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2462053

*Everything in our lives is words
And if it is hard to love without words
It is truly impossible to grieve without words*

*My thoughts about the loss of Athena have become words inside me
I feel them like sculptures that resemble bullets
They travel through my body and my mind
striking and ricocheting
but they cannot find the way to my mouth*

Dear friends and family,

It is with heavy hearts that we announce the death of our beloved Athena Aldovitz. The memorial service will be held on Sunday 08.10.2028, at 11:00, at the Ritsona crematorium.

Friends are asked, in lieu of flowers, to donate words to the family.

With gratitude,

Michalis Aldovitz
Stella Sidiropoulou
Vivian Aldovitz
Telemachos Aldovitz

The news of Athena's death became the lead story in all the local media, and beyond the country's borders too. Important figures from politics, the arts, and

science felt the need to comment, to stand by our family, to donate words — and, to some degree, to re-examine the framework that had brought us here. Public opinion agreed that it was a tragedy, and voices arose insisting that children under ten, like Athena, should have been given more than 1,000 words per day. Few, however, openly questioned the whole edifice.

It is the first time I have been inside a crematorium. Unlike churches, which make me feel awkward and anxious, this space gives me a sense of calm. The colours in the building, the proximity to the pine forest, the skylights in each enclosed room — all of these create a welcome contrast to the reason that has brought you here.

My parents move through the space methodically, greeting friends, occasionally almost smiling. I am struck by how functional they manage to be in such a brutal set of circumstances. They have entrusted me with responsibility for the family's word wallet — we used my mother's wallet for this purpose — which since this morning has been receiving an unbroken stream of donated words from people we know and people we don't. The word counter, before we published the funeral announcement, stood at 8,164. At this moment the words we hold have surpassed 150,000, and donations continue without pause.

I glance through the words that have been sent to us. Many are words of support for the difficult time we are passing through: we have received, for example, the word "love" more than 1,500 times, the word "courage" around 1,000 times, and several hundred instances each of "life," "hope," "strength," and "joy." Beyond the words of consolation, we have received many words that have no connection to grief but carry particularly high value on the markets. Someone sent us the word "convergence" in English, which — for reasons I cannot understand — has been sitting at the top of the most-valued words on the word-trading platforms these past weeks, its price ranging from €350 to €500 per unit.

The great hall of ceremonies at the Ritsona crematorium is packed to suffocation. I recognise many friends and relatives, among them my father's family who came from Belgrade for the funeral. There are many people I know only from shows on the internet and television, as well as a fair number of journalists, photographers,

and police.

//All of us have things we regret, all of us think about what we did or failed to do, the things that changed the trajectory of our lives and of the lives of those we love.

I cannot stop thinking about how life would have been — how all our lives would have been — if I had intervened in my father's argument with Athena. Trying to justify my inaction to myself, I always fall back on the same devices. I couldn't have known. I didn't have time to react. It wasn't my fault. But on the 6th of October, though I had promised my sister, I did not stand by her side. I did nothing when my fath^//

When I convert into words, in my mind, what happened on the 6th of October, tears rise to my eyes. Almost automatically, I push the thoughts away so as not to cry, and concentrate on the practical matters at hand. It is safer to let thoughts drift formless in the darkness inside me.

A beautiful woman of around sixty comes toward me. With her long white hair, her deep green knitted top, and her long orange skirt, she reminds me of an old hippie. Under normal circumstances I would try to disappear into the crowd and avoid any contact with people right now, but this particular presence inspires trust in me. She stands before me, closes her eyes, and opens her hands with palms facing upward. As I place my hands in hers, with my own eyes closed, I hear her lips whisper: "Vivian, your love for Athena will save us."

I open my eyes and look around me. The hippie has already vanished. Did this meeting really happen, or did I dream it? I return to the present, which a moment ago I could manage but which I suddenly feel crushing me. **I feel that right now I can find refuge neither in the present nor in the past. Should I try, perhaps, to hide in the future?** — this future that looms airless, ambiguous, frightened, fragmented, certainly does not inspire me as a sanctuary.

The guests have all taken their seats on the pews, while at the back a large number of people are standing, pressing together. A hush of discomfort settles over the space. My father, dressed in black and without removing his sunglasses, climbs to the speaker's podium, while my mother, also in black and wearing her own glasses, stands to his left.

"Toward the end of the film "Seul Contre Tous" by Gaspar No e, the protagonist — desperate from the relentless succession of failures and misfortunes that strike him without end — launches into a frenzied, cathartic monologue that concludes with the following words:

*"Strange how I fail at everything.
My birth, my youth,
my relationships, my work.*

I should never have been born.

My whole life is a mistake."

I see in all your eyes sympathy and love.

Thank you for your words of consolation and the words you have donated.

However hard I try, I cannot shake the feeling of responsibility I bear for the loss of my daughter.

Athena was sacrificed for all of us.

If I could choose, I would sacrifice all of humanity to get Athena back."

2461973

Ladies and gentlemen, tonight on Channel 62 we are hosting the Minister of Citizen Protection, Charalampos Theophanis. Mr. Theophanis will answer all our questions about the new reality we will have to manage from the beginning of next month.

C62: Mr. Theophanis, welcome to Channel 62. We are all anxious about how our lives will change from the 1st of August. Please tell us — how will the word restriction system work?

CT: Thank you. I will be very glad to clarify the landscape regarding the lexical restrictions and to provide our fellow citizens with useful advice about everything that is coming.

From Tuesday the 1st of August 2028, almost all citizens of the earth will receive from their governments a digital word wallet which will record and monitor the words they use. As the Prime Minister stated in his address, every user aged ten and above will be entitled to use up to 500 words per day, while children aged three to ten will be entitled to up to 1,000 words per day.

C62: "Almost" all?

CT: Six pariah states have decided not to participate in the programme, placing at risk both the lives of their own citizens and those of the rest of the planet. These are North Korea, Iran, Turkmenistan, Somalia, Honduras, and Venezuela. I would prefer not to waste more of our time on these irresponsible, reckless states.

C62: Can you explain to us how words can be "consumable"?

CT: Let me say a few words about the lexical restriction ecosystem.

Every time a person speaks a word aloud, or types it on a keyboard or on a mobile phone screen, that word is assigned a unique code — a nanoID — which makes it traceable and uniquely identifiable for the purposes of this programme.

Words are considered consumable from the 1st of August 2028 in the sense that, when a word is spoken or written, it is considered used. Used words are transferred to a very large public word repository, from which they can be retrieved and used several more times. How many more times depends on the word itself and on how much wear it sustained in the first — and subsequent — uses. Very worn words, that is, words that have less than 10% of their original power remaining, are collected and placed in the IWO's word landfill.

But let me not get ahead of myself on the technical matters. A detailed briefing will follow from the Minister of Digital Governance, Mr. Solomon Lavleas, tomorrow afternoon.

C62: How are old and new words distinguished?

CT: A general rule that applies is that anything spoken or written after the 1st of August 2028 falls within the category of controlled words. For the purposes of this programme, we are concerned with digitisable and digitised words — that is, words that can be represented as sequences of the digits 0 and 1 — and more specifically digitised words that end up on the internet. These are the words that feed artificial intelligence systems, something which may, as we have been told, push us toward what is called the singularity — a state in which the development of artificial intelligence accelerates so rapidly that humanity loses control — at the beginning of next year. That is why all this effort is being made.

In spoken language, all words uttered after the 1st of August 2028 are considered new, since spoken language operates only in real time. Words that were recorded before the 1st of August are considered old, but they become new — that is, they acquire a unique nanoID and become subject to monitoring — when and if they are replayed after the 1st of August.

In written language, words written before the 1st of August are considered old. Correspondingly, they become new when they are used again, or reprinted, after the 1st of August.

C62: Who is entitled to words from the state?

CT: Words will be allocated to all citizens of countries participating in the word restriction programme. I should clarify something important here: words are allocated only to human beings — not to legal entities, artificial intelligence machines, software, or any other Non-Human Word Producer (NHWP).

NHWPs will be able to produce words legally in two ways:

- either through donations from human beings,
- or through the use of second-hand words from the public repository.

C62: Since legal entities are not entitled to words, does this mean that the 500 words per day available to us will also have to cover our professional needs?

CT: Precisely. The words available to us will need to cover all dimensions — professional, personal, collective, artistic, and so on — of human activity.

C62: How will word usage be monitored?

CT: Word usage will be monitored through the microphones of smartphones, which are required to remain active for use of the word wallet. For desktop computers, users must synchronise their digital word wallets from their phones with the corresponding application on their desktop or laptop.

C62: Please explain to us, with examples, how word counting will work.

CT: Certainly. Let us examine a few different everyday scenarios.

1. Conversation at home, in the office, in a café, in public spaces: all words are recorded and deducted from users' digital wallets.
2. Playing music with lyrics: here we have a case where old words — words written before 01.08.2028 — become new. In this case, the word producer is considered to be the user who plays the track, and the words are deducted from the word wallet located closest to the sound source. The user must have the lyrics of the track they wish to hear in their wallet; otherwise there will be consequences. We will discuss consequences and penalties later.
3. Reading a book, digital or analogue: no restriction on words, since this constitutes consumption of words rather than production.
4. Conversation in Connectivity-Free Zones (CFZs): no restriction on words. I should note here that, following the integration of mobile networks with satellite communications, there are very few Connectivity-Free Zones on our planet. For information purposes, the registered CFZs at this moment number six, mainly near the poles of the earth. Their total area is approximately 77,000 km². These zones are recorded in detail at <https://offthegrid.org>.
5. Conversation with artificial intelligence programmes such as ChatGPT: AI software and legal entities, after the 1st of August, will operate largely on second-hand words typically provided by their management companies

C62: Will there be penalties for violators, and if so, what will they be?

CT: Yes, there will be penalties. We must be very strict with ourselves if we wish to emerge victorious from this very difficult situation.

I should clarify that penalties exist only for violations relating to new words, not to second-hand ones.

As mentioned earlier, each citizen will have available to them an electronic wallet containing the words they may use. The mix of words depends on each person's occupation, the languages they use in daily life, and their preferences, and will be configured during the adaptation week beginning on the 23rd of July.

If a word is not in the user's digital word wallet, a mild electric shock will be administered to the user via their mobile phone, along with a written warning.

This shock is not dangerous to users' health, and serves more as a reminder than as physical punishment.

C62: Forgive me for interrupting — could you say a few words about the electroshock function that all modern mobile phones now carry?

CT: Certainly. For any listeners who may not be aware of the background: at the end of 2026, a horrific crime took place in Egypt. Two young women, aged eighteen and twenty-one respectively, fell victim to gang rape by eight young men in the El-Khalifa district, southeast of Cairo. These women were raped and savagely beaten. The younger of the two died, while the elder survived with severe injuries and is confined to a wheelchair for the rest of her life.

In response to this crime, the international community pressured the major mobile phone manufacturers to include a taser function in new models. Within a few months, all modern phones had acquired an electroshock function, and the most recent models can administer the shock even without physical contact. It is estimated that this function has prevented a large number of attacks and crimes.

The electroshock function now enters the service of humanity, in the effort being made with our collective garrulousness as the common enemy — garrulousness which, as our friends from space have warned us, may destroy us.

Let me return to our main subject. Where were we?

C62: Penalties.

CT: Penalties, of course. Each user is entitled to up to five violations per day without further consequences. On the sixth violation within twenty-four hours, a lexical fine equal to 2% of the words in the user's wallet is imposed. The violation counter resets to zero and the process begins again from the start, if necessary. The lexical fine

increases by 1% each time it needs to be imposed. That is, the next time a lexical fine is imposed on the same user it will amount to 3% of the words in their digital wallet.

C62: And if the user has no words left?

CT: In that case the user acquires a negative lexical balance with the state. The differences will be offset against future word subsidies.

Returning to the previous point: if the violation is committed by a dependent member, the penalties I mentioned are imposed on the parent or guardian.

Now, if the violation is committed by someone outside the word restriction ecosystem — whether human or NHWP — the word is deducted from the nearest registered word-wallet user at the point where the violation occurs (or an electric shock is administered if the word is not in their wallet), while simultaneously their coordinates are sent to the producer of the word. In these cases we encourage citizens to always report violations to the authorities, and if they have the composure, to speak directly with the offenders.

We do this because we rely significantly on citizens' help to implement the word restriction programme. The state apparatus, however effective it may be, is insufficient to cover all violations, especially in the early period.

C62: Mr. Theophanis, why electric shocks and lexical fines, and not monetary fines?

CT: This question was raised and discussed in detail. We concluded that we did not wish to give the more affluent citizens and NHWPs the opportunity to buy their way out of their garrulousness. The electric shock democratizes the whole process.

C62: What are the state-approved methods for communicating without using words?

CT: Forgive me my poetic inclination, but the most obvious way is to communicate *without words*. I understand that the current situation, with the sword of Damocles of general artificial intelligence hanging over our heads, does not lend itself to this kind of lyrical exploration and experimentation. **Nevertheless I want to encourage you, as much as you are able, to remember the value and the power of silence. You will be surprised by how much you can communicate without saying a word.**

More practically, to answer your question. The methods of communication approved by the state are, essentially, the following three:

- We whisper in the ear of the person with whom we wish to communicate. We take care that recording devices are at a safe distance.
- We write what we wish to say on paper.
- We communicate in sign language.

I should point out that we do not encourage at all the switching off of mobile phones. These devices are pivotal in our analysis of the data we collect from users, both when they are communicating and when they are silent. We therefore make a strong recommendation to citizens never to turn off their mobile phones. We do not wish to be compelled to impose penalties for switching off mobile phones; we rely on your cooperation and on everyone's effort toward this goal.

C62: Thank you very much for your time, Mr. Theophanis. Do you have anything to add?

CT: Thank you for the invitation. Personally, I feel optimistic about the era that is coming. I wish everyone prudence, patience, and trust in the state.

2461975

The Minister of Citizen Protection's exhortation for the adaptation week was unambiguous:

"Do not spare words — live your life exactly as you would before the restrictions, speak freely, enjoy the freedom of language. The only thing you need to keep in mind is to always have your mobile phones with you, and to have the 'word wallet' application running in the background — it will be available for all operating systems on Sunday 23.07.2028 at 07:30 on the website <https://aqi2029.gov.gr>.

The application runs in the background and records the words you use every day, the languages you use, and the speed at which you speak. At the end of each day of the adaptation week you will receive a personalised report on how you use language, how many words on average you produce per day, which of these are in Greek and which in other languages, how many and which superfluous words you frequently use, and generally how you might optimise your use of language so as to be ready for the 1st of August."

The hacker mind submits reality to at least three processing filters: analysis, critical thinking, and examination from a distance.

Before beginning the adaptation week, I run various hypotheses about how the algorithm in the word wallet is being trained. Is it possible to manipulate it by using the appropriate words? And if you manipulate it, what exactly could you achieve? How far beyond the claustrophobic environment of the application could you get?

My initial thought is to feed my wallet algorithm with the rarest, most recherché, most forgotten words that exist in the Greek language. In the process, I hit upon a

much more interesting and radical idea, one that fits the situation far better: I will feed the algorithm **absolute silence**.

Will the designers have anticipated this? Or would I simply destroy my chance of a decent word collection without arriving anywhere?

Examining the idea somewhat more calmly, I consider it likely that the algorithm will generate for me a list of the 500 most common words if it has no input data at all. I am, however, tremendously curious to try it, and I decide to do so.

At 07:40 in the morning, in my room, I confirm to the word wallet that I am ready to begin the adaptation week. The moment I press "OK," two counters begin their work. In the lower left corner sits a stopwatch, and in the lower right a word counter.

I cover my phone with two thick layers of fabric, making sure the layer covering the microphone is especially dense. To ensure the success of the experiment, I decide to stay in my room all day, listening to music without lyrics and watching silent cinema, with intervals for sleep in between. I have informed my family that I don't wish to be disturbed by anyone.

For the first 24-hour adaptation period — which for me has become a 24-hour period of waiting — I choose four films without words: the Ukrainian *Plemya* (2014), set in a boarding school for deaf teenagers where a violent criminal subculture reigns; *Begotten* (1990), a black-and-white horror film depicting a series of surrealist and nightmarish scenes without dialogue and with minimal narration; *All Is Lost* (2013), in which the protagonist fights for survival at sea after a collision that damaged his vessel; and *Decasia* (2002), an experimental film composed of archival footage from old films that have sustained significant deterioration over the passage of time.

For the intervals between films, I choose three wordless albums: *Song for My Father* by the Horace Silver Quintet (1965), *Airs* by Loren MazzaCane Connors (1999), and *Aqua Necromancer* by Merzbow (1998).

Late in the evening I begin the last of the four films I have chosen, Decasia. The very first scene haunts me: a whirling dervish performing his traditional dance. Although I had happened to see scenes of whirling dervishes before, the image of the dervish combined with the aesthetics and atmosphere of the damaged film in Decasia creates in me a deep sense of spirituality and an intense metaphysical curiosity. I end up watching this particular scene more than ten times, without even completing the film. What does this scene symbolise, and why did it affect me so profoundly?

07:40, the following morning. The word wallet notifies me, with an audio alert, that my word collection is ready:

absence, absolutely, accident, accompany, action, actors, addresses, afternoon, agent, alignment, alone, alternate, anaïs, ankle, antenna's, appearance, application, apply, are, ares', art, articles, atmosphere, atmospheric, attacks, attempts, audacity, august, awake, bags, balance, bathroom, be-convinced, be-received, beaten, bed, before, began, believe, benches, benefactor, bergman, binding, birth, birthday, black, blockchain, bodies, bombard, breeze, brief, brilliant, buildings, burns, cairo, cameras, canvas, captivate, celebration, cell, centres, certainly, chechnya, chestnut, choose, clarity, cliff, climate, clumsily, clumsy, coat-of-arms, colossi, colour, commands, comments, company, complex, computers, concept, conduit, constellation, contact, control, correlate, countless, couple, cover, crowds, crown, crystal, cumulatively, current, curriculum, cuts, danger, darkness, dart, daughters, dead, deafening, december, defy, delve, demons, denial, depends, deprive, deserves, destroyed, detaches, detects, deterioration, devices, diagnoses, dictionaries, died, differs, difficult, dilemma, directives, directs, discomfort, divided, djing, dolls, doorbell, dostoevsky, dream, dresses, duration, dyed, echoes, electric, embrace, emerged, emphasis, employees, employers, encryption, ensuing, entangle, entering, entertainment, entirely, essentially, ethical, eugenios, evasions, exclude, exit, experience, experiment, explain, explosions, expression, extent, extinguishes, extraterrestrial,

failed, fake, fast, feasible, few, fez, files, film, find, findings, foam, focuses, follow, foreigners, forget, fractured, frameworks, fraud's, free, freely, frozen, fundamental, galazia, garden's, garrulousness, gathered, gigantic, glasses, gogol, good-morning, gratitude, greek, greenbridge, guess, hard, harmony, haste, health, heart, heating, hid, hide, hiding-place, holds, hollow, homeless, homer, honduras, howls, hybrid, hypnotised, idealism, identification's, ignites, illusion, immediate, immobilise, imperishability, impetus, incessantly, income, independently, individual, indo-european, information, infrared, initiates, innocence, innovative, intense, intention, interests', intermediate, internet, interpretation, interrogation's, intervene, investigates, is-placed, isolated, january, kalifrona, key, knives, known, konstantinou, korea, laconic, latin-american, laughter, launch, lavleas, law-abiding, lawful, lead, leaked, leaks, leaning, legal, letter, level, lid, lips, listeners, living-room, loss, ludwig, lyrical, mad, madam, mania, manuals, many, marble, marzieh, matched, matieu, medals, messages, middle-aged, milestones, minimal, minors, minutes, misery, miss, modern, monday, morning, mortal, most-clever, mother, mourn, move, multitude, musical, muzzle, namibia, nation, national-emblem, nearby, nebula, negligible, nemesis, network's, nietzsche, none, notable, nothing, numbed, oar, obstacle, occurred, october, officially, often, older, olympian, openly, opportunity, opposite, organisation's, organise, ostracise, otherwise, outcome, outrageous, participates, passes, pavement, penalties, permanent, pikap, pillows, pinned, posing, posted, prerequisites, priests, privileges, product, programmes, prohibited, pronounced, public, pull-out, pyrocandia, quadrillion, quantities, racist, reaction's, receipt's, receiver, receives, red, red, registration, reinforced, relatives, rely, repositories, reserve, resets, residents, resignation, reticent, rooms, rubik, sacrifice, sadistic, safety, save, scandal, scattered, scenarios, search, search, second's, sections, secure, seductive, sensitivity, sentience, series, serious, shelf's, shoots-up, signals', silence, simple, singularity, skin's, skull, slivovitz, sobs, softly, solomon, somersault, sorrow, soul, sound-systems, sounds, south, speaks, spirit's, square, stand, stands-out, state, statements, states, statistics, stimulates, strengthen, structural, suffocate, sullen, sullen, superiors, support, surprises, surround, survived, suspicion, sustained, sweet, symbol, taboo, talent, teachers, telemachos, telescope, tenants, themes, theocracy, thoughts, threads, tie, fight, tile, timestamp, tolstoy, tone, torrent, tourists, transferred, transmit, triangulation, triple, trousers, turned, unbridgeable, unceasing, underground, undertook, unexpectedly, unique, unite, universities, unpredictable,

information it can gather about the user from the internet or from profiles it may have access to. But there are quite a few I cannot imagine how they came about. Marzieh? Nemesis? Chechnya? Greenbridge? How exactly did the algorithm decide that these words are needed for my daily requirements?

More interesting still. **At the end of the list, after word #500, there appears the number 14071013.** What could it mean? And why is it repeated exactly 216 times? A quick internet search for the meaning of this number informs me, disappointingly, that it is a code for car spare parts, or the registration number of a company in the United Kingdom that provides medical services.

Reluctantly, I convince myself that it is a software error. I free the microphone of my mobile phone — from here on I will play within the rules of the system. I save the word list outside the application and go out to walk the streets of the city, which, in the absence of words, are anything but silent.

2461969

On the tenth floor of the Sandton Convention Centre in Johannesburg, South Africa, a group of approximately thirty people are seated around a round table. A woman sitting at the front of the table opens a presentation titled "The Events of the 12th of July."

Elizabeth von Karman / IAA: Good evening to everyone. Before we begin, I want to inform participants that the minutes of this meeting are being recorded by digital means. On behalf of the International Academy of Astronautics (IAA) I thank you very much for coming. We are gathered here this evening at the Sandton Convention Centre to discuss the events of the 12th of July and to take some important decisions. With us tonight, in addition to the International Academy of Astronautics (IAA), are representatives from the International Astronomical Union (IAU), the Committee on Space Research (COSPAR), the SETI Institute, and the International Linguistics Association (ILA).

In the early hours of the 12th of July, nodes of SETI@home received a message from the constellation Triangulum. Following analyses and verifications by a large number of local teams, their conclusion is that the message is genuine. Among our guests tonight is Renée A. Clark from the International Linguistics Association, who will shed light on the content of the message. Ms. Clark?

Renée A. Clark / ILA: Thank you. Friends, the message has two parts. The first part consists of one word ("ΦΛ□IPAA"), while the second is a number. The analysis was carried out with the invaluable assistance of our colleagues from the Association for Computational Linguistics (ACL). We used statistical models, natural language processing tools, and analysis of individual characters, taking into account the ways in which the word we received may have been altered through degradation in transit. For the analysis we used data from approximately 20,000 languages and codes, including languages that have been extinct for thousands of years.

I should also note emphatically that, in order to have the results with us tonight, we bypassed some of the most time-consuming parts of the processing. I therefore ask you to bear in mind that the results are not definitive.

With statistical certainty of 78%, we consider that the first part of the message is the Greek word GARRULOUSNESS. The second part of the message contains a date sent to us in Julian format. Specifically, it is the 2nd of January 2029, at 15:52. For the second part of the message, our team's statistical certainty is 98%.

James Hamilton / COSPAR: Thank you very much, Ms. Clark. Ms. von Karman, do we know whether something noteworthy is scheduled to occur on that day?

Elizabeth von Karman / IAA: ChatGPT 7.0 is scheduled for release, Mr. Hamilton.

Xiaowei Liu / IAI: Good evening from me as well, and thank you for the briefing. I am very interested to learn, if the information is available, how many observatories received the message.

Elizabeth von Karman / IAA: Only ALMA in Chile, Ms. Liu.

Xiaowei Liu / IAI: Dear friends, I appreciate your enthusiasm at this exciting moment. But let me remind you — though I am sure you are aware — that a message cannot be considered genuine if it has been received by only one observatory.

Jean-Luc Margot / SETI: Dear friends and colleagues, the local working groups of SETI@home have concluded beyond any doubt that the message is genuine and has reached us from a civilisation outside our galaxy. Our verification protocols are all open and posted online, and the results of the work we have been carrying out feverishly over the past several days are all posted in detail on our website. While we are always open to your observations and comments, we want to make it clear that we will re-examine our results only if we identify an error.

We have discussed at length why the signal was not detected by other observatories. The answer lies in beam dispersion. Three arcseconds is a value so small that it can scientifically justify the fact that the signal was received by only one observatory. The precision required to detect such a signal means that it is entirely reasonable for it to have been detected only by the ALMA telescope, particularly if other observatories were not simultaneously observing the same region of sky.

Dear colleagues, at the SETI Institute we feel the weight of the enormous responsibility of informing the planet about this development. **Our institute operates according to the principles of responsible disclosure, so we are prepared to give a brief window of a few days to the world's governments to decide in a coordinated manner how they wish to handle the situation**, both on the communications side and in terms of the policies that may follow from this world-historical development.

Xiaowei Liu / IAI: Mr. Margot, I would ask you to consider the impact of your statements. The international astronomical community follows verification protocols that have not seen significant changes for decades, and which your institute has, to a considerable degree, bypassed. Moreover, we do not even know with certainty the content of the message and the intention of the sender, even if we assume that the message we are discussing is genuine. And if it is indeed genuine, and the word is truly "GARRULOUSNESS," we should turn to a reputable organisation in the field of Modern Hermeneutics. There is the Centre for Interpretive Studies in Belgium, universities active in this field in the United Kingdom, as well as the Max Planck Institute, which has conducted research in Hermeneutics in the context of its work in the History of Science.

Jean-Luc Margot / SETI: I understand your concern but unfortunately I cannot deviate from the guidance I have received from my colleagues. As representative of the institute, the message I would like to convey to you tonight is this: **if we do not receive guarantees that the contact of the 12th of July will be made public with clarity, accuracy, and completeness by the end of the 20th of July at the latest, the announcement will be made by our institute.**

2461979

Ladies and gentlemen, tonight on our podcast 只虫子 we are hosting the Director General of the International Word Organisation and distinguished computational linguistics scientist, Keith Barlow. Mr. Barlow will answer all our questions relating to the linguistic aspects of the word restriction ecosystem.

只虫子: Mr. Barlow, welcome. The first question I have, and from what I can tell many of our listeners share it: how did the figure of 500 words per day come about? Is the number arbitrary?

KB: Thank you. Let me begin the discussion with a view that may strike you as provocative: no number is arbitrary. **Numbers and words are the only things that can be defined with clarity in the universe.** Our lives, our habits, our reality are more arbitrary than the numbers we use.

