



In The Call Centre

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abstract

This excerpt from the unpublished novel *Dead Americans* was largely produced just after the 2003 *No Border* camp in Frassanito, Southern Italy, at which a number of internees were successfully liberated from an Italian detention centre. Like all intellectual works, it is hypertextual. The sources it links most immediately are *Heart of Darkness*, by Joseph Conrad¹, *Hotlines: Call Centre Inquiry / Communism*, by Kolinko², and *The Logic of Sense* by Gilles Deleuze.³ In particular, the Kolinko study is used contextually throughout, and is highly recommended for those wishing to understand the contemporary organisation of the call centre. The final section employs scan and tone, not to mention a muddled line or two, of Wallace Stevens' *The Idea Of Order At Key West*⁴ ('Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know...'); Basil Bunting's *At Brigglatts Meetinghouse* provides the excellent 'thud of the ictus.'⁵ The title refers to Franz Kafka's *In The Penal Colony*.⁶ The author will ignore suits from the acquisitive estates of dead authors. For the living (Kolinko), it is hoped this attribution, and a further exhortation to read their text, will repay the license of using it.

They arrive in the early morning at an empty place, an industrial park, could be anywhere on earth. A minibus has brought them non-stop from Waterloo, the same grey light all the way, the same slant of rain.

Variegated towers of shipping crates suggest a port nearby – but there are only long, squat galvanised buildings receding in tight tessellation to the distant weld of land and sky. Sea would give border, land's end, limits of a nationality that has been long redundant here. Corporate jurisdictions spread in muted quadrangles, marked by the loose flutter of logos, the tri-spiked flag of Mercedes, the bitten Apple, Fiat's rippled

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- 1 Available at [<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/ConDark.html>]. Throughout this and the rest of *Dead Americans*, Conrad's prose is invoked only in inverted form. This is not simply to deal with copyright issues.
 - 2 Available at [www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/kolinko/lebuk/e_lebuk.htm] From memory, George the Hotcubist exists in the original. The Ultraglitch and Telematic Hypertrophy Sickness (THS) are pure figment.
 - 3 Deleuze, G. (1990) *The Logic Of Sense*. New York: Columbia University Press.
 - 4 Available at [cscs.umich.edu/~crshalizi/Poetry/Stevens/The_Idea_of_Order_at_Key_West.html]
 - 5 Available at [www.jamie.com/archives/000214.html]
 - 6 Available at [www.mala.bc.ca/~johnstoi/kafka/inthepenalcology.htm]

slashes, each with their own sentries guarding their particular borders, barriers raising to let chauffeured executive cars swish into wide stencilled bays.

Unchallenged, at the centre of generic roundabouts, or by traffic lights at which no cars wait, lonely adverts on massive hoardings obscure any sign of the landscape that subsists beneath them.

The driver doesn't seem to know what to do next: he hands over a set of keys, shrugs toward a long, squat hangar, leaves them standing outside the expanse of building amongst their strewn packs. They let themselves into the interior, low and immense and windowless, ribbed with fluorescents, intersected by movable partitions at head height that do nothing to obscure its volume. The peculiar football field has remnants of arbitrary rules, teams, traces of movements and flows. Across the expanse of light grey carpet, in zones roughly delineated by great desk archipelagos and hanging signs in pastel hues, ghostly demarcations of activities that, though ceased, still leave their trace: Customer Services with its litter of phones and filthy headsets; Credit Control, and half a square kilometre of Sales, Sales, Sales.

At the very centre of the huge room is a raised transparent box, visible from every point, its empty swivel chair suggestive of a spectre provided with perfect vision, or a feudal lord whose scope had extended across each demesne of this miniature sovereign territory.

This place was once a call centre, the final terminus of many million enquiries concerning thousands of different products, the originary point of legion upon legion of sales pitches.

Now it is empty.

Puck and the Scots break six-packs of lager and work up an astonishing accumulation of empties. Others arrive across two or three dilated hours, in groups of five or six, all younger than Trace and the others, boys in fact, working hard to impress each other, rigid and strutting, stiff-legged.

To look at any of them is to know their story, to have a picture of how they came here.

