water before deftly turning upward, only to settle again moments later at the height of the platform, eyelevel.

As they near, the shape of the first bird melts and molds itself into something more substantial, more angular. The long rectangular body of a shipping container unfolds, formidably occupying the space once finely feathered, flying slowly and deliberately on imperceptible wings. Baby blue paint gives way to dark orange at its corners where it has come into contact with other containers, wearing and chipping at it over time. Letters and numbers stenciled along its sides, recognizable yet holding no inherent meaning.

The bellwether container is overtaken by another feathered body, also shifting midflight, its soft down replaced with cold metal, followed by another. Then another. The pod constantly shifts, its collection of containers ever moving, ever changing. In fractal-like fashion, their angles twist in on themselves, a merging mess of material that swims through the air on two extended metal pectoral fins, containers jockeying for position at the edges of each. Rising up above it all, a dorsal fin of light blue stretches out and back, tiny bits floating off

its tip and out into the sky. Metallic bubbles of something lighter than air, floating away.

A vague shape of a dolphin floats past the platform, the size of a blimp. Light cold mist extends out from its invisible wake.

A form sits on a bench close by, hidden in the receding shadows cast by the floating amorphous mammal. Its hand extends in greeting from a crisp suit the color of a chillier than expected overcast day, immaculately tailored about the elbow and around the shoulder. The creases of fabric slide against each other, a slight rustling of leaves and knowledge. Black hair frames her face, a blanket of assurance over an inviting, comforting smile; hair, soft and gentle upon a forest breeze, smelling of bark and pine. A wind blowing idly through a copse of fir. She has information she dearly wishes to impart and does so, speaking deliberately and without hesitation.

"It is the very nature of probability to prove that nearly anything is possible," said in the patient and mild yet confident tone of someone narrating a documentary. Balling her right hand into a fist and rotating it slightly for attention, "for only if zero probability is met, is a thing truly impossible." She gently places her open left hand against her fist, at the ready. Pulls her hands

suddenly apart wide, wiggling the fingers of her open hand in emphasis. "Infinite timelines of endless possibilities stretch out from here. Zero is merely the start."

Pulling hands back together, slowly, until they are almost touching. "Even the most unlikely of things is still possible, however close to improbable it may seem."

She opens the withered fingers of her closed fist to reveal an apple, red as the blazing inferno of a new sun. It shines with ferocious intensity. "Inside is impossibility," she says, shining it against her jacket, relishing the gleam. "Once tasted, it is known; defined and quantifiable. The point in space and time around which all probability exists." Pauses for a heartbeat. "Never tasted..." and lets the words linger, dripping into the air with possibility.

Holding it out to take. It is neither heavy nor light, fitting perfectly in hand, warmed by either the sun cast upon the platform or by its inner self, unknown and untasted. Looking left up the river toward the chasm of buildings, the water reflected in their unreadable glass facades. Looking downstream where the water flows away from view, dodging out of sight a stone's throw away from the platform behind a bulge in the far bank.

She stands, a wraith in black, transparent against the sky. "Without the knowledge of impossibility, anything seems possible." Searching the river with the eyes of a newborn, full of wonder. "But is that ignorance a blessing or a curse?"

One bite is enough. Bitter and sweet. It is burning hot and freezing cold. It is a paradox of possibility unable to contend with its own duality. At its center is nothing; a hole overflowing with the unanswerable. It is too heavy to hold and floats away from your outstretched fingers. You stand, grasping for it, needing it back but it is gone. Squinting into the sunlight, you search for it in vain but are met only with the frenetic movement of clouds, their impressions far in the distance, swirling on motes of hidden wind.

She watches you with eyes of pure blue, brown, and gold. Smiles.

"This platform is a way station," she says, zipping up an arctic jacket full of down feathers, zippered pockets festooned about its surface. Pulls a giant hood over her head, its sides spreading out like a giant mound of snow. Light purple ski goggles tucked tightly on her face. "The farther you go, the greater the probability of meeting with the impossible."

Turns and walks toward the edge of the platform, snowshoed footsteps echoing in an absence of sound. All attention focused on her voice. "The world is breaking and being remade at every moment. Probability leaks out, dripping through rifts of fiction, captured with ink on paper by the dreaming. Shared between friends. Read to sleepy children. Imagined scaffolding sculpted by an author, fleshed in by a reader."

"What will you do with it?"

She turns, her jacket a thick coat of fur, white as snow. Steps out into the void above the river, her body that of a bear the size of a whale, her growl the thrum of a coal engine. Slowly tilts away and is absorbed by a flowing train of noisy townsfolk, each unaware of the other, each a collection of infinite narratives. Characters swept together in a timeline heading out and away from the station. It tumbles and roars, rotating on a central axis, a cloud of color and texture, slipping away.

The river drifts by, unaware of the world above it. Sunlight tiptoes across its surface, waiting. A pen nib fills the sky, pushing gently through the air above the water, slightly distorting reality and drawing in the edges of perception. Withdraws, pulling at the senses, the river pulsing with the blood of an invisible muse.

A bird chirps, its trill accentuating the low rumbling of the water which swells in answer, roiling into a torrent; a steady rush of clapping pouring through an audience as the heavy red velvet curtains are drawn open. A quiet light flickers on stage. Probable outcomes and improbable consequences illuminated by its faint glow.

The overture starts in a darkened theater, a train ride from downtown in a neighborhood just left of center.