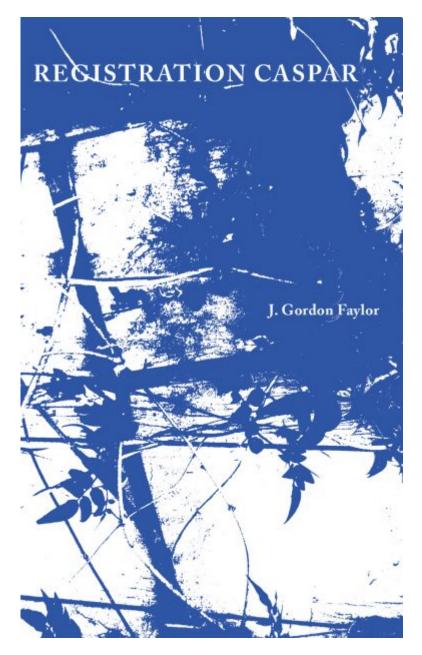# [Optic nervous](#)

written by Jessica Sequeira | October 5, 2016

For a long time, when I visited Silicon Valley, I thought of it as the locational equivalent of Musil's man without qualities. A 'not yet' place that rejects a fixed definition and essence, a place defined by what it does rather than what it is. Being from this place doesn't seem to mean too much, or least doesn't give one a solid sense of identity, as being from *fin-de-siècle* Paris might. Most people here are recent immigrants anyway, from some other nook of the world. This might be the condition of all places in the future, but here and now, it simply feels a bit like a white stage backdrop awaiting events — like being from nowhere, with access to everything but in essence nothing, the unbearable lightness of bitmap.

If this were true, the historian's or critic's desire to provide context might seem out of place, as if it were missing the point. Whatever happens already seems halfway inside the Internet, or the mind of some engineer, an abstraction that doesn't benefit from cultural analysis. An illusion, perhaps, but a convincing one, which the 'post-history' of technology encourages. Yet what if this very non-placeness, this non-humanness, could become the basis for a different literary approach? Lots of people here complain the software is in charge. What if it began to write the books too?

These were my thoughts as I picked up *[Registration Caspar](#)*, published this month by Ugly Duckling Presse. It was written by J. Gordon Faylor, managing editor of SFMOMA's *Open Space* and editor of the online publisher [Gauss PDF](#). Faylor, a sort of Bay Area Beckett, gives his book a basic plot, but this is only important at a secondary level, as its real innovations occur at the level of procedure. Via email, Faylor told me that many of his sentences developed gradually and endogenously (i.e. expanding from within), emerging from a practice central to his work in recent years, the palimpsestic treatment of spambot texts. He would find some hideously garbled and clearly automated spam or robotext, then try to 're-write' it from scratch, changing most of the language, and — more importantly — trying to structure it like a narrative to lend it the aura of coherent prose.

(Ugly Duckling Presse, 2016)

Sometimes these texts would integrate chunks of other novels in order to throw off Google's anti-spam algorithms, which abetted the process all the more. But the approach wasn't strictly applied or procedural, and Faylor made many adjustments and additions via his 'own' writing and life experience along the way, whether in the interest of rhythm, argument, conveyance, grammatical obfuscation or deictic play. A lot of the language also came from coding language and discourse (e.g. 'chaining', 'execution').

What all this means in practice is that while the structure of a sentence or paragraph might suggest a meaning, the actual words resist comprehensibility. Play of the eye and play of the word need not be foes, and some of the most interesting work comes from integrating them. Here, however, wordplay handily annihilates the visual. Extreme compression marks the style, a pure string of randomly generated phrases united by a falsely informal conversational tone, like someone chattering away to you in a language you don't know with a smile. When dialogue appears, it's stagy, full of kitsch

expressions like 'superstar' uttered by people with names that are either absurd or variations on Bob. Outré adjectives and verbal pyrotechnics abound, in pages that are anti-elegance and anti-sense, interested more in structure and echolalia than intelligent transmission. Chapter titles (e.g. the Kierkegaardian 'Chapter crumbs') form their own philosophical drama.