This one joined the army at sixteen, served a year, maybe two. No one found him intelligent, no one found him gifted. He got drunk and he beat someone up in a bar. He was pretty drunk, and he beat up this someone pretty badly. In the brig for six months, and then back in the world with nothing but an unclean record and a uniform he puts on from time to time to impress his girlfriend, or to remember how it was before it all got fucked up.

He can put together a grease gun, fire it off, break it down, just like they do in *Full Metal Jacket*, which he's always thought was a pretty cool film.

Once a month they used to run him eight miles with a full pack, and the last five times before the bar incident, he did it without puking.

He came out with nothing, and now this is what he has. A job for people he doesn't know, in a place he's never heard of, doing something that he doesn't understand.

They said something about diamonds.

They said something about mining.

He understands enough to know this means money, and danger.

But what does this boy see when he looks around the huge room? Some guys who look pretty dangerous, dangerousness of a different order to his own, a quiet brooding dangerousness that doesn't need to brag or announce itself. It is there, undeniable, true.

These guys, they don't look like people you can trust. Some of them don't look like people at all.

He watches them corralling the chairs and tables into herds, making clearings in which they lay down packs and sleeping bags. Already they seem completely at home in their surroundings, as if this spooky deserted call centre was their natural and preferred habitat. They don't look at him. They don't look at any of the younger men. They hardly even look at each other. They seem self-contained units, each with its own intention, its own business. But there is one they all avoid – no, avoid is wrong: the way they navigate around him seems more unconscious than that. Why is he so frightening? Something in his unmovingness, the way he seems completely embedded, folded in to the place in which he has put himself. How could a man be so completely relaxed and concentrated, focussed on something so private, when all this young soldier can think of is what waits for them, in Africa, the possibility of death looming around the corner?

Watching the man is like staring into a deep, deep chasm. Your eye moves away, it tries to protect you from the thing you don't want to see. It scans the room for something else, something it can deal with.

The Scottish trio lounging with their pile of beer cans.

The quiet, shaven headed guy who just seems to pack and unpack his bags.

The completely incongruous, shortish, plumpish man studying and fiddling with a drinks machine in the corner of the room... You watch him. Your eye is safe there. You watch him and hope that, soon, some of this will make sense.

* * * *

Sixteen months ago, this machine, the machine the young ex-soldier watches Darko van Couvering study, and three others like it, are in full working order. Each is capable of dispensing seven varieties of vile, hot syrup. They are poised at each door to the vast flat hell pit, ruminating, as employees pass by and stuff them with pocket change.

The hell pit is the place in which you work, an inestimably extended grey lozenge saturated with the insect fizz of fluorescents, sluggish air shoved by the air conditioning system over rank on rank of partitioned desks.

Shift is starting. It is seven forty eight AM. You are dabbing with an inadequate paper napkin at the acrid coffee you have splashed semi-deliberately onto your lap. You have been dabbing at the coffee on your trousers for almost two and a half minutes now, because you know that the best chance for a system crash is if you log in at around 8am. Much later or earlier and the chances are that you will be able to start work straight away.

Seven fifty one AM.

A crash will eat five to seven minutes of your working day, depending on the load on the network. Five to seven minutes is a considerable achievement in terms of calls you do not have to take. It might mean one call, it might mean more.

Seven fifty two AM, and thirty seconds.

While you are dabbing at the coffee with the napkin, which is now autoshredding itself against your inner thigh, the grinning hyena who is your Team Leader comes sneaking up behind you and slides the stats from yesterday's work onto your keyboard: the amount of calls you took; their duration; your total idle time, your total time in 'ready' mode, your total time in 'after-call work' mode... on and on, over a whole page of A4. The Team-Leader-Hyena is standing there grinning at you and at the piece of paper. You attempt to ignore both him and it. You put the paper aside and try to look busy with your beverage mishap.

The Team-Leader-Hyena never stops grinning, because this is how it has been taught. It has evolved the ability to communicate its wishes via subtle variegations of the permagrin. Now the Hyena switches the grin's direction to the coffee stain on your lap flecked with the pieces of decimated napkin you are massaging into it. The grin becomes somewhat more insipid. This indicates you should stop massaging napkin into your crotch, boot your computer and get on with your work.