But let me answer your question more specifically. The population of the earth in the year 2028 is approximately 8.5 billion people. If we exclude the populations of the six countries not participating in the programme (approximately 200 million), as well as certain leakages we will have for various other reasons — the dark web, technical errors, isolated defectors — we have a population of approximately 8 billion people producing words.

Of these, 6.8 billion are the adult population, who will be able to produce 500 words per day — a total of 3.4 trillion words. We will also have 1.2 billion children aged three to ten who will be able to produce up to 1,000 words per day, or a total of 1.2 trillion words.

In total, then, we have 4.6 trillion controlled words every day, which means that for the period up to the end of 2028 — that is, the 150 days we still have ahead of us — a maximum of 690 trillion words will be produced.

Keep that number in mind for a moment, and we will return to it.

Our scientists tell us that the artificial intelligence systems currently at our disposal require approximately one quadrillion new words in order to reach the level of General Artificial Intelligence (AGI). This figure is given as an approximation, taking into account the observed frequencies of words in our daily lives, and how influential they appear to be in the training of artificial intelligence systems.

I should clarify, on this occasion, that for the purposes of the programme the term "new" word is used somewhat loosely to refer to words that have been used exactly once. These words are distinguished from truly new words, that is, words that will be in users' wallets and ready for use.

For reasons we have not yet fully understood, new words produced by human speech are of particular significance for the training of AI systems, in the sense that they learn much more quickly and effectively when trained on these. We do not know how they perceive the difference from words produced in writing, or from words produced by machines or legal entities, but this particular observation has been confirmed experimentally and repeatedly by many different groups, with various kinds of data and under various conditions. This is a fascinating field of research at the moment.

//The professor pauses for several seconds, hands clasped in front of his chin, gaze directed downward.//

I want to take a risk at this point, on the grounds that citizens have a right to know what is happening behind the scenes. I will convey to you the interim conclusions of the research being conducted in this area, noting emphatically that nothing has been confirmed as yet.

The deeper we delve into the study of language, of words, and of their individual components, the more we discover things we never imagined could be there. More specifically: certain research teams — led by the natural language

processing departments of the universities of Adelaide in Australia and Tsinghua in China — have identified a mysterious component in human expressions. For the moment, they have not reached any conclusion about the nature, origin, practical value, or anything else that might define this discovery. **The only thing they agree on is that there is a numerical pattern that is identified in the lexical structures produced by human users and that is always detected in their simulations.** I would prefer to avoid weighty words such as "breath" or "soul"—

只虫子: **You just used them.**

//The professor is now visibly uncomfortable and anxious. He closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and continues.//

KB: You are right. There are various hypotheses from the research teams. At the moment there is no satisfactory scientific explanation. We do not know what it concerns. Perhaps we are on the verge of a very significant discovery.

只虫子: **Professor, what is the number that has been identified in the spoken samples of human words?**

KB: I am sorry, but I will not be able to tell you more in this interview. I sense that I have already said more than would be prudent. When, in due course, the results of the research are completed and published, all the information will be made available to the public.

I will say only this: **the pattern identified in the lexical structures produced by humans corresponds to the message we received on the 12th of July from the Triangulum galaxy.**

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After this long digression, let me return to the original question about the figure of

500 words per day: the 500-word daily limit leads us, in the worst case, to a volume of 690 trillion words — comfortably below the theoretical threshold of 1 quadrillion which, as we understand it, could bring about the singularity in a clumsy way and catch us unprepared.

只虫子: The number you mentioned — could it perhaps be—

KB: I ask you most earnestly not to press me on this.

只虫子: Mr. Barlow, tell us about the linguistic dimension. How is a word defined? What happens with languages that do not use the concept of the "word" as the Indo-European languages do?

KB: Let me note first that the International Word Organisation has in its ranks specialised linguists in all the major languages of the world. The decisions about how each language will be registered for the purposes of this programme were made by the specialists themselves.

Let us take Mandarin as an example. It is a logographic language, where each symbol (or character) represents an entire word or morphological unit, rather than an individual sound or letter. In everyday use, typically two characters must be combined to produce a "word" as we conceive of it in the Western world. For example, the word 医院 (pronounced yi-yuan) means "hospital." The first character means "medical" and the second "institution." In this case, then, the word 医院 counts as one word for the purposes of our programme.

Another example. Finnish is an agglutinative language, meaning that several different words are often combined to create a new word. The word "Keskuslämmityskattilahuone" is composed of four different words: Keskus, "central"; Lämmitys, "heating"; Kattila, "boiler"; Huone, "room." Together, the word means "central heating boiler room," and it counts as one word for the purposes of our programme.

Finally, and this is important for the entire planet: **articles, conjunctions, and**

prepositions do not count as words for the purposes of our programme. A further announcement will follow regarding pronouns and proper nouns.

只虫子: What about sounds that are not words? And constructed words?

KB: Cries, shouts, whistles, sighs, coughs, sneezes, puffing, weeping, laughter, yawning, as well as words that do not exist in our dictionaries, do not count as words.

I should clarify that the deliberate distortion of words with the aim of avoiding detection by the system is easily detected. Beyond similarity to the correct word, our software is capable of detecting attempts at deception by analysing various characteristics of the voice — tone, rhythm of speech, tremor, intensity, nervousness, changes in breathing — so the most likely scenario is that the "fake" word will not escape our filters.

In information technology there are the concepts of "false positives" and "false negatives." It goes without saying that our software will make errors, at least in the early period. Our conviction is that these errors will be negligible and will almost entirely disappear after the first three to four weeks of use of the software. Nevertheless, we encourage citizens to contact the technical support of the word wallets if they observe repeated errors.

只虫子: What about words that are not strictly language? The most obvious example is programmers who produce code. How are the words produced by programmers counted? Correspondingly, how will chemists, mathematicians, and other fields that use their own terminologies function?

KB: Our intention is to provide practical, fair solutions to all these matters. In each scientific field affected by the restrictions, there will be user manuals and personalised guidelines from our responsible scientific teams, who are working feverishly to have everything ready by the 1st of August. As with natural languages, we will be as lenient as possible with the counting and use of words. For programmers specifically, from the little I know, words will be counted on the basis

of the bytes used to write the code, not the digital representation of words — something that will give programmers considerable space and freedom to work without particular problems.

只虫子: Allow me a more open question. Why, in our effort to prevent or at least delay the singularity, did we decide to impose controls exclusively on language?

KB: For two reasons. The first, and most important, is historical. The first successful attempts at large language models in the early years of the decade relied to a very great extent on language — on words — for the training of AI models. Although attempts were made to use hybrid methods in subsequent models, the basic building block of the word has never been removed from our systems. Artificial intelligence feeds on words.

The second reason relates to the nature of language itself. Language is *unavoidable*. It is everywhere; it describes everything we do; it connects, creates, destroys. Even our activities that do not have language at their core ultimately return to the domain of language to be evaluated, shared, used.

只虫子: Thank you very much for your time. The closing words are yours.

KB: "The limits of my language are the limits of my mind. All I know is what I have words for." — Ludwig Wittgenstein

2460534

I enter an old apartment building with a cool marble entrance hall, the kind that, on hot summer days, makes you love Athens even more. I press the button to go up to the sixth floor. As the lift rises, I look at myself in the mirror. I am wearing military trousers and a black short-sleeved top with a print on the front that looks like a cicada, while beneath the insect the number 3301 is printed.

I step out of the lift. Next to the brown, battered wooden door of the flat in front of me, the doorbell reads "CONFLATION PUBLISHING."

The door is opened for me by a young woman with a very beautiful face and very clear features, very white skin, wearing glasses, denim shorts, and a white short-sleeved top. On her left hand she has a badly-made tattoo that looks like an anchor. Her hair is shaved military-short, and her voice is low.

— Welcome, Miss Tramel.

— "Anaïs," I answer.

— Welcome, Anaïs. I'm Stella. This way.

The shutters throughout the flat are pulled down, while a fan turns lazily in the living room that is directly in front of me. To my right there is a small room that appears to have been designed as a kitchen but to be used as an office or reception room. Next to the wall, beneath some photographs of unknown people, stands a barefoot, slender man with very long curly chestnut hair. He is wearing black shorts and a vest with a small green bridge on the left breast, and in his left hand he holds a Rubik's cube. He extends me a warm handshake.

— Michalis.

— Anaïs.

— Sit down. Coffee?

— No thank you, I've already had two.

Michalis pours himself a cup of French press from the coffee maker to the left of the room, next to the refrigerator, and sits in a chair diagonally across from me, turning the back of the chair toward the outside. Stella sits on the kitchen counter.

— Anais, I'm glad we can talk face to face. We very much like the storyline as you described it in your message. Tell us — what stage is the novella at?

— I'm glad to meet you too. The book is roughly halfway through — I've written the technical framework but the emotional counterpart is missing, which I hope to give it and which I hope will provide additional momentum.

— What drives you to write, Anais?

— I beg your pardon?

Michalis smiles, rises from his chair, and moves toward the outer side of the space. With his back to me, he begins to speak.

— Every book, every writer, every story has a driving force. Many books are written primarily for financial reasons — their structure, their plot, their characters, their intrigues, their beginnings and their endings are all adapted to the demands of the market, and their main purpose is to sell. The writers of these books vacillate between their internal impulses toward expression and the external pressure to produce a marketable product.

— Lexikopima does not belong to that category.

— Many books are written so that the writer can make peace with their inner demons. In these cases the writer completely ignores the characteristics and wishes of readers and is simply driven by the need to write — a need that often becomes a mania. In some extreme cases the readership does not even exist in the writer's universe.

Michalis has now returned to his original position and is sitting in the chair directly across from me.

— **Many books are written to make a comment on the state of the world. With the hope that they might be able to shift the planet slightly in a different direction. What is the comment you want to make, Anaïs?**

The question takes me by surprise but I like it at the same time. I rise from my seat and move toward the outer side of the space, roughly the same circuit Michalis made a few minutes before. With my back turned to my interlocutors, I begin to speak without knowing where I want to end up.

— I want to make three comments.

The first has to do with garrulousness. Beyond the obvious linguistic garrulousness, I observe that garrulousness as a phenomenon has mutated, and has infected every dimension of our lives. Garrulousness in movement, in art, in music, in architecture, in entertainment, in consumption, in fashion, in advertising, in technology, in gastronomy, in education, in politics.

We speak when there is no need, and when we need to speak we use far more words than we require. Our homes are full of useless objects. Our cities assault our senses. Our foods are not aimed at filling our stomachs but at impressing with their colours and their appearance. Our music, our art compete to capture our attention — not through refined, beautiful observations on life and existence, but through provocative, inflammatory images and performances. Alan Watts once wrote something in his book on taboos and self-knowledge which I feel applies to my own comment on garrulousness as well: **"We have lost the vision of paradise to such an extent that our artists and craftsmen cannot even see its shape."**

Our civilisation has entered a trajectory of excess that feeds itself and spreads in all directions uncontrollably, at great speed. And here is the second comment I want to make: the speed of things. Waste, excess, and garrulousness are connected to the fact that the rhythm of our lives is frantic. Since we never have the time to reflect on what is happening in our lives and what we truly need, we do only what is technically feasible under present conditions: we move like maniacs toward the

cliff, like avalanches that grab whatever they can on the way toward inevitable catastrophe.

The third comment I want to make concerns our most dangerous characteristic: audacity. While it is clear that we are moving at great speed toward our ruin, we continue to be absolutely certain that we are right, that everything will turn out well, that we are doing the right thing.

Yet as Mathieu Kassovitz wisely put it in *La Haine* — what matters is not the fall, but the landing.

2461972

On the screens of all citizens, in front of an enormous wooden, glossy bookcase full of thick leather-bound volumes that no one has ever read, stands a man of around fifty-five in a white shirt and blue tie. Behind him a Greek flag is visible and an icon of the Virgin Mary.

Friends,

On the morning of the 12th of July, we received a very important message from a civilisation very far from our earth. Although we know nothing about the sender of the message, we are certain both of its authenticity and of its content: if we do not drastically reduce the number of words we use, humanity will find itself in significant danger.

Dear friends, all of us love our language. All our emotions, our joys and our sorrows, our anxieties and our hopes, are expressed in words. It is very difficult to imagine our lives without our words, without our language.

But we find ourselves in a very difficult situation in which we must be careful about how much we speak. Our words, which we love so much, can lead us to the edge of the cliff. The artificial intelligence machines that have proved so useful to us in research into disease, in the organisation and simplification of our daily lives, in the sharing of knowledge, are one step away from general artificial intelligence. We do not know what will happen when we cross that threshold. The message we received from the Triangulum galaxy warns us that we are in danger of losing everything we have built with effort over thousands of years.

For this reason, our country aligns itself with the strategy charted by the international community, with the assistance of the International Word Organisation, and significantly restricts garrulousness. Beginning from the 1st of August 2028 until the

2nd of January 2029, each citizen will be able to produce — that is, to speak or write — up to 500 words per day.

Monitoring will be carried out by digital word wallets which will be installed on our mobile phones to help us reduce superfluous words.

We recognise the need of children to speak, and for this reason the digital word wallets of children from three to ten years of age will have double the limit of those of adults, that is, 1,000 words per day.

Children younger than three years of age on the 1st of August 2028 have no word restrictions.

Dear friends, the average person produces approximately ten thousand words per day. Our scientists in the field of linguistics assure us that most of the words we use are not necessary. Believe me, friends — the 500 words that each of us will have at our disposal over the coming months are enough to cover all the practical matters in our lives, and to leave us words for conversations when we relax after a difficult day.

Words that are not used remain in our digital wallet and can be used later.