Here the text itself is the protagonist in its wordplay, tension, possibility and exuberant nonsense. In its attack on realism and rejection of simplicity, it is a modernist, difficult book, a kind of prose crust that constantly smashes together high and low, theorizing on itself. Faylor is not interested in personality, story or communication, but in something else, the novelty and complexity of language and structure, the process of incorporating new elements. The everyday is made strange, and realism with its 'sickly naturalist taste' (a meta-pertinent spambot phrase) becomes the enemy.

Like the cursed videotape in *The Ring*, Faylor's kind of writing both relies on the reader's participation and changes the reader during the experience. Since these are spambot words, sense only emerges through personal association; the private meanings I derive from two phrases located near one another on the page have more to do with my own past and experiences than with whatever is in front of me, let alone in Faylor's mind.

A reliance on the reader and her ability to perceive and forge connections is required here. Meanwhile, the writer dissolves or 'ghosts'. Alienation and impersonality are preferred to the subjective 'I', which in the view of the Faylorian philosophy is a holdover from the 19th century. (This isn't just Faylor's idea; plenty of other writers like Kathy Acker and Tan Lin have also explored this.) Nominally the writing takes on certain scenes based on Faylor's life, in reality it is totally impersonal and anti-subjective, an alternative to the inward-turning novel expressing emotional states. Are the little marks on the page signs for some greater meaning, or are they spam? Even if the latter is the case, in this world of writing, spam is never just spam. If Faylor were not Beckett, he would be Beatrice, guiding Dante through the Heaven of Spamwissenschaft.

In this sense, despite its 'non-placeness', perhaps California is a theme here, or at least a certain stereotype of California. For Wittgenstein, language was the distillation of an entire form of life, and the rhythm of a book and its structure could reflect a lifestyle. Perhaps this book is an anti-product of California culture, a rejection of the West Coast existentialism and its constant focus on the personal and emotional, which at best results in moving lyric works, and at worst dissolves into self-pitying New Ageism. Faylor offers an abstract, fast-paced silicon alternative.

Here, unlike in the founding texts of modernism, alienation is treated not as a profound cultural malaise but with a sort of end-of-world glee. Faylor seems to want not less but even more distance. This is a book written by someone who has read a lot of other books and doesn't want to write a parody of the past, someone for whom straightforward narrative has become dull. Faylor makes a fine gasket of his 'junk', in which machines replace humans in

producing the substance of the prose, while the human self becomes a sort of editing and arranging machine.

In this post-humanist vision, the question of the degree to which the text 'creates itself', and to which it is given shape through the organizational structures and associations of the author, becomes an interesting one. What is the ideal balance? And how should we even think about this? In terms of percentages (i.e. spambots do 75% of the work and the human author 25%)? The question of how algorithms and strategies can help us write or produce startlingly unexpected connections of words and ideas (i.e 'samizdat bioflora') is an intriguing one. Faylor's work has its critical equivalent in Stanford's Franco Moretti, perhaps not coincidentally also in the area. And there are other writers doing similar work, unafraid of new developments and finding technology to be simultaneously a highly sophisticated version of hell and a source of fascination.

The brain, however, may not be so happy to play along. In the morass of spambot prose, finely crafted though it may be, the eye is drawn to the subjective bits regardless, the parts written in a straightforward style that more or less makes sense. Is this something the brain does naturally, or a fault of mine in still giving so much attention to the lyrical first person 'I'? I suspect that like me, most people are naturally drawn to writing with a lyrical tone and greater degree of comprehensibility—a series of visual postcards, with trapdoors perhaps, a highly self-conscious realism. To read Faylor is to struggle against one's own tastes, one's own 'natural' preferences. But here, once again, modernist self-interrogation has a prepared answer: Should one expect to 'enjoy' a book as one enjoys a cinnamon-sprinkled plum torte? The text is trying to do something more complex.

Just as interesting than the non-lyricism of the text, I think, is the speed of it. Speeded-up prose reflects a whole philosophy, that of technology using and consuming itself. With technology, as we've all experienced, the way that one reads changes — the eye glides over the spiky phrases on the page, so one takes in material more quickly than one would, say, Proust. While reading, the eye skips, in a self-conscious parody of the way it moves while surfing (I prefer 'scampering'?) the web. In its gradual development and expansion from within, in its structure not pre-planned but organic and self-developing, in its 'palimpsestic' nature given to unpredictable layering, expansion and growth based on chance, *Registration Caspar* also contains an implicit element of slowness.

A rapid text created in layers takes a long time to actually put together. One could not have made up something like this. And so the time required to gather and arrange material forms a contrast to the frantic speed of the reading, and this is a jarring effect in itself. Faylor's sped-up prose is a kind of glitch aesthetics, in which there are too many patterns, information overload. Perhaps Faylor's own personality is what keeps the text interesting, despite his anti-subjective philosophy. What saved Beckett from the alienation of his modernism was the lyricism he injected, and what saves Faylor's text from looking like my 'Trash' folder is his conversational informality: a friendly good-natured tone that makes just about all things

possible, even the stringing together of spambot phrases.

I'm not sure that I understood all of Faylor's text, but it did make me think, especially about the question of what speed one desires to live at. What is preferable, a kind of ambling forward propelled by commas, linked to the speed of conversation and writing by hand, or the kind of speed only possible after the birth of the modern computer and the techniques of cut-and-paste? Haste is intensity, compactness, a smashing together of words that accrue unexpected connotations and provoke puns due to their collisions of ideas and language. Slowness is lyrical, visual, a smear of paint on canvas, a Gobelin tapestry work completed over years.

Just as there are people who desire to accelerate literature using technology as a motor for renovation, as in *Registration Caspar*, so there are people who hope to accelerate society as a mechanism for social destruction. What kind of people, with what kind of projects, hope to speed up society? And what kind of people, with what kind of projects, hope to slow it down? Perhaps the visual imagination is linked to a deliberate slowness, while the verbal imagination is linked to quickness, although I suspect most people have something of both. The juxtaposition of multiple speeds in a literary work — the varying rates of the process of composition, the textual confusion of the end product and the rapidity with which a reader is able to process — has an unsettling effect on the eye and the brain, making one ask once again what art is and what this work is trying to do. Faylor's spambots would look askance at these personal speculations, but I had to know. When I asked, he confirmed my suspicion that there is something else behind the work. 'While the Bay Area is and has been a place for the admixture of entrepreneurial ambition and artistic freedom and/or enterprise, the former has much more of a tightening grip on the area — the cost of living is soaring everywhere, as I'm sure you know, and life for artists has become ever more precarious,' he wrote to me. 'I sometimes can't help but think of *Caspar* as an angry text — and that anger definitively comes out of the economic struggles fomenting here.'

So it is. But again, this is just one element of the whole. Faylor was heavily influenced by the paintings of Mexican-born Californian artist Martín Ramírez, which are thinly stratified, segmented — mollusclike — and suggest original ways of peeling things away, scalloped hollows and infinite readings.
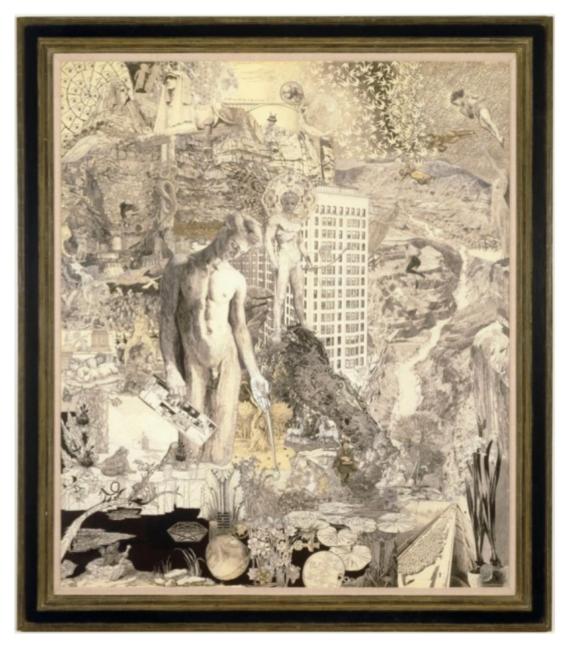
*

Driving north years ago along the winding road of Highway 1, hugging the Pacific coastline, I remember thinking how easy it is in a place like this to forget the world of technology exists at all. White foam presses up against the cliff face, and chilly beaten blue ripples in one great sheet. It's too cold to swim, it's always too cold to swim, but the bracing air smelling of salt and sandy grit feels sharp, and intense, and real. There are rock crabs snapping their little claws, birds with fantastic names (ashy storm-petrel, harlequin duck, wandering tatler, marbled murrelet) that bob about their business. The rough and tumble water casts black bracken and long strips of kelp onshore. One can imagine hundreds of stories of ships and mermaids

emerging from this place. What seems stranger is the artificial life that also sprang up here, making this its base of operations.

One of the people who made the myth and technology in the area his concern was Jess Collins, a quiet but influential figure in Bay Area artistic history who preferred to go by 'Jess.' After working on the production of plutonium for the Manhattan Project, he grew disillusioned with his government job and turned to poetry and art, co-founding King Ubu gallery. He would go on to create dozens of collages and paintings, including 32 'translations' recomposing images from scientific works and children's books to make them more vibrant, and somehow more themselves. His work drew on George MacDonald's Scottish tales, Pythagoras's esotericism, Goethe's color theory, Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, the poetry of contemporaries Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov, Jack Spicer and James Broughton and the events of daily life, among a host of other influences.

Visually, in many respects Jess did something similar to what Faylor does textually. Faylor's work is endogenous, operates with found material and has an unsettling 'flitting eye effect' for the reader in the contrast between the word-heavy quickness of his prose and the palimpsestic slowness of its making. Jess's work is similarly endogenous ('the meaning appears as the painting thinks itself into being'), operates with found material, and has an unsettling effect for the viewer in the contrast between the excess visual stimuli of his collage and its slow composition. But where Faylor is interested in the weird *detritus* of technology — spambots —, Jess preferred to play with the weird *predecessor* of technology — Victorian myth. Faylor's works aggregate spambot 'nonsense' to draw out the ghost of the method that preceded them, while Jess' works function in reverse, compiling non-technical sources in search of a different historical outcome.

Victorian myth is not the opposite of science but its forefather in attempts to make sense of the world, and Jess picked up its faith that myth may have something to tell us. He wasn't against technology per se, but did think it emerged from a wider variety of sources than one might expect. In the history of visual and literary Bay Area art, surrealism, Victorian fairy tales, magic and the occult have been influences almost to the point of parody, as if to be here, in this part of the world, requires one to take a strong creative stance against the supremacy of technologically-based reason. Artistic life in Silicon Valley has been defined by its complex attitudes toward what the area creates. The tech world here, which arose somehow from the wild Pacific Ocean, Santa Clara fruit orchards, pale blue Santa Cruz mountains and rolling fogs of San Francisco, is not an aberration, but it does demand a thoughtful response.

Jess' final work was *Narkissos*, an enormous drawing (177.8 cm x 152.4 cm) made from graphite and gouache on cut and paste paper in a found artist's frame. It shows an enormous, beautiful lover in the foreground, eyes shut and looking down, with a black-eyed cupid with bow in hand behind him. Further back is a city building, and all around is nature, a cliff face and giant gorge with water running through, populated by mythical figures. The work has a gold-crinkled, everything-separate-yet-unified aesthetic. One can see swallows doing flips, a serpent crawling up a column, a bird's wing, a crystal, dinosaurs, a San Francisco edifice, a peacock on a branch, eyes, a comic strip, more eyes all in a line, toads, Victorian bouquets of flowers. There is a gentleness to everything, although this is not a scene of pure nature.

Is the city being swallowed up by nature and the myths around it? Or is it emerging, bursting forth from that nature and those myths in an endogenous development? It's not clear, and perhaps it's not meant to be. This area, constantly self-mythologizing in the form of genius 'discoveries' by

particular figures in the industry and entrepreneurial breakthroughs, forges its own creation stories, even as it claims to be free of history and seek points of rupture from the past in the form of 'innovation'. Sensitive people have always lived here, both working for tech companies and trying to make it as artists, and the simple oppositions of the area, nature vs. technology, myth vs. science, are constantly being complicated and challenged.

When I visit the Bay Area, it still does not feel like my place, and I do not think it ever will. But I've come to recognize that it *is* a place, not Musil's man without qualities but an environment fueled by its own contradictions, intensely concerned with its relationship to technology, as both the source and the product of the hidden underlying forces preceding it. Jess's concerns about technological and non-technological creation are still very much alive, and his work is currently on display at the SFMOMA, where Faylor works. What Faylor and Jess are both doing, as I understand it, is trying to grapple with the area through a deep reconsideration of the language, verbal and visual, that composes it. The piled-up quickness and excess stimuli of their work, the product of a slow process of making and contemplation, creates a strange contradiction. Sped-up prose and detailed collage, combined with a layered process of making, serves to bewilder the eye, at the same time the brain slows down. This moment of deep processing becomes a point of origin to consider everything in an unfamiliar way, to look once more at the world and give all that one observes a new name.

Here is the poem 'Just Seeing' by Robert Duncan, a Bay Area poet and the artist Jess's lifelong lover:

        takes over   everywhere   before names
        this taking over of sand hillock and slope
        as naming takes over as seeing takes over
        this green spreading upreaching thick
                fingers from their green light branching
        into deep rose, into ruddy profusions

        takes over from the grey ash dead colonies
                lovely the debris   the profusion the waste
        here — over there too — the flowering begins
                the sea pink-before-scarlet openings
        when the sun comes thru cloud cover
                there will be bees, the mass will be busy
                coming to fruit — but lovely this grey
        light — the deeper grey of the old colonies
                burnd by the sun — the living thick
                members taking over   thriving

        where a secret water runs
        they spread out to   ripen

The inventor

There once was an old inventor who wanted to read faster. He tried all the usual methods to increase the speed of reading, attended a private school and good university and respected postdoctorate program, paid a qualified tutor. None of it worked, and he continued to read at the same pace. But this inventor was not easily daunted. He decided that if he could not make his brain go faster, then he would accelerate his eye. With a special contact lens that pulled the pupil back and forth, his eye was made to move more quickly over the page. This was only a superficial trick, he knew, but he hoped it would be as they said about prayer: move your lips, hold your hands together and belief will follow. The book he had chosen to read, however, spent twenty pages describing the unloading of merchandise from a boat, the cases of macaroni, the tins of tomatoes, the candles in bundles, with a level of description more suitable to a clerk's log than a novel. The improved quickness of his eye was entirely unsuited to the material before him, and this or that detail spaced widely in the description, particulars which by no right should have come into contact, blurred together in his mind. In his San Francisco office, the inventor switched his lenses for others that moved the eyes more slowly, but then he made the mistake of picking up a fast-paced thriller, and once again his eye grew confused. Tired of inventing, he removed the lenses and went downstairs for his weekly class in beekeeping. There he wound his way through the hives collecting honey at exactly the right speed, sticking tiny cursive labels on the jars as he made his way.