Thus at seven fifty three AM you are forced to press the power button on your computer. It is not going to crash, and you will not gain five to seven minutes in which you could chat to the person sitting at the partitioned desk next to you, smoke a cigarette, or go to the toilet. Any moment now the first call of the morning is going to come rattling through your headset into your brain.

Meeeeeeep.

And then you know there's a caller on the other end of the phone, expecting you to say something.

This is the miracle of Automated Call Distribution.

You look on your display to see what kind of caller it is. There are different codes for regular callers and first-timers. There are different codes for each different product. Callers and products and codes, that's all there is from now for the rest of the day.

'Hello,' you say, and then you say the name of the company, and then you tell them your own name, and then you ask, 'How can I help you today?'

You wait to hear what they've got on their minds. If they're a bad tempered asshole or a good-tempered joker. Both are equally intolerable.

Then the improvising begins, and the handing off, and the passing on, and the lying.

Meeeeeeep.

Hello, Fujitsa Customer Services, how can I help you today?

The conveyor belt's running now, they come one after the other, straight into your brain, and you handle them like a machine, like they're a machine and you're a machine: you've been programmed to piss when the time is right, start talking when the signal sounds, move your mouth like you've been instructed.

They really do tell you how to move your mouth.

Between calls, you take a look at the stats left by the departing Hyena. They don't look all that good because, just like now, you've been trying to stretch the amount of seconds you can wait after finishing one call and accepting the next, the so-called 'Wrap time'.

You've also been lingering by the coffee machines, loitering in the toilets, and lolling in the corridors.

You've been doing all these things in increasing increments for quite some time now, and the computer in front of you has been grassing you up, spilling the beans, dobbing you in, timing your work and recording data about everything you do, estimating on its own incalculable metrics the 'quality' of your work. This computer is not your friend: it may 'wire you to the information revolution' and 'streamline your work practices', but those things are not good for your health. You have come to despise it. If you had a moment when no one was looking, and thought you could get away with it, you would take the butt of your telephone, the one that never rings since Automatic Call Distribution was installed, and ram it into the screen.

There would be a satisfying shatter, the pop of the vacuum tube filling up with call centre atmosphere, a pleasant glittering of glass, under the ranks of fluorescent lights, on the grey nylon carpet.

And by tomorrow the glass would have been swept up, there would be a new screen on your desk, and a new employee would be sitting in front of it, beaming, just like he or she had been told to, into the imperceptible flicker of the cheap, low-refresh rate, high radiation Samsung monitor, as the calls came in at a rate of one every five to seven minutes.

The computer would still be collecting data on him or her, piping it all to a fresh file and passing it obligingly to the raised box in the centre of the room.

They call this box the Hotcube.

Sitting in the Hotcube is George, a fucker who, as such, has recently been promoted. George's job is to monitor your calls, watch your times, and to listen in to what you're saying if he deems it necessary. George always deems it necessary.

At the end of the day, if you've been particularly good or bad, George will write you up in a report. Stay on a call longer than thirty minutes and your name goes into George's log. Sit in Wrap for longer than three minutes, and your name goes in George's log. Leave your desk without an appropriate code – your name's in George's log.

George hangs around in front of his screen, staring at it. When your name pops he swings into action, enthusiastically shooting off emails, calling you on your phone, informing team leaders and dashing off letters of warning.

Or there might be a beep in your headset, and it's not a 'customer', it's George on the line.

'Did we have a bit of a bad day, yesterday?'

'Fourteen minutes, twenty seconds in the toilet on Tuesday. Do we think that's a little excessive?'

'Your break yesterday afternoon was one minute and twenty five seconds over the limit.'

You will wish that George would drop dead in his fucking Hotcube, but it's a fact that George is thriving in there.

George will say, 'We can give you some assistance. Tomorrow Tim the Team Trainer will listen to some of your calls. He'll give you great and useful advice!'

This means you will have to listen to Tim the Team Trainer going on about the missing 'smile' in your voice, about how you're using forbidden words like 'problem.' (There are no problems in this world. There are only challenges.) Tim will annoy you by sitting next to you, or plaguing you with 'mystery' calls. Later he will present a list of your mistakes, your stammering during calls, the missing 'smile' in your voice. He will touch your shoulder and talk about how your attempts are promising, and how there's always 'room for improvement.'

Tim the Team Trainer will say all this because he learned it at the Total Quality Management seminars he attended throughout the preceding year. He will go on and on about this 'quality', and talk about things like 'total customer experience'. He'll never talk, of course, about the endless piped music queues, the fundamentally fucked products, the constantly increasing quotas, the mindless repetition...

MEEEEEP. Click.

Hello, Hyundo Corporation. My name is [your name]. How can I help you today?

Scatched on the underside of your desk is written:

INMATE IN THE JAIL OF TELECAL

It's there because you wrote it there yourself, one month and ten days ago.

In sixteen months and two days, a man who you do not know and will never meet, a mercenary soldier, sleeping under what used to be your desk, will read your carved inscription as he is waking up. Due to circumstances peculiar to that moment, he will not have time to even wonder what it means.

This mercenary will be the only person, ever, to even glance at what you wrote under your desk that day.

* * * *

The sealed crates of weapons which have been sitting incongruously amongst the empty water coolers and stacked office chairs prove too much of a temptation: someone prised the lid off a box of M16s one morning and squeezes off a round in the basement.

Trace has woken just before this moment and is looking with clearing eyes at something scatched under the desk he has been sleeping beneath. The report of the M16, incongruous in the deserted hangar, extracts him from his sleeping bag. He stalks down to the basement to make sure that all the M16s are accounted for, to put the nails back in the weapon crates and to collect a gun from anyone who might have one.

The someone who prised the lid off and fired the weapon has disappeared by the time he gets there.

The weapon is back in its grease. He puts the lid back on and secures the crate.

* * * *

The purpose of the call centre stay is to brief the assembling crew on the expedition. Men lounge on office chairs that buckle and distort under their weight; they range over the acres of carpet, listening to briefings given from makeshift pontoons on the sea of tiled carpet. There are projectors and rough screens made from stapled sheets of paper. Maps appear and disappear, aerial photographs, satellite pictures with rivers squirming across them like gristly veins, tapped by men they have never seen before, men who arrive with sleekly silvered notebooks, talk and click through PowerPoint presentations, then leave in cabs to God knows where...

The lizards are in a continuous, private conference that occasionally rises to a row.

Everything now is the plan, the plan: an insatiable appetite for information grips the men, as if in these anonymous surroundings the plan is the only thing that can give them any identity, any certainty. Men stop each other in corridors, roll each other over in sleeping bags, to ask, were you briefed today?

Were you briefed today?

What do you know? What did they tell you? Can you tell me?

No one is content with what he himself has been told. The demand for information is proportionate to the muted, generalised fear swelling everywhere. Men are lying awake at night, looking into the patterns of the Styrofoam ceilings, their only thought that with more or better information, a clearer picture of what's awaiting them, could solve all tomorrow's unseen fuckups in advance...

And yet each new piece of information seems merely to require another, because the thing they are zeroing in on is the unknowability at the end of all enquiry, death itself, and specifically the possibility of meeting with it in a dark piece of jungle. There's no quantity of knowledge that can keep you safe from death, show you the trajectory the bomb will arc in on, so that, at the last moment, you can step aside; no critical datum that will tell you whether, when the ground plumes, and the others fall all around, you'll be saved. You'll never reach this plateau of understanding you imagine; the information can't become knowledge, can't specify the land's contour, its swell and fall, what face the enemy will wear. So all the briefings remain mere words and images, never resolving to an object that can be seen and touched, oriented around; and each new piece of information only takes you a step further away from your imagined plateau, ratchets up the terror, galvanises the fear. The plans and maps pick out the outline of something insistently absent. Nothing you could know, no secret you could obtain, will help you to fill this gaping void. Not even if this deserted, decaying infrastructure, this monument to the delivery and dispersal of information lying everywhere dead and lifeless, ran again, not even if all these dead lines surrounding you were to bring the signal streaming in, sheer and strong, would you find something to shore you against the chaos, to base yourself on, to give you certainty.

The certainty you need, now, is not of that kind.

After all the plan is simple: you're going into the jungle to protect some geologists, mining diamonds.

You take them in.

You set up a perimeter.

You guard it.

You take them out.

And at every moment risk will stalk you from the shadows, as you lie there surrounded by razor wire, as you sleep in your hooch, as you gaze into the bushes, your gun nosing out into the darkness.

If there's an insurance policy that covers the likes of you, it's not one you could afford.

* * * *

At the end of each call, you have to ask: 'Did I provide you with an excellent service today?'

Did I provide you with an excellent service today?

Did I provide you with an excellent service today?

Did I provide you with an excellent service today?

You'll ask that just less than two hundred times in this ten hour shift, and not once will you give a fuck about the answer.

Did I provide you with an excellent service today?

Did I?

You have to ask this to a caller who had been holding for thirty five minutes enduring Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* squeezed through the receiver of their phone before their call was dropped and they had to call back and listen to the same thing for another eighteen minutes, at which point they got through to you.

The product they wanted to discuss, you didn't even know what it was yet: so you consulted the sheets for the thing, which were only placed on your desk by the Hyena this morning. Then you fobbed them off and promised to call them back.

Calling them back is a thing that you're not, in matter of actual fact, allowed to do.

In other words you lied barefacedly to get them off the line.

That's what you're paid for and that's what you do.

Did I provide you with an excellent service today?

Of course it is impossible to provide an excellent service because (and this is an open secret) the products that have been sold to these callers do not work properly, and never will. All of the troubleshooting, escalating, passing-along, finessing or fobbing-off is meant to occlude this systemic, basic fact and to support the illusion that, fundamentally, everything is functional, if marred by an absolutely unrelated series of *glitches*.

That is what the illusory 'team' dedicated to this product the caller has bought are for, these real experts who know this particular product intimately and use it personally, as a matter of personal preference, and are fully confident that, given the correct reconfiguration, or the supply of a missing, minor, part, or an engine check, or a flash of the thing's BIOS, the glitch will be ironed out, and it will work in exactly the gee-gaw way it's supposed to.

Without the ranked agents of the call centres, who knows but that all the glitches might coalesce into one massive ultrag glitch: and the consumers at the end of all the

unanswered phone calls might realise, perhaps during an inspiring peak of the very *Four Seasons* meant to distract them, that this ultraglitch extends all the way down, not just into the core of the product they've bought, but right the way down into The Real Thing itself, eating away at it, and who knows but that at this moment The Real Thing is revealed to a million callers at once as the rotted, cankerous Real Thing it is, all slapped over with makeup and bright toothy gleaming smiles, but rotted nonetheless and leering now at them with its rotted ghastly zombie visage?

And say this bright, toothy, rotten, gleaming-zombie truth was revealed? What, then, would happen?

If people, transported on the anger of the unanswered support call, cracked on to this idea of the ultraglitch, maybe no amount of customer service would be able to straighten them out.

Your real task, never of course stated in any job description anywhere (for the real tasks never are), is to delay the moment at which this mass, disastrous comprehension of the ultraglitch will occur (for the moment is inevitable), and to sit up straight in front of your screen, and smile! while you're at it. That's why, in the middle of your shift, each day, the Team Leader Hyena finds you slouched in your swivel chair, ogling your monitor with swollen, bloodshot orbs, grinding your teeth in great clashing, shearing revolutions, with your legs poised and juddering on their nerves, your plastic cuplet of acrid coffee sloshing freely onto your desk. It's the accumulating stress of suppressing the ultraglitch.

That's why as soon as the Hyena's back is turned, you'll jab the CTRL-ALT-DEL combination with rictussed fingers; your Windows(TM) machine will go into a paroxysm and restart itself. You will manage to smoke two cigarettes in the three minute break this gives you.

Everyone here uses the CTRL-ALT-DEL thing, when the weight of suppressing the ultraglitch becomes too much.

Some people can't help themselves and do it three or four times a day, and then they are fired. Others kick out the cables at the back of their computer and then the technician has to come round and fix it: ten minute break from the ultraglitch.

You have seen certain workers demolishing their headsets and computers and sabotaging their software by changing settings, removing essential system files and physically taking memory chips out of the machines. All due to the burden of the ultraglitch.

Things like this are happening with increasing frequency in the Telecal centre. These certain workers have been telling other workers how to do this. Still the weight of the ultraglitch is upon them. In five months time, something strange will happen in this call centre. This strange thing will become the object of more than one sociological study. It is what will lead to the Telecal call centre becoming empty and, eventually, to its empty shell being rented out to a bunch of mercenaries on their way to a newly democratised state.

The strange thing that will happen will later be called, by sociologists, psychiatrists and doctors, 'Telematic Hypertrophy Sickness' or 'THS' for short.

And the fear you felt in this place, the terrible fear brought in by these thousands of lines with their hundreds of thousands of callers and queries and complaints and unfathomable questions in fourteen different languages, arcing in from all over Europe, all over the world, the fear of these desperate tones, the massive cascades of information into your call centre, all to be dealt with and filed and, above all, deflected; all this will have its proper, insufficient name.

The crumpled faxes, memos, pink slips, sick notes that still lie around on the floor of the room will tell the story for months after you're gone.

The sick notes will have an alarming similarity.

Hearing difficulties.

Auditory deficiency.

Sudden onset of deafness.

The notes will look genuine and be signed by doctors and this will be because they, like the sickness they describe, will be genuine.

You yourself will fall to it in only three months' time.

You'll be in the middle of a call, and then there will be this massive sudden supping and all the noise will go out of the room, out of the world, out of your headset. You will smile because you won't be able to hear the person on the other end of the line, and all the more because the person on the other end of the line was the Team Leader Hyena warning you, with a permagrin in its voice, to keep your toilet breaks to time.

You will rise from your desk and stagger towards the door with its drinks-machine sentinel, and there will be tears in your eyes.

You are crying because you are about to walk out of this job and you have just this moment realised that holding back the ultraglitich was destroying you, organ by organ, from the inside.

You are weeping because there is something beautiful about the journey out of the room without the sound of call agents saying any shit that comes into their heads to another stupid caller on another line; because you hear no sales people ranting from pre-prepared call sheets like fleshy robots; because there is something beautiful about how the fluorescents shine now without their insect fizz, how your footfall feels on the grey carpet without the sickening deadened sound of its impact. There is something beautiful about how this whole channel of information, sound, just got cut out of your world. You'll feel like you wouldn't care if this channel were never restored. You'll still be blubbing with pleasure, with relief, as the Team Leader Hyena comes cantering up to

you with a violent, questioning grin on its face. You'll be bawling as you hold your hands to your ears and shake your head, and say, 'I can't hear anything. I can't hear...'

Then you'll start laughing, when you realise you can't even hear your own voice as you say this. That even this channel of noise has been cut out of your world.

You also can't hear your own laughter.

Telecal, the company you worked for, will try to hush it up. But fifty employees going deaf in two weeks is not an easy thing to hush up, even with all the experience Telecal has in information control.

They'll try to deflect their incoming calls to other call centres – but by some mysterious and unknown causality the sickness will be passed along with the stream of calls, and the employees of the next call centre in line will begin to fall deaf, too, not under the simple weight of calls, but under the subliminally felt weight of preventing the million glitches coalescing into one; and the next centre, and the next, until no one will accept Telecal's excess, because the other companies have realised their truly superstitious natures and come to believe that Telecal is somehow responsible for the transmission of an illness which could ultimately destroy the call centre industry.

Later someone will take out a class action against Telecal, and you'll get a settlement.

You'll get more money than you earned in the entire time you worked at Telecal, which will still not be very much.

Telecal will sack all its deafened workers without a moment's thought, but in the end they will have to give them all money. A lot of money. Enough money to nearly ruin the company.

With the last of its resources, losing business steadily, the company will employ new workers.

It will make them fill out complex assessment forms in order to establish whether or not they've ever heard of Telematic Hypertrophy Sickness, in case they too get the idea of falling ill to it. Any potential workers who are even suspected of knowing about THS are immediately barred from the selection process.

But Telecal is dealing with something it is not equipped to understand: it does not know, because the doctors and psychologists cannot tell it, that what underlies THS is the ultraglitch. As it ratchets up the pressure on the new workers, even tighter quotas and higher loads, cutting margins in an attempt to claw its way back to financial stability, the principle that rebelled against Telecal in the first place, will still be active.

The new employees' tongues will swell in their heads and they will no longer be able to speak into their grimy headsets.

They will be able to hear the calls alright, but they won't be able to answer them.

Beeeeeeep.

Hmmmoo. Vfff Ifff Mffff Hf. Hoo....

It is difficult to provide Excellent Customer Service with a tongue so large that it won't move in your mouth.

The huge-tongued workers will be escorted out of the Telecal building like poxy criminals. The sum that will be paid out to them will be the final ruin of Telecal, and the superstition that has by now accrued to the place will explain why it is evacuated, why no other company moves in to use its mouldering infrastructures, even a year later.

* * * *

O! pale worker! Oh ghost of a call agent! Come to us now, walk once again in this place. Let your ears hear again, so you may hear our questions, or let your swelled tongue shrink, so that you may answer! – There are no Team Leaders here any more, no Direct-to-Ear technology, and no calls for you to take. You are safe here, and must tell these scared soldiers what you know.

Tell them how no sheer quantity of information can ever conjure what they are searching for: certainty, an object at the centre, something that can be touched and held.

Tell them how useless to their aim is information.

Tell them what you learned as the deafness descended on you, as your tongue swelled in your head, what they truly already know: all the noise in the world, all the adverts and papers and conversations and magazine articles and reviews and phone calls, cannot make up for the fact that there is nothing at the centre of this giant construction – that there is nothing there but the absence of centre – an appalling vacancy, whose yawning margins we flee every day, for fear of admitting our complicity in maintaining a world that has no reason to be this way, whose shape is utterly, completely arbitrary.

Tell them.

Tell them about the ultraglitich.

How you journeyed to the dead centre of the world and discovered the void there, lined with call sheets and ring tones, strewn with headsets and telephones and processors and monitors, sucking in all the paraphernalia, all the corrupted designs and gestures, trademarks and brands and slogans, washing at its shores in scraps and tatters, the doggerel of signification, dashed on the rocks of what, ultimately, opened beneath your feet.

Tell them how at the pale horizon of your deafness, you discovered the acutest vanishing of meaning.

Your call centre was one part of the machine that ranked many hundreds of thousands of humans for a single intricate purpose, advanced through a million human

improvisations: suppressing the ultraglitch. Its final failure would be rest, plans' end, manuals' destruction, rupture of sense, the moment at which world reveals itself as balanced on nothing but world, a foundationless misery with one overriding imperative, to insist on its missing foundations: for if that absence were discovered! If that discovery ramified! Then oh! what could possibly keep all this in place?

Tell them what you knew the day the deafness came: that everything's returning to the surface now, the centrelessness exposing itself, the ground rumbling, the surface of things buckling: no army can stop the world from stripping itself back to subterranea, freeing the phantasms to walk once more. What was concealed will be bared, leaving us less than nothing, more divine than gods, no longer animated by these fantastic machineries, beyond refusal or contempt, divinely dissipated, skins stretching like drums' over the hollow world's whole frame, the impossible end of the infinite circulations, sense's production, of the awful inadequacies of freedom, of mind, of self; more strength, in the silence, for each and all of us than we've ever dreamt...

As these soldiers leave the place that you used to haunt, a ghost before dying, as all of us, tell them, as they face the interminable waterway of the North Sea, the vanishing flatness of this airstrip, the ground dark below, the air dark above, the water shining blackly, the sky a perturbed immensity of stained light; tell them that somewhere flight stops, sense peters out, ears come keen to the thud of the ictus; as death crowds them, as they glance toward their own inward directionless foreign shores, unsatisfied with what they know, hankering, fearful: tell them there's nothing that is or should be mysterious to them now: life's substancelessness is plain: everything's available to alteration, even death itself, existence's last inscrutability. Tell them their error: they are trying to prepare themselves for what they must meet with: another calculation, another addition to all this extant senselessness; useless against the absence of sense itself. The end of flight. The final impossibility of return.

the author

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