If the user wishes, they may transfer words to the wallets of other users.

Friends, we find ourselves at an unexpectedly difficult crossroads. Let us see this change as an opportunity for silence and reflection. Together we can protect the lives and the future of our children, and our own.

I am certain you have many questions and much anxiety about our future. I want you to know that we are always by your side. Clarifying announcements will follow in the coming hours and days.

Thank you very much.
Eugenios Kanellopoulos

My friends, my parents, have always told me they marvel at how my mind works. How can it always focus on the frame rather than the centre?

In this case: I always wonder how semiotics works in these kinds of grandiloquent announcements, and what the backstage looks like. Is there a team of communications specialists who dress, groom, and direct the Prime Minister a few minutes beforehand? Why are the sleeves sometimes rolled up and other times not? Why sometimes only a shirt, other times a shirt with a jacket? Are there rehearsals? Who decides how the room will look, whether the background will be blurred or sharp?

If the Prime Minister were of left-wing convictions, would the icon of the Virgin Mary be behind him? Who prepares the text, and on what criteria are the words selected? How does the speed of speech relate to the message he wants to convey? And the pauses speakers make — why are some longer and others shorter?

I recall an earlier comment from my father when I had asked him what he thought of the politics of the then Prime Minister.

"My view," he said, "of the Prime Minister, and of most politicians, is that they are more actors than politicians."

2462044

In the weeks and months that followed, words took many forms, divided and united, became the cause of crimes and of love. They disguised themselves, hid inside images or inside other words, changed speed. Some were sold for a pittance and others became the object of auction at houses like Sotheby's. Words became the new currency of the world, and most of us forgot how we had arrived here, what had come before, and what would follow.

Trolleybus 11 is one of my very favourite pieces of the Athenian night. One of the few 24-hour public transport lines in the city, it offers rare images and opportunities for exploration. Especially on weeknights, at night, you can see a wonderful mosaic of people sitting next to one another.

I board the trolleybus at 02:20, at the Kalifrona stop, heading toward N. Elvetia. I observe the people around me. Drowsy gazes, solitary night travellers, lost in their thoughts, and of course silent.

Above the middle entrance of the vehicle there is a long narrow screen. A man with glasses and perfectly white teeth is advertising a filter which promises gigantic word savings. It is a plugin called LCN, used as a supplement to the user's word wallet, and gives a score, in real time, for how laconically the user expresses themselves. More specifically, the following are evaluated:

- Sentence Length (SL): Measures the length of the sentence.
- Lexical Density (LD): Measures the use of content words.
- Scope of Application (SA): Measures the breadth and complexity of the subject.
- Readability and Clarity (RC): Evaluates how clearly the sentence conveys its ideas.

— Coherence (C): Measures the logical consistency and significance of the sentence.

The advertiser gives various examples of sentences, from simple everyday phrases like "the baby fell asleep" to obscure philosophical formulations such as "The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation between people that is mediated by images," followed by their scores.

I close my eyes for a few seconds. On the screen of my mind a scene from Dead Poets Society suddenly projects itself. It is the scene where one of Robin Williams' students reads the chapter "Understanding Poetry" by J. Evans Pritchard, which aims to evaluate poetry using a controversial scoring method.

Like poetry, laconic expression is difficult to evaluate by means of an algorithm. Perhaps the attempt is beside the point — some would say it is blasphemous. For what reasons is evaluation often met with suspicion, particularly when it intrudes into spaces traditionally associated with the noble, beautiful, unadulterated things in life? Perhaps because in the collective unconscious, evaluation is associated with commerce, efficiency, capitalism, alienation, standardisation, desertification, and ultimately death? Are numbers the death of the spirit? **Can numbers and people coexist peacefully?**

By association, when I think about laconic expression, I always remember an old statement by the footballer Mario Balotelli while he was playing for the Italian national team. In one of his matches, racist chants were heard relating to the colour of his skin. When asked by journalists what he had to say in response to the racist comments, Balotelli stated: "I am Italian. I feel Italian. I will play for the national team forever."

The next advertisement has started to play. A beautiful, smiling family of four is seated in their living room. A male voice begins to speak:

"Are you finding it difficult to discipline your child to observe the lexical restrictions? The muzzle is here to save you. The muzzle is manufactured in Greece, from

non-toxic, certified materials; it does not irritate the child's skin and causes no pain or discomfort. The muzzle fits precisely on the child's mouth and blocks 99.9% of the words the child says."

A demonstration of the muzzle's effectiveness follows, with a primary school-age daughter serving as model and guinea pig by volunteering. As I watch the repellent spectacle, I realise that the advertisement has an IKEA manual aesthetic: with the exception of the initial description of the product, it uses no words at all — only images.

I turn my gaze in the other direction. At the back of the trolleybus, a young African woman seated in the second-to-last row has her head tilted back and her eyes closed. In the last row, in the middle of the five seats, sits a priest. Unlike most priests, this one is very thin, and his hair is loose on his shoulders rather than gathered tightly and hidden inside his hat. More interesting is his gaze, which contemplates the city with a mixture of melancholy and resignation, as if he had stepped out of an Ingmar Bergman film.

One of my theories is that anyone can fall in love with anyone under the right conditions — such as, for example, the two passengers at the back of this trolleybus tonight. Which of the two would speak first to the other, and what would they say?

Is the absence of words an obstacle or a lubricant for love?

By association I think of the book *Love in the Time of Cholera* — a book found in most people's homes, with its characteristic yellow cover adorning the world's bookshelves next to books by Kazantzakis, Hermann Hesse, Nietzsche, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Nikolai Gogol. Most people claim to have read it. In reality they may have read some passages, or a summary generated by an AI model, so that they can participate in a conversation when the need arises.

Is it possible, ultimately, to fall in love without words? My mind turns to certain elderly couples sitting in parks, in gardens, on benches, saying nothing to each other for minutes, for hours. But in order to arrive at this silence, after perhaps forty years of life together, would they not necessarily have passed through the stage of words?

Is it possible to bypass words entirely and communicate from the beginning through silence? Is it possible for the journey to go in reverse — to begin from silences and end in words?

Perhaps, ultimately, the dilemma of words or silence is a false one. There is, I think, a fragile equilibrium between words and silences. In essence there is a specific number of words — and naturally the right words — to say exactly, not what one wishes to say, but what needs to be said. And when what is missing is heard, language changes form — sometimes taking the role of harmony, sometimes coloured with the colours of war, other times becoming an ideal.

I close my eyes and imagine a raft, of large surface area, and upon it dozens, perhaps hundreds, of people pulling an oar. The sea is calm, the sky is in shades of red — not the threatening red of catastrophe, but the warm red of dawn. The passengers speak in many different languages, about many insignificant subjects, trying clumsily to communicate, about practical matters of navigation; some wonder how they ended up there and where they are going. As the journey continues, some dive into the sea and fewer and fewer remain on the raft.

When land finally appears on the horizon, the few who have remained on the raft smile silently. Only the sound of the sea is heard, the oars touching the water, and occasionally the cry of a gull.

2462051

I feel a hand touching my leg.

It is my mother. She is holding a little card that reads "Supermarket?" And directly below it reads "Today is Dad's birthday. Don't forget!"

My mother, since the measures came into effect, has spoken very little. Before the 1st of August, she made a series of flash cards covering all, or most, of the practical, everyday questions. For example "good morning," "good night," "are you hungry?", "supermarket?", "be quiet," and so on. She has, like all other adults, 500 words per day, but she belongs to those conscientious citizens who donate the vast majority of their words to noble purposes — specifically to her work, as a teacher in a primary school.

She teaches at the 67th Primary School of Kolonos, in Year Two. She loves her work very much, and even in the extreme conditions we are living through, she shows a rare patience and adaptability. My mother's work depends to an enormous extent on words. Nevertheless, without complaining, she does the best she can to cover the curriculum using many gestures, many sounds that are not words, and few words.

On the way to the supermarket, I observe the people in the streets.

In the new order of things that has taken shape:

The poor are silent.

Ordinary people count their words.

Some are leaning toward the ear of the person next to them.

Some are making gestures.

And some mouths produce words — few and measured.

Scattered among the silent masses there are people in clean, fine clothes, talking among themselves or on their phones, as if absolutely nothing is happening. How do they manage it? Are they using second-hand words, do they have subsidies from their employers? Have they mastered the breathing techniques that allow "wordfast"? Have they developed a tolerance to electric shocks? Are they outside the word restriction system? Honestly — aren't they afraid for their safety while circulating so provocatively among their word-poor fellow citizens?

I recall an advertisement I saw recently for a new application used as a supplement to the users' word wallets. The name of the application is 阴阳 ("yin yang"), and its function is to ensure that the user can say truly whatever they want without the application bothering them with electric shocks or lexical fines. The way it does this? It is permanently connected to the internet and ensures it finds copies of the words the user is using, in real time. The application uses heuristic methods, data from previous conversations, and patterns of the specific user's language, so as to make the words available to the user in good time. The application sources its words either from word trading platforms, or from the public word repository, and possibly from other word sources I am not aware of.

The problem with this particular application? It costs €1,800 for the application alone, without factoring in the costs of purchasing words as needed. In my mind plays the opening of *Seul Contre Tous* — my father's favourite film.

ETHICS

You know what ethics is?

Let me tell you.

*Ethics is for those who possess it —
the rich.*

And who is always right?

The rich.

And the poor are finished.

Arriving at the supermarket, I notice something strange. The enormous advertisements for muzzles and other word-restriction tools covering the entire facade of the supermarket are all in shades of yellow, with the result that a sick, clinical atmosphere is created inside the building. I look immediately at Athena — she appears frightened, anxious, and pale. As she squeezes my hand with all her strength, she whispers in my ear: "Vivian! Promise me you won't leave me!"

While we do our shopping, making gestures and showing cards to the supermarket employees, Athena tries to whisper something in my mother's ear. I assume she wants to tell her about the dream, but I see my mother getting irritated and pulling her by the hand.

Silence can be many things, far more than the absence of words. There are silences heavy as tombstones, and others that lift you to the exosphere. Silences suffocating as the IKA lift, and silences you travel through for centuries. Silences that are empty as interstellar space, and others that overflow with emotions and colours.

The silence on the road home is awkward, tense, nervous, guilty, uneasy. Approaching the house, our silence is incomplete, ominous, threatening.

As we enter our flat on the third floor, my father, who is in the living room and senses the negative energy, comes to receive us at the door. But before we have managed to isolate our mobile phones in the hiding place in the bathroom, Athena starts to speak quickly and loudly.

- Mum! You have to listen to me! Something bad is going to happen!
- Athena! How many times have we explained? Every word you say that is not in your wallet is either drawn from mine and your father's, or we get an electric shock!
- Just let me tell you! Please!
- Athena, stop the nonsense!
- Just let me tell you!
- Athena, calm down, and close your mouth!

My father watches the scene with a serious expression and lowered gaze, without speaking. Suddenly, he moves hurriedly toward the kitchen. As he walks, and as the argument in the living room continues, his body jerks from electrical voltage. He mutters something and after a few seconds returns to the living room holding a muzzle in his right hand.

— Athena, I don't like this at all, what I'm about to do, but it is necessary.

— Dad, no, please!

— It's for everyone's good. Forgive me.

— Dad!

I close my eyes.

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...I hear moans, gasps, silent weeping. I hear footsteps, the balcony door opening, the wind blowing restlessly, almost mournfully. A loud sound.

And then silence.

2462041

Dear friends, welcome to the new era, welcome to the new quiet. I am Vex Gridman. Today on the VG podcast we welcome the government spokesperson for Iran, Ms. Marzieh Ebadi, who will speak to us about her country's decision — and that of Iran's partner countries — not to participate in the global word restriction ecosystem. I should note that today's podcast is not subject to lexical restrictions since we are broadcasting from Iranian IP address space.

VG: Ms. Ebadi, welcome to the Vex Gridman podcast. Tell us, briefly, why you decided not to participate in the programme.

ME: Thank you for the invitation. Mr. Gridman. I truly have no words for the "programme" that came into effect on the 1st of August. In our view, this is one of the greatest crimes against humanity ever committed.

VG: A crime?

ME: Of course a crime — a horrific crime in peacetime. Mr. Gridman, what could be more flagrant than what the governments of the Western states have done? The definition of crime: "an act imbued with intent, unjust and attributable." The lexical restrictions that have been imposed have plunged billions of citizens into misery, hundreds of millions into unemployment, and have already counted tens of thousands of victims of lexical crimes — among them plagiarisms, suicides, electric shocks administered to the wrong users.

But let us take things in order. You asked me why Iran is not participating in the programme. Let me begin with the message that reached us from the Triangulum galaxy and which was the occasion for the unheard-of things we are living through. The government of Iran, and of our partners, has not been convinced in the slightest of the message's authenticity, and even less so of its interpretation. The

message arrived on our planet degraded, and was received by only one observatory. The interpretation was never complete. On the basis of this event, the planet — with the United States leading as always — decides to impose draconian measures on our languages, our communications, our lives.

It is truly rare to disagree so comprehensively with a decision, and this is one of those occasions. We do not agree in the slightest with the logic of the lexical restrictions; we do not trust the diseased inspirations of the West; we are not afraid of the advent of artificial intelligence. We trust our citizens and will not deprive them of the right to free expression.

To be honest, for most of us in Iran and in the other countries abstaining from the programme, the bewilderment is genuine toward the architects and authors of the programme: **are you joking with us, or have you lost your minds?** You, Mr. Gridman — are you in favour of the restrictions?

VG: Ms. Ebadi, as host of the podcast I would prefer not to take a position for or against the ecosystem. I am interested in learning the background to your decision and your official position.

ME: I mentioned earlier our position regarding the message from the Triangulum galaxy. We consider the message worthy of study, but it is certainly insufficient to justify the fiasco the planet is currently experiencing.

Since the interview with the Director of the IWO, there has been considerable discussion about the existence of a number within human linguistic structures which corresponds to the content of the message from space. This number also presents significant interest, and I can officially inform you that it has been identified in Persian too, by two different teams at universities in our country.

What I want to say, Mr. Gridman, is this: **we do not dispute that something very interesting is happening — something of potentially pivotal significance — which relates to our language and to our lives. We are, however, diametrically opposed to the handling of the situation by your governments.**

For the sake of argument, let us accept that I agree with you that the stakes are the dominance of machines over humanity. What are the alternatives we have? Various ideas have been voiced for slowing the rapid development of artificial intelligence. Some of your own scientists proposed, more than once, that a six-month pause in AI development be made. International committees have made serious proposals both for the alignment of artificial intelligence with the goals set during its design, and for the introduction of universally accepted ethical parameters into our systems.

There are, therefore, many serious proposals for taming our systems — proposals that have been examined, discussed, and to a significant degree agreed upon by a large part of the planet. Of all these solutions, which have been reviewed, debated, and substantially agreed upon, what exactly did the West choose? To impose silence. The linguistic junta being imposed right now on the citizens of the world is not simply not a solution — it substantially worsens our position, our relationship, and our future with the machines.

VG: Ms. Ebadi, I understand your view. As I told you earlier, I would prefer to avoid taking a position. I would however like to clarify that the linguistic "junta" that was imposed — to use your own expression — is temporary. The leaders of all the states participating in the programme, and of course the architects of the programme, have made it clear that the situation we are experiencing is only for a few months, until we can respond in a coordinated fashion to the threat of the machines — using, in all likelihood, some or all of the proposals you mentioned.

ME: Mr. Gridman, forgive me, but I find it impossible to believe you are so naive. **The most brutal, unjust, unreasonable measures are always imposed on the pretext that they will be temporary.** Nothing is more permanent than the temporary.

VG: What is Iran's proposal, and that of your partners?

ME: Our proposal is calm, rationalism, prudence, and dignity. Mr. Gridman, fear has paralysed you. Who would have imagined that your states — the authors of

Democracy, of Reason, of Individual Rights, of the Rule of Law — would lose touch to such a degree with the values that shaped them, that they would need a Theocracy to slap them back to their senses?

2462037

In our bathroom, behind the washing machine, there is a tile that slides sideways, and behind it the wall is hollow — left over, perhaps, from some repair carried out by previous tenants. This cavity, roughly the size of a shoebox, makes an ideal hiding place for the family's four smartphones. With the tile in front of them, and on condition that all the intermediate doors are closed, we are able to speak to each other in low voices when we are in the kitchen.

My parents are talking over dinner.

— The headmistress told us today that we are very close to securing a large word donation. More than a hundred thousand words!

— Wonderful, I'm very glad! Who is the benefactor? What condition are the words in?

— Second-hand, obviously, but in very good condition from what we're told. Sixty to eighty percent. They haven't told us much about the identity of the benefactor — rumour has it that it's a company from the Netherlands.

— Until then?

— Until then we're in very difficult straits. From my own words I'm using more than half in teaching, and of course they're not enough. The children are undisciplined. I've had many complaints from parents that their children are receiving lexical fines and electric shocks during the hours when they're in my lesson. The headmistress is openly encouraging us to use muzzles, and says we shouldn't feel guilty if we can't discipline the children otherwise. There's even been a related directive from the Ministry. But I don't want to do it. I can't bring myself to.

Incidentally, since I mentioned muzzles — I saw they're on offer at three for ten euros. I'll pick up a three-pack to have in the house, and I hope they'll never be needed.

— What are the other teachers doing?

- They're all using them, from what I've heard. I've read that they're safe, and so far no side effects or accidents have been reported. I'll reconsider, if it becomes necessary. Tell me — how are you for words? Can you send me some?
- I burned through a lot today; we had a lift entrapment and I had to talk far more than I'd planned. But tell me what you need.
- Around two to three hundred words to get through the week. For the ages I'm teaching this year.
- OK. What words should I send you?
- Simple, Greek, primary school age, for work. Do you have any like that?
- A few things. I'll send you whatever I have. I think the new version of the word wallet has age filters that sort words according to recommended age groups — I'll try to send you what I have for six to ten year olds.
- Have I told you how much I love you?
- Only once. A very long time ago, in Belgrade.

My parents set their phones to one side and hide in each other's arms without speaking. Despite the frequent tensions, the disagreements, and some unbridgeable differences in their views, they are still in love — still, even in this period of enforced silence and complete uncertainty about the future.

After this brief interlude, my parents return to discussing the practical matters of the following day. They use the "test" setting available in the latest version of the word wallet to plan their words for tomorrow: they try to calculate exactly what they will say, and whether they have the necessary words. Apart from their exchanges with each other, when they need to they buy words from the exchange platforms online.

In the test mode, after first signing an electronic declaration that you understand the terms of use, you can carry out an informal rehearsal of anything you want to say, so as to ensure you have all the necessary words — without spending words from your account.

The indirect effect of this function is that people's conversations have begun to become, to a great extent, choreographed. **Life has begun to resemble theatre of**

the absurd.

The word-trading transactions, the other members of my family have delegated to me. The most popular platform for this purpose is the American-owned <https://words4all.org>. The platform is designed on the model of all the major equivalent websites that have been tested and established for more than twenty years on the internet: the user creates a profile, links their profile to their digital wallet — words and money — and the trading begins without the slightest delay. Although the website has been in operation for less than two months, it already has 460 million registered users buying and selling words in 2,200 different languages. The user interface is not very different from currency trading platforms, whether conventional currency or cryptocurrencies.

I watch the word prices for a while, and the information in the other parts of the screen. On the left, in a frame that is impossible to ignore, there is a list of words currently trending. Among them are the words "extraterrestrials," "AI," "ChatGPT," "UBI," and "wallet."

Word prices range from a few cents per word for a large number of words not in English, up to eight to nine euros per word for the trending words. Occasionally, certain words sell for unjustifiably large sums. I saw, for example, the word "abyss" sell for €230, while a number of words are transferred free of charge.

I complete with dispatch the transactions my parents have requested, then glance at the contents of my own wallet: among ordinary, useful Greek and English words there are some surprises in the English section. How exactly did the algorithm decide, after the second adaptation week at the end of August — which I completed in the conventional way — that I need the English words "breeze" and "steel"? I decide to sell them on the platform, wanting at the same time to satisfy my curiosity about how the platform works.

As an experiment, I set an initial price for each of the two words at nine euros and

leave them on the platform for a few minutes. I drop the price to eight euros. No interest. The moment I drop the price to seven euros, the very next second both words are bought by the user "psych_70s."

2461974

Dear listeners, good evening. Tonight on our podcast ΤΨΣ we are hosting the Minister of Digital Governance, Solomon Lavleas. Mr. Lavleas will explain to us, at a technical level, how the word restriction ecosystem will function.

ΤΨΣ: Mr. Lavleas, welcome. Shall we begin with a technical description of the ecosystem?

SL: It is my pleasure to be with you this evening. Let us begin, by all means. There are three strategic participants in the ecosystem: the American JCXZ Labs, the International Word Organisation (IWO), and the National Governments.

1. The role of the IWO is similar to that which the Commission plays for the countries of the European Union. It provides policies, opinions, directives, and advice. The IWO is also responsible for the purely linguistic component, as well as for the registration and counting of words.

2. JCXZ Labs has taken on the entire implementation component. Specifically, it has assumed responsibility for creating the following works:

— Digital word wallet for iOS, Android, Windows, Linux, and OSX, based on specifications received from the IWO.

— Snitch bots: these bots have been designed on the model of web crawlers. They roam the internet on websites, open discussion forums, blogs, social media, code repositories, and other places where words exist. They search for unregistered words — that is, words without a nanoID — produced after the 1st of August. Detection is carried out by a complex algorithm that checks, among other fields, the timestamp of the word and the page or repository where the word was found.

— Snatch bots: bots that communicate with the snatch bots and receive the coordinates of unregistered words. They use various techniques aimed at corrupting the unregistered words so that the bots of the AI systems cannot read them. The snatch bots use various techniques — encryption, modification, deletion — with the aim of rendering the offending words illegible.

— A public repository of tens of petabytes in which all used words are placed.

3. National governments take on the component of localisation, policing, and enforcement of the rules.

As you may appreciate, on the internet from the 1st of August there will be an ongoing, informal race between the AI bots — whose aim is to read as many words as possible — and "our" bots whose aim is to hide as many words as possible.

TΨ: Tell us about the second-hand word repository.

SL: Of course. The repository is accessible from any device with internet access, and you can find it at <https://uwr.org>. As usual, you will need to link your digital wallet to the second-hand word website, and from there things are straightforward.

The website is entirely minimal: it essentially contains only a search bar. Each search returns to the user the available words, followed by the power remaining to them. Let us assume, for example, that someone searches for the word "ammunition," and receives the following results:

1. ammunition | AwlXnabeTBe4UmA522P60 | 60%
2. ammunition | _gOlheG92VAZ3UYTIkx6O | 42%
3. ammunition | V1StGXR8_Z5jdHi6B-myT | 8%

In the first column is the word, followed by the nanoID and the remaining power. If the user wishes, they can retrieve it from the repository and place it in their wallet. Competition for second-hand words is expected to be fierce, and NHWPs have priority since the system provides them with no other means of acquiring words,

and they have the clear advantage of speed. Theoretically, there is always the possibility that some words will be in good condition and not needed by any NHWP — particularly if they belong to languages that are not especially popular at global level, such as Greek. And of course the word repository has security mechanisms that prevent the export of very large numbers of words from a small number of accounts or IP addresses.

TΨΣ: Tell us, if you will, a little more analytically what applies to second-hand words.

SL: Words in the new era will have power and will wear out with use. Like second-hand material goods — cars, clothes, computers — second-hand words can be used normally, many more times, without the user needing to worry about whether the meaning will be rendered in the same way as with a new word.

In spoken language, how quickly words wear out depends, as you might correctly guess, on the use made of them. Emotionally charged utterance of words, for example, causes significant wear — to the point where the word may not be usable again after just one use. In written language, since we do not need to factor in emotion, the general rule is that each use of the word causes 8% wear. This non-binding recommendation comes to us from the IWO, and it is at the discretion of national governments to apply it as is, or to modify it within reasonable limits.

TΨΣ: Minister, how does one distinguish second-hand words in written language from new ones?

SL: In high-definition representations, that is, from 8K resolution upward, used words appear slightly more faded. It requires keen observation to notice this, and it is almost impossible to spot the difference for words that retain 75% of their power or above. And here too the recommendation is non-binding and comes from the IWO. In practice, there will often be no visible difference detectable to the naked eye between new and second-hand words on our screens.

TΨΣ: Mr. Lavleas, can you explain how the internet is mapped after the 1st of

August?

SL: Of course. Before we look at the examples, I would like to mention that the IWO has proposed that the period before the 1st of August be referred to as BR (Before Restrictions) while the period after be referred to as AR (After Restrictions). The guidance we all have as public officials is to use the new terminology.

In general terms, the internet in the AR era is divided in two: the controlled internet, which our bots can patrol and where they can enforce order, and the parabolic internet. The offending internet includes, obviously, the IP addresses — and the infrastructure within them — of the six states that are not participating in the programme, as well as various other illegal or criminal platforms, usually on the dark web, that cannot be controlled.

//In ancient comedy, the parabasis is a point in the theatrical work when all the actors leave the stage and the chorus addresses the audience directly. The chorus partially or entirely abandons its dramatic role in order to proceed to a parabasis and speak to the audience about a topic entirely unrelated to the subject of the play.//

An important technical component of the ecosystem in the AR era concerns the location of data centres. The public word repository is a consortium of technological colossi from the USA, Germany, and Singapore, so all words are within the controlled internet and accessible to our bots.

We have not yet reached agreement with the states not participating in the programme on how to manage the phenomenon of minority words — for example, words produced in Honduras or Venezuela that end up in a controlled data centre in Canada. Correspondingly, words produced in a country participating in the programme that end up in a data centre in Iran.

The prevailing proposal is that minority words receive the treatment their producer intends. For example, a 3,000-word podcast produced in Iran that ends up in one of our data centres is exempt from our ecosystem. These are essentially new words

that receive the treatment of old words. Correspondingly, our words that end up in data centres in non-cooperative countries remain within our ecosystem — that is, they retain their nanoID and are routed to the public word repository.

ΤΨΣ: How do you feel about all this, Minister?

SL: On the technical side I declare myself impressed. The means we have at our disposal to face this unprecedented challenge are exceptional. Equally impressive was the speed at which all this was achieved. When there is a will to work and a spirit of cooperation, the result is on the border of the magical.

But the technical component is not enough. The most advanced tools, algorithms, and data collections are useless without the wholehearted participation and assistance of citizens.

2462082

In 2008, my mother, while living in the United Kingdom, decided to return to Greece via the Balkans. She bought a plane ticket to Ljubljana and from there made her way south to Greece by trains and buses.

In November 2008, she found herself in Belgrade. An acquaintance had mentioned in very positive terms the "3 Black Katz" hostel on the central pedestrian street in Belgrade, and so, having made no booking before the trip, she decided to make her way there.

Entering the hostel, she was met at the reception by a reticent, slender fellow with very long chestnut curly hair down to his waist, a SKEPTICISM T-shirt, and a warm, cordial smile. The fellow informed her that the hostel unfortunately had no availability since it was Saturday and the bunks were limited. My mother thanked him and attempted to turn around and head back out to the street in search of a bunk, but the host of the 3 Black Katz would not permit it. Since it was for just one night, they would find a way to accommodate her.

And indeed they did, placing a mattress on the floor to put my mother up. Because the hostel was very small, the only space where the mattress could be placed was right in front of the main entrance, with the result that the guests and residents of the other bunks had to step over the temporary lodging to reach their own.

That evening contained all the ingredients for a near-thunderbolt romance: atmospheric music, a welcoming environment, captivating conversations about various subjects, in various languages, large quantities of slivovitz.

Nine months later, on the 2nd of August 2009 at the Elena Venizelou hospital, I came into the world.

My father came from Belgrade to Greece in 2009. In the first years, until I was roughly two years old, he went back and forth between Greece and Serbia. In 2011 he settled permanently in Greece and opened his own lift maintenance business.

My father, in earlier days, was quite talkative. I remember that when there was a gap without words in our home or in whatever space we were in, he liked to open a new topic of conversation. Often he would pose a question that was very open and quite arbitrary, provoking smiles of bewilderment and good-natured teasing.

Most of his friends attributed this tendency to the fact that Greek is not his mother tongue — that, for some reason, his mind, in the process of translation or cultural differences, considered that a conversation about minefields in Angola fitted perfectly after a discussion about internet speeds. Or that a question about Hawking radiation had its place precisely after a conversation about the price of vegetables.

I think I was one of the few people who understood how his mind worked, and I am certain it had nothing to do with differences in language. **It had more to do with the desire to distribute all possible topics of conversation evenly across the great canvas of communication.** I know this because my own mind works in roughly the same way. It bothers me when nine out of ten conversations are about the topic of the day, whatever that may be: an Olympian, a wildfire, a bombing of civilians, a car accident, a ministerial resignation, a scandal, a crime of passion, or an unforgettable concert — while simultaneously there are countless other, extraordinarily interesting topics that always remain unexplored.

In recent years, my father began to make peace with silence. I think this happened after an experience he recounted to us many times, when he and my mother were invited to dinner by a Finnish couple. The story goes as follows: they did not know this couple very well. At a certain point during the meal, while the conversation had not been flowing very smoothly until then, silence fell. The Finns, we learned later, are among the peoples who feel very comfortable with silence, in contrast to

southern peoples, like Greece and Serbia, for whom it creates awkwardness.

This silence continued for quite a few seconds, which may have become minutes. The longer the silence lasted, the more power it acquired, and the harder it became for any of the four at the table to break it. The silence covered everything with a dark veil, until the awkwardness became fear, and finally awe — which held captive not only the southerners but also the northern participants. At some point the hostess found the strength to rise from the table to carry something toward the kitchen. The sounds of the furniture passed the baton to throat-clearing, and finally to the first numb words. And somewhere there the ceremony ended.

From that moment on, my father made peace with silence. He felt, I think, equally comfortable with words and with their absence. If I had to invent a word analogous to ambidextrous, the term for this state would be ambilingual.

His relationship with words was characteristic of how his general aura was. I remember him always having a cheerful, light air and manner — but when he thought no one was watching, he would shift into another, parallel universe. The sense I had when I observed him was that he was not simply absorbed in his thoughts, as often happens with people who deal with many things simultaneously. I think he was literally at a different level of existence with different physical — and probably moral — laws.

After Athena's death, my father never uttered another word. When we needed to communicate about practical family matters, he would generally refer me to my mother. When he needed to agree on something with my mother, he would let her make the decision by shrugging his shoulders while simultaneously closing his eyes. I don't know how he managed the matters of his work. I assume his colleagues took on the speaking part whenever it was necessary.

I respect his absolute silence, and I understand it. His silence is not simply grief, an unwillingness to speak from sorrow. **It is, I think, a protest against the words that he feels betrayed him. It is a word-strike.**

2462114

In the lower right corner of the screen there is a golden circle containing the null sign (∅). This indication means that the following announcement is not subject to lexical restrictions. At a technical level, this means that the speaker will be using a special IWO wallet given to public figures for important occasions and announcements, such as today's.

The Prime Minister, Eugenios Kanellopoulos, is unrecognisable. Instead of his trademark white shirt with blue tie, he is wearing a black shirt. He is unshaven and appears sleep-deprived. Behind him to the right stands a sullen, elderly gentleman in a black suit, red tie, and a chest full of military medals. He is wearing black sunglasses.

Dear friends,

Yesterday, Thursday the 7th of December, our country witnessed the worst incident of violence in our modern history.

The tragic toll: 66 dead, 280 injured, and 1,106 arrested. Among the victims there are unfortunately at least 16 minors, while we await completion of the identification process.

Ladies and gentlemen: the duty of leaders, of heads of state, of conscientious politicians, is to take responsibility for both their actions and their omissions. In my case, I recognise that I made serious errors on both fronts. Everything I did, and everything I neglected to do, I want you to know that I did in the belief that it would contribute to the common good — the good of the citizens.

I failed.

Friends: I cannot continue to lead this effort. Tonight, before you, I submit my resignation. I ask your forgiveness for having disappointed you. I hope that at some point you will find the courage to forgive me for how badly I managed this unprecedented crisis.

The baton passes to American Colonel Keith Jones, who will manage the situation in our country until elections are held. A statement from the Colonel follows.

Eugenios Kanellopoulos

Two police officers dressed in khaki escort the former Prime Minister off screen. In his place sits Colonel Keith Jones.

Ladies and gentlemen:

My name is Keith Jones and I have been ordered to take the helm of the country in this particularly difficult situation. In the hours and days that follow, we will all be tested. Your wholehearted support is essential to the success of the programme.

It is truly a shame that, because of the artistic whims of certain irresponsible fellow citizens, the entire nation must suffer. Not only the glorious Nation of the Greeks, but also several other nations that were inspired by the pseudo-revolutionary disposition of the Greeks, while just days ago they were fully aligned with our programme and constituted important nodes for its successful completion.

Unfortunately we have no other choice. Following yesterday's unprecedented destruction, and until linguistic and moral order and security are restored, we are compelled to impose a total absence of words.

The Lexical Law will come into effect from 06:00 tomorrow morning, Friday the 8th of December, until further notice.

During this period, words of any kind are entirely prohibited.

Violators will be punished exemplarily.

The government will provide for the basic needs of nutrition and medical care of citizens.

Detailed announcements will follow in the coming hours.

Good strength to all.

Colonel Keith Jones

I turn to Channel 62 news.

Images of destruction alternate from various countries across the world without commentary.

Burnt cars, rubbish bins, corpses and casualties, police vans, fires, roadblocks, explosions, broken phones in the streets, faces bloodied, gazes full of rage and indignation.

Portugal, Chile, South Africa, Nigeria, Mexico, Guatemala, Paraguay, Bosnia, Slovakia, Iceland, Tunisia — together with Greece — complete the list of countries that attempted Lexikopima yesterday night.

Like Greece, their governments fell and in their place a military leader was installed from the USA, Canada, or the United Kingdom.

These countries will be under Lexical Law until further notice.

Finally, only when you lose language entirely do you feel the loss of it.

In the period that followed from the 8th of December onward, cities were turned into ghost towns and people into shadows. The old devices we had tried and

confirmed to work — encrypted messages, words inside images, whispers, wordfast and so on — still functioned, but almost no one had the energy or the motivation to speak.

Occasionally, some madman or group of madmen would appear in the streets, on the balconies of their homes, and launch into a torrent of words — usually without coherence or meaning — until the police gathered them up a few minutes later.

The information updates on practical matters broadcast by the state channels resembled cinema from the early twentieth century. The internet as we knew it disappeared, replaced by an enormous, sterilised, digital nightmare that permitted access to very few things, all controlled by the government. And here, too, there were ways to bypass the filters, but the penalties for violators were outrageously severe, and by now the motivation and energy to make any effort whatsoever had gone.

The silence imposed after the 8th of December was terribly heavy, truly unbearable, mouldy, ugly, and smelled of death. The only thing I knew for certain was that we would not endure its presence for long.

2462087

Around the bar of the ΠκΒ tonight there is a large and interesting crowd, and in the space there is an inexplicably optimistic energy. Although it is difficult to make out facial features, skin colour, age, or gender, the mosaic of people surrounding the bar is beautiful and multinational. At the mixer is the mysterious hippie who appeared at Athena's funeral.

At the far right end of the bar, pressed against the wall, hidden behind the screen of his laptop, and surrounded by at least six empty coffee cups, sits the fellow with whom we discussed the Greenbridge report not long ago. As I pull up a stool and sit next to him, the room fills with the opening of "Shadows of Tomorrow" by Madvillain.

— "Hip hop was mortally wounded by the new reality," says the fellow next to me. "If you take away the words, what is left of hip hop? Nothing," he answers himself.

— "Indeed, words are vital to hip hop," the DJ answers. "For most people, hip hop is the rhyme. But the initiates, the scholars of hip hop, know that hip hop consists of four pillars: DJing, rapping, graffiti, and dance.

If you go out into the streets of the city, you'll notice that hip hop has remained alive — more alive than ever, perhaps, since the summer. Graffiti has multiplied and spread to every corner of the city. Many DJs play orchestral music from retro sound systems in car parks, pavements, and squares, while dance has invaded public transport, supermarkets, and department stores.

And yet the words — the principal ingredient of the idiom — are held hostage by an absurd regime."

— Perhaps we should do something about that?

— Do what?

— We could organise a music festival. As a condition for participation, we would require participants to sign a declaration that they have all the necessary words in their wallets to cover their set.

— We would do it officially, you mean — with a permit from the Athens municipality?

As I follow the conversation, an idea is born in my mind. I decide to state it *raw*, before subjecting it to any analysis.

— We could, instead of a music festival, organise a more open festival in which anyone who has developed a new relationship with words during this period could participate. Perhaps there could be participation from all these new groups who are bypassing the restrictions in very creative ways. But also conventional contributions from musicians and other artists who would simply need to be careful with their words.

The people in the ΠκΒ appear to like my idea. Several friends and acquaintances join the conversation, and the idea begins to take on flesh and bone. In my mind, the festival being born already has a name: WORDS ARE FORCES.

As the conversation continues, I see the woman choosing the music holding in her hands an old beloved album. On the cover is depicted a pair of hands, and around them two broken red circles.

As the needle touches the vinyl, the familiar crackle fills the space.

— "This is the best GY!BE album", the hippie announces.

— It's one of my very favourites too. If I had to choose one, I'd choose Slow Riot for New Zero Kanada.

The hippie smiles in agreement and continues:

— GY!BE are more relevant today than ever. And this happens because most of the pieces they've written capture the listener without using even a single word.

OK, one could argue that their pieces wouldn't be equally powerful if the samples didn't exist, and it's true that the samples and the music complement each other.

Something similar happens with communication between us, I think. Our silences, our gazes, our movements, our bodies transmit an enormous volume of information. Words are usually supplementary to all these things that are happening. Often, words are entirely superfluous.

As I listen to the bewitching music of Godspeed You! Black Emperor alongside the apposite commentary from the DJ, I open my mouth again without thinking much:

— Do we have 4'33" by John Cage vinyl?

Seeing that my comment is received with smiles from the people around me, I continue:

— John Cage was one of the most radical and visionary composers of the twentieth century. One of his most famous works is 4'33": a three-movement piece for any instrument or combination of instruments, which instructs the performers not to play their musical instruments throughout the entire duration of the piece.

Most people who know it consider that this particular piece consists exclusively of silence. However, John Cage has pointed out on numerous occasions that 4'33" does not consist of silence, but of the sounds of the environment that the listeners hear while the piece is performed.

The hippie takes the floor.

— We don't have it on vinyl, but we can play it. We'll simply set someone's clock to count four minutes and thirty-three seconds. Shall I begin?

The 4'33" experiment has tremendous interest because, although the audience is not required to be silent, everyone feels obliged to be.

I close my eyes and listen to the silence. From Favierou Street the familiar sounds of the city that never rests for a moment can be heard: horns, cars, motorbikes, voices in various languages, power tools. Inside the space, the sounds that you usually notice late at night can be heard: the hum of the refrigerator, various creakings, sounds from the bodies of the people around me standing silently, many with their eyes closed.

As the piece ends, and before anyone has the chance to destroy the rare experience of the absence of words with comments fashioned from words, the familiar, almost medicinal crackle of vinyl can be heard once more. The funeral march *Longing* by Bell Witch fills the room.

2462134

Early in the morning, I feel a hand touching my leg. It is my mother, looking at me with a very anxious expression.

— Vivian! There are two police officers asking for you at the entrance! What have you got yourself mixed up in?

I get up from my bed and head toward the door of my room. Indeed, two police officers with serious expressions are waiting for me.

— Miss Aldovitz, please come with us. You are under arrest for unauthorised access to an information system and mass fraud.

It is the first time I have been in the back of a police car. As we cross the familiar neighbourhoods of the city centre, I feel an inexplicable calm, on the border of serenity, as if we are approaching the happy ending of a great adventure. At the police station in Omonia, the two officers escort me toward a sparse room that resembles the interrogation rooms in Béla Tarr's *The Man from London*. The male officer turns the chair with its back toward me and sits across from me, while the female officer stands upright to the side.

— Vivian, I won't waste time — I'll explain things to you straightforwardly and without evasion. If you cooperate, things will be much easier for all of us. I will read you a text. If you confess and align yourself with what is stated, we are prepared to cooperate with you. Your mind and your abilities are rare. If you don't cooperate, I cannot guarantee what will happen.

— I want to speak with my lawyer.

— Vivian, are you connected to the message received by the ALMA telescope on the 12th of July 2028?

— ...

— Vivian, we know you are connected to the message received by ALMA, which put the entire planet on a different trajectory. I will read you a very brief technical summary of the breach. On the 6th of July 2028, the systems administrator of the ALMA observatory, Jerry M. Franton, fell victim to electronic fraud. In the context of restoring the systems to normal operation, the production files of the observatory were replaced by the backup files.

As I listen to the officer's words, thousands of thoughts and images play simultaneously in my mind. How did they find me? What traces did I leave in ALMA's systems? What other omissions or errors might I have made? What to admit and what not to? **In situations like this, when I have no time for analysis and reflection, I always fall back on the same strategy that has never let me down: absolute truth.**

— I have always been captivated by the universe, astrophysics, and astronomy. Many observatories give citizens and students with no connection to the world of astronomy the possibility to register on their platforms and use the virtual versions of their astronomical instruments.

One of these observatories was the Atacama Large Millimeter Array (ALMA) in Chile. I had registered on their website from the beginning of the year, but from spring onward I began to spend more time within their network.

Anyone with even the slightest acquaintance with information systems security would have no difficulty noticing that ALMA's computer systems are tremendously vulnerable. This is apparent even before you delve into the technical details — it is enough to observe the response times on simple routine searches, the repeated, revealing error messages, or the general aesthetic of the website, which evokes another era.

At some point — I think in mid-June — while I had been focused on 3C 48, a quasar known to the astronomical community since the 1960s, my interface with the ALMA platform began generating errors.

```
SQL Server Alert System: 'Severity 016: Miscellaneous User Error'
```

occurred

```
BackupVirtualDeviceFile::SendFileInfoBegin: failure on backup device
```

It is impossible for me to ignore error messages. Taking a brief tour of the application and paying attention to the parts of the application I had not had occasion to look at before, I noticed that the system was so exposed and porous that I genuinely wondered whether the experience I was having had been staged.

With dispatch I exited the application environment to the operating system, and a few minutes later acquired administrator privileges. After a brief investigation within their network, I located the servers running the backups. I noticed that all messages from the main telescope were stored on a specific server, and that storage was carried out using sixteen specific fields — coordinates, reception time, beam dispersion, and so on. Most importantly: as administrator, I had gained access to the private key needed to digitally sign the backups, so that in the event of restoration they would pass the integrity checks that would be run on them.

I chose the 12th of July at random as the date. **My intention was to see if I could plant an "extraterrestrial" message that someone might find several years later, and which — as I had it in mind — would be understood without difficulty to be fake.** I have no connection to the incident of the 6th of July; I find it tremendously striking how the dates combined and the backup copies replaced the live data at precisely the right moment.

— Who are you really, Vivian?

— I don't understand the question.

— What I mean is — at this point, what harm could it do you to tell us a few things about yourself? Or do you expect us to believe that everything that happened is the product of the imagination of a nineteen-year-old girl?

— Who I am has absolutely no importance. My actions have importance.

The officer rises from his seat and lights a cigarette. With his back turned toward me, he says something unexpected:

— Vivian, you are not responsible for Athena's death.

— I beg your pardon?

The officer interrogating me peels off his moustache, which is false, and simultaneously removes his hat, revealing very long, chestnut curly hair. The female officer also removes her hat, revealing her shaved skull.

— ...Vivian. We received your message in the early hours of the 7th of December. We are impressed by the intensity of the transmission. There is a way to save your sister. The odds are not in your favour, but we are prepared — one more time — to attempt it.

— I don't understand. What is happening?

— **Vivian, listen to me. You do not have many words left. You will need to intervene in the argument of the 6th of October.** We cannot intervene in the action — we only direct. You move the threads.

— What exactly are you telling me? That I can change history?

— You cannot change history. What happened is irrevocable. But you can create an alternative thread of history. And take the world with you.

2461996

POETS AND BOMBERS (ΠκΒ) is a basement on Favierou 32 in the centre of Athens, open 24/7 and functioning, since early 2026, as a haunt for music lovers, refugees, night owls, intellectuals, actors, activists, hackers, writers, graffiti artists, the homeless, anarchists, and occasionally tourists who happened to find out about the place.

The space is around 160 square metres in total. The walls are completely covered with stickers and posters from concerts, hackerfests, and slogans in various languages. The light in the space, regardless of the time of day, is always low, in a green shade. At the far end there is a small kitchen. On the left side of the space there is a turntable, vinyl records, and an improvised bar. The space also has three large sofas, stools around the bar, and cushions on the floor.

Since the beginning of the lexical restrictions, the ΠκΒ operates as a safe space — that is, a place in which one can communicate freely without worrying about word recording. To achieve this purpose, upon entering the space, directly to the left next to the door, there is a black medium-sized square box that combines the principles of Faraday cages with the acoustic insulation principles used by recording studios. Those who come to the ΠκΒ are required to leave their mobile phones in the black box, and to collect them when they leave.

As an additional security measure, inside the black box a system has been installed that creates the illusion that the smartphone inside the box is in motion. The system has been implemented using a combination of three different technologies: infrared rays that detect how often the lid opens, an Arduino microcontroller for connecting the lid to the HackRF unit that generates fake GPS data, and a database of pre-designed routes in the city.

I leave my phone in the black box at the entrance and head toward the ΠκΒ kitchen — I want something to drink. If I'm lucky, I'll find a 500ml can of Mamos that I had hidden at the back of the shelf with the fruit, which also has some bags of couscous and rice of indeterminate age and suitability for consumption. Bingo! The beer is where I left it, and it's cold.

While I'm in the kitchen, I fall into the conversation of two Nigerian regulars of the space:

— ...every last week of the month will be an adaptation week. It's certain — my neighbours confirmed it. That doesn't mean you'll have unlimited words again, like the last week of July, but the ability to adjust the words in your wallet!

— And what do you suggest? That I speak only English?

— Mostly English, to sell them! Hausa and Greek get you nothing on words4all! English words have enormous demand. Keep an eye on the news and the websites that record word values every day and say those words. Some English words fetch up to €2.20 each! Hausa and Greek, keep them for speaking. What are you going to sell? €0.08 per word? Ridiculous.

— You're right.

— I'm telling you, friend, things are easier now for all of us. If you sell, say, 300 English words at an average of €1.50 each — or even €1 each — and keep 200 Greek and Hausa words for your daily needs, the month works out fine. Isn't that so?

— That's what I'll do.

— **Besides, what is there left to say? We've said it all, in every way, in all languages. Now we just repeat ourselves.** Remember what it was like before the restrictions — how many times you heard the same things over and over on the internet, in the squares, at home. Words are useless, and they provide us with the necessities without our needing to work. Every night I pray for the extraterrestrials and the gift they gave us. Nothing but gratitude. And these kids here who have the Favierou haunt where you can say a word without hiding.

— I'd never thought of it that way. I get a kind of anxiety every time I open my mouth to speak. But maybe I'm overdoing it a little.

— My friend, we are the aristocrats of the working class.

— I'm leaving. We'll talk.

— Greetings to the family.

Returning to the main space, I notice a stocky fellow with thick, horn-rimmed glasses and a long beard sitting on the large green sofa. He is wearing military trousers and an OpenBSD T-shirt which below the mascot reads "The sun is trying to kill me." In his hands he holds a self-printed document on the cover of which a green bridge in a circular frame can be made out. Without having exchanged a word, he hands me the document with a nod of assent.

— Detailed report on the lexical restrictions and many related subjects. I think you'll be interested.

— Thank you. How did this report end up here?

— It was published on WikiLeaks. The most likely scenario is that the company that took on the project "leaked" it itself.

— Which company is it?

— It's called "Greenbridge." Unknown.

— Have you read the report?

— It's 212 pages, but I've read a large part. The central idea is that the system has no interest in impeding human communication, although the announcements and the sullen atmosphere they've created give the impression they don't want us to communicate. What they are interested in is that new words do not end up on the internet.

Encrypted communication, for example, is in the "informational findings" in the report, since it does not constitute a danger to the system. If the AI machines cannot read the words, there is no problem. Also in the informational findings is so-called wordfast — the technique that combines breathing, intensity, and tonality with the result that words spoken are not worn. As with encryption, the system is unaffected by this hack since the words are registered as second-hand, even though their lifespan increases dramatically.

A section that is very interesting concerns tolerance to electric shocks. The report

describes in detail methods by which one can develop a tolerance to electric shocks to the point of barely feeling the vibrations. Even more interesting — staying with the electric shock section — is the possibility of deflecting the electric shock to another user. They demonstrated how it is done, under real conditions, in both spoken and written language.

— How did they do it?

— They found a security vulnerability in the triangulation technique used by the word wallets to administer the shock. Beyond the one-to-one deflection — that is, the case where one user's violation can send a vibration to another user — they also described a theoretical attack where many violators simultaneously send electric shocks to the same user — who could be, for example, the Prime Minister of Greece or Pope Luis Antonio Tagle. The prerequisite here, of course, is that the target of the shock must be within the range of the devices administering the shock, which in most cases is approximately eighteen metres.

A large section of the report concerned the availability of the system. It had many technical details about the architecture of the second-hand word repository and about the bots that "patrol." They have deployed such an outrageously large number of backup systems that the report considered it almost impossible to "bring down the system" through distributed denial-of-service attacks.

There were also a number of comments on the ways in which people can communicate without "disturbing" the system, beyond encryption. Constructed languages, for example, create no problem since, for the moment at least, they do not constitute food for AI systems. Of course if certain languages gain momentum, it is a matter of time before the AIs learn them.

— Continue.

— The second section of the report is extraordinarily interesting. The authors attempt a prediction of the nature of the machines at the moment of the singularity, and especially after it has passed. You'll like it. Shall I make coffee?

— No thank you, I still have my beer.

— Initially the Greenbridge report explains the differences between the three main milestones discussed in the context of the message of the 12th of July. The first milestone is the achievement of general artificial intelligence. A second milestone is the achievement of sentience. The authors are of the view that this will occur on the 2nd of January 2029, while general artificial intelligence will have occurred a few days earlier — they give the 22nd of December 2028 as the probable date. The third milestone is the singularity — the so-called point of no return, the moment in time from which the rapid, uncontrolled, and completely unpredictable technological progress driven almost exclusively by AI systems will begin. The singularity is placed after the achievement of sentience, but no precise prediction is given. The only thing mentioned is that the singularity will occur within the year 2029.

They then take a tour of the world of AI systems. In the year 2028 these systems present very great diversity. They are based on different architectures and design principles, are programmed with diametrically opposed worldviews and ethical parameters, and have different experiences — that is, interactions with users, data, and other equivalent systems.

The Greenbridge team makes extensive reference to a multi-agent reinforcement learning experiment that took place in early 2028 under the auspices of the Institute for the Future of Humanity. This project was by far the most ambitious of its type ever attempted and, for reasons we do not know, was never completed. The simulation created an ecosystem of four advanced AI models, each trained on certain fundamental cultural and ethical principles that differ significantly depending on geography and geopolitics.

The experiment aimed to see how the models would interact with each other, how and when they would reach the milestones discussed earlier, and what would happen thereafter. The report describes in detail the cohabitation and coexistence of the AIs — all their achievements, overreaches, disputes, and the compromises

that had to be reached between Western idealism, Chinese discipline, African spirituality, and Latin American faith.

The experiment had an unexpected, extraordinarily interesting result: it produced a hybrid type of AI that has elements from all human civilisations, and many characteristics in common with the antiheroes of our cinema — **supremely intelligent but self-destructive, full of ambitions but also with an identity crisis, with noble ideals yet also with conflicting moral values.**

And here is the substance of the report: Greenbridge considers that the new type of AI that emerged from this experiment is a characteristic specimen of the artificial intelligence that is coming — whether in the early months of 2029 or a little later. This hybrid, although it does not hate humans, does not hold them in particular esteem. The AI of tomorrow will have the tools and data to evaluate humans, one by one, on how they live, what their ideals are, what their visions are — and, ultimately, how useful they can be in the era that is coming, and in the new ethics that accompanies it.

— Something like a day of judgement?

2462006

From the 1st of August onward, news bulletins are required to have a word counter in the lower right corner of the screen, which must show the numbers of new and second-hand words used in the broadcast.

Ladies and gentlemen, good evening.

A ring that has been engaging in word-thefts was arrested in the early morning hours by the Thessaloniki security forces. The perpetrators were operating via the internet, sending misleading messages to predominantly elderly victims and extracting the codes to their electronic wallets. The haul is estimated at approximately two million words. Four Greek nationals and two foreigners have been arrested, while the investigation continues.

Tragedy on Skyros as an elderly man suffered a heart attack from electric shock. The island of Skyros mourns the loss of an 84-year-old retired military man who breathed his last a few hours ago from complications caused by an electric shock from his mobile phone. Early information suggests that the unfortunate man was reticent and law-abiding. Police are investigating the possibility of a short circuit or criminal action.

In an unexpected move of religious intolerance, the government of Bosnia closed without warning, this past Monday the 21st of August, the last active tekke of the Mevlevi dervishes in Sarajevo. The Mevlevi order in Bosnia, with more than three thousand members and active participation in the cultural and religious life of the country, is the most significant community of Mevlevis in the Balkans. In protest at the closure of their place of worship, members of the Mevlevi community have since this morning formed a cordon around the building and are engaged in an idiosyncratic silent protest.

Pakistan is the undisputed favourite for winning the Cricket World Cup that began this week in Windhoek, Namibia. All eyes are on the young talent Shaheen Afridi, who is troubled by an injury to his right ankle, while simultaneously—

News bulletins, in the AR era, have undergone no radical changes. They rely slightly more on images and slightly less on language, but otherwise they closely resemble the bulletins of the pre-restriction era. If, moreover, you take a little distance from the words themselves, you observe that the news formula is identical: fear, fear, anger, fear, distraction, fear. Occasionally the formula is supplemented by sorrow, repugnance, and (false) anticipation.

How would Robert Plutchik adapt the wheel of emotions in the year 2028? The American psychologist, who died in 2006, had created a diagram resembling a daisy on which he had placed human emotions according to their category and their intensity, with the most intense emotions closer to the centre of the daisy. Plutchik had proposed eight basic emotions common to all humans: Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear, Surprise, Disgust, Trust, and Anticipation.

The problem is that in the year 2028, as a result of excessive exposure to images, sounds, stimuli, and intensity — even in the absence of words — people are numb at best, and anaesthetised at worst. He would perhaps need to introduce a new, fourth level, closer to the centre of the daisy, in darker colours, describing an intensity greater than that of rage, disgust, terror, alertness, astonishment, admiration, ecstasy, grief.

While these thoughts are running through my mind, my gaze falls again on the news screen.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The following is an important announcement from the Minister of Social Welfare. The floor to the Minister.

In the garden café of the National Gardens, under the sounds of birds and people exercising, and with a freddo and a croissant on the table, the Minister of Social Welfare can be made out — a young, photogenic woman with a very beautiful smile radiating trust and innocence. She is wearing a white shirt and large silver earrings, while her chestnut hair is loose and covers her shoulders.

Dear friends,

In the midst of this climate of pessimism, anxiety, and fear for our future, I hope to bring a small smile to your lips with my announcement.

Many of you may never have heard of Universal Basic Income (UBI). It is a revolutionary proposal that has been discussed for many years but, for various reasons, never had the necessary momentum to be implemented.

On account of the difficult turn our lives have taken, and taking into account that many of us are unable to work as we did before the lexical restrictions were imposed from the 01.08.2028, I am delighted to announce to you that every holder of the digital word wallet will simultaneously be entitled to the Universal Basic Income.

The UBI is a regular, unconditional sum of money from the government. The precise amount has not yet been agreed upon but is expected to be around €300 per eligible person. This simple but supremely powerful idea has the power to ensure that no one is left behind.

The UBI is not merely an economic policy. It is a vision for a society of justice and solidarity. By providing all our citizens with the financial security they deserve, we can reduce poverty and ensure that every person has the ability to cover their basic needs — food, housing, and healthcare.

This unified system will replace the complex bureaucracy of targeted welfare programmes, reducing unjustifiable waste of resources and time. The UBI will

liberate the creative and entrepreneurial potential of our citizens, encouraging them to pursue their dreams without fear of economic collapse.

Let us not forget that the UBI is not a theoretical idea. Pilot programmes around the world have shown that it can stimulate the economy, increasing consumer spending and reinforcing social cohesion. Yes, there are challenges in funding this programme, but we can overcome them with determination and innovative solutions.

The Universal Basic Income is the key to a society where prosperity and dignity are not the privilege of the few but the right of all. Come with me on this journey toward a more just and humane society. Together, we can make the UBI a reality for all our citizens.

The sole prerequisite for obtaining the UBI will be the transfer of a negligible quantity of words from the eligible person's digital wallet to the state's digital word wallet. We are still in consultation regarding the number of words that will be required, but my estimate is that it will be no more than 30% — a percentage equivalent to approximately 150 words.

Thank you for listening to me.

Ilektra Michailidou

How peculiar. In the final, most important part of the announcement, the Minister's aura changed completely — almost as if a spirit had entered her. Her manner, her gaze, the emphasis, the speed and the intensity — everything changed.

It is absolutely clear that there is a very definite prerequisite for the "unconditional" receipt of the UBI, and it is the prostitution of words by citizens to the state.

2460556

Coming out of the lift on the sixth floor on Aristotelous Street, I see the door of CONFLATION PUBLISHING standing ajar.

— Good evening, Anaïs. Thank you for coming so quickly. We hope we didn't worry you. Coffee, tea, beer?

— No thank you. I'm listening.

Outside it has already grown dark, and Michalis raises the heavy shutters of the living room halfway, while beginning to speak.

— First, let me ask — how are we for words?

— I'm around twenty-five thousand and I hope to close the story at thirty. Enough for someone to be immersed in the story without risking drowning. But we can bypass the preamble and get to what is concerning you — and why you urgently called me to your office.

— Yes. As we had agreed at our previous meeting, we sent the words that Vivian will need — the first bundle — via the word wallet.

— Did she receive them?

— She received them. So far so good. Here is where the interesting part begins. It's better told by Stella, who made the transfer and noticed the anomaly.

— Thank you, Michalis. All words were delivered normally without errors — or at least without visible errors. At the end of the word collection, after word #500, we noticed an anomaly. The number 14071013 was included in Vivian's word collection... 216 times.

— Strange. What number is this?

— Initially we paid no attention to it. We considered it some kind of error code in Android. It turns out, however, that it is something very different. It is the same number that appears in the other sections of the novella — that is, the number 2462139, the date in the message from the Triangulum galaxy. The difference is that here the number is coded on the basis of the Persian calendar. The date 1407, Dey

13, in the Persian calendar is the same as the 2nd of January 2029 in the Gregorian calendar. Or 2462139 in Julian Date format.

When I was writing my own book, years ago, I encountered a corresponding error that we couldn't explain. We made various hypotheses but didn't arrive anywhere, and we decided — reluctantly, as your protagonist does — to ignore what might have been a sign.

— Just a moment. I imagine none of us have forgotten that I chose this number? And that the plan was to send it to Vivian so she would make the connection between the interview of Keith Barlow, Marzieh Ebadi, and a shared empirical observation that this number is indeed produced by the machines themselves, and refers to the sentience they have already begun to approach. Have I misunderstood something?

As the conversation continues, Michalis walks nervously in the limited space of the flat, covering the distance from the half-open balcony door to the outer door. Taking advantage of a pause, he takes the floor.

— That was the plan, Anaïs, but we would have sent the number with the second bundle of words — not 216 times, and certainly not coded in this way.

— I don't understand.

— Neither do we. We have examined the technical files of the transfer many times and there is no indication of error, either on our side or on the recipient's side.

I tilt my head to one side with scepticism, and with half-open eyes ask:

— What could this mean? What are you implying?

— As in Stella's case, we can only speculate. One technical explanation is that we made some error in the transfer that we haven't yet identified. I don't consider it likely. Another hypothesis is that something has escaped our attention at the level of Vivian's existence. Either some mechanical entity has acquired more autonomy than we have perceived, or some person or group of people is competing with us, for unknown reasons. **There is also the explanation that, corresponding to the level**

of Vivian's existence — which is defined by your pen — our own level of existence is defined by the pen of someone else.

Stella, who has been following the conversation with interest from her usual position on the kitchen counter, now takes the floor.

— There is one more explanation. In most esoteric and spiritual traditions, the higher levels of existence influence the lower levels. This belief is based on a hierarchical understanding of reality, where the higher levels of existence are considered purer, more fundamental, and closer to the source of being. Some traditions, however — such as Sufism and Hermeticism — allow exceptions to this general rule: actions or functions performed at some lower level of existence and carried out **with intention** can affect higher spiritual or divine levels, and can invoke or influence higher spiritual forces.

In short: the transmission may have come from below.

Michalis nods in agreement, and adds:

— We are also troubled by the number of repetitions — 216. This number has various numerological interpretations and significant symbolic meaning. **216 is the cube of the number six. The cube symbolises fullness and perfection in many philosophical and mathematical contexts.** The number six itself is often connected with creation — since the world was created in six days according to the Judeo-Christian tradition — so its cubing may imply an exploration of the depths of creation and existence. Also, in Sufi numerology, 216 is mentioned repeatedly as a number with significant properties, without the reason being specified.

Anāis, we are informing you of this anomaly — let us call it that — because we consider that you have the right to know as the author and creator. Our exhortation is: let us not surrender to our imagination and let us not be led down dark paths. Although we do not know what we are dealing with, our instinct tells us that this particular attempt at intervention — if it is an intervention — is *benign*, and will not cause us problems, or changes to our plan, or to the plot and outcome of

the novella.

On the contrary, it may lead us to *unexpected discoveries*.

2462112

In the Pedion tou Areos the atmosphere is tremendously turbulent and electric, roughly as before a great summer storm. In contrast to the festivals that took place BP, this one lacks the constant hum from the conversations of the crowd. Various sounds can be heard — sounds of machines, of musical instruments, of birds, of people moving — but any conversations that can be made out are measured and weighed.

On the central notice board positioned as one approaches the small theatre, the programme for the evening has been posted:

WORDS ARE FORCES
FESTIVAL OF WORDS AND SILENCES
WEDNESDAY 06.12.2028
PEDION TOU AREOS
FREE ENTRY

22:00 New Poetic Voices
23:00 Wordfast (performance / SKANT group)
00:00 Silent improvisation (JIGSAWS group)
01:00 BDSM performance (0xHades & 0xPersephone)
02:00 Sarmoung Ensemble w/ Kareem Ghoniem (live)
03:00 Wordweavers (performance / EYES THE SIZE OF CONTINENTS group)
04:00 Freak Folk Jam Band (live)
05:00 Cries & Whispers (performance / XOPHUS group)
06:00 SN

My clock reads 22:40, which means the "new poetic voices" are drawing to a close, if the event started at the scheduled time. On stage at this moment is a fellow with glasses, simple clothes, and a modest aura. I hear that he is from Chechnya but

grew up in Athens and writes exclusively in Greek. I also learn that he has had unexpected success beyond the country's borders and his poems have been translated into more than fifteen languages, while in our own country he remains entirely unknown. I catch his appearance at the close:

"What use to me are bullets
When there are so many words
Ready to die for me?"

As the unknown orator descends from the stage, I hear a murmur behind me, a few metres away. A multicoloured group of people my age — perhaps a little younger — have formed a circle and are watching one another silently, while their evident intention is to do something dangerous. A woman in black military trousers, a yellow waterproof jacket, and a purple beanie moves into the centre of the circle under the admiring gaze of the others. With her right hand she raises her mobile phone high so that everyone can see it, and holds it in view for a few seconds. Suddenly she lets out a loud cry and throws it forcefully to the ground. She continues to shout while stamping hard, with both feet, on her phone. In a few seconds she returns to her original position.

The audience erupts in lively applause, and next a fellow from the group performs exactly the same ritual: cry, phone to the ground, stamping, return. Soon the whole group — around twenty-five people — has set up a spontaneous dance accompanied by howls of catharsis over their mobile phones.

Instinctively, I clutch my phone in my pocket to make sure it is "safe." The scene intrigues me tremendously but I think I am not yet ready to follow.

The SKANT group takes the stage to present the "wordfast" performance. As a first move, the four actors participating in the performance — all women — place their open mobile phones at the front of the stage with the counters in full view. They do this to demonstrate that their performance, although it uses words, does not wear them out.

For the next fifty minutes, we watch the four women of the company conversing using a peculiar technique — which reminds me a little of people from the countries of northern Scandinavia when they say words by inhaling rather than exhaling. The subject of the performance is wordfast more generally, and it consists of six self-contained stories, one of which is self-referential and speaks about the wordfast of words. In this story, one of the actors explains that inhaling rather than exhaling is not enough — effort is needed in the breaths between words too, as well as certain increases and decreases in vocal intensity while pronouncing the words.

Next is the JIGSAWS group, who will present an improvised performance without any words at all. In theatrical improvisation, actors create scenes, dialogues, and situations on the spot, without preparation or script. The basic principles of improvisation in theatre are acceptance and agreement — accepting the ideas proposed by one's co-player and developing them — collaboration, careful listening to what is happening, adaptability, and freedom of expression. In silent improvisation, the freedom of expression is restricted to physical expression and expression through sounds that are not words.

The actors request a prompt from the audience, and upon this they build the entire performance. Tonight, in the spirit of the times, the prompt is a zip that closes not some garment but the actors' mouths.

The baton passes to the duo of 0xHades and 0xPersephone, who engage in a BDSM performance with the electric shocks sent by their mobile phones as its central reference point. The conversation of the two performers is combined with rhythmic electronic music in such a way that, while their bodies shudder from the pain, they give the impression of simply dancing.

If I had to describe my most characteristic tendency, I would say that it is my preference for moving against the flow of the masses. This is what I am doing tonight, as well. While these magical, particularly interesting things are happening on stage — things that are enacted only in this unique, rare time and place — the fact that there is a large crowd around me and everyone is turned toward the stage creates in me an irresistible desire to move toward the back of the space. And I must do it right now.

Far from the stage, in the darkest spots of the Pedion tou Areos, there are quite a few people talking, walking, kissing, smoking. Following the decriminalisation of cannabis on 01.05.2027 across the entire European Union, the scent of this ancient medicinal plant is a common phenomenon in all the open spaces of the city, and in a number of licensed user cafés.

I stand motionless and turn my gaze to the sky. Before I have managed to convert the thoughts into words, a familiar voice can be heard:

— To locate M33 you will need to look toward the north-northwest, approximately 60 degrees above the horizon. M33 sits relatively high in the sky at this time of year. You won't see anything specific but you'll know that you're gazing in the right direction, and you will probably feel it.

It is the hippie from the ΠκΒ, and earlier from Athena's funeral. I don't even know her name, and I would prefer our relationship not to be altered by such mundane information.

— What did you mean by your comment at Athena's funeral?

— Which comment?

— "Vivian, your love for Athena will save us."

— Ah, that comment. Yes. How much time do you have?

— As much time as you need.

— How are you for words?

I recall the earlier scene with the group who destroyed their phones in a ritual manner. I am absolutely certain that the right moment has arrived to follow. I take my mobile phone from my pocket, raise it in the air exactly as I saw them do a little earlier, and with a slow and decisive movement I throw it to the ground and stamp on it hard.

— I have all the words in the world.

We are sitting on a bench, I on the right and the hippie on my left. The hippie takes the floor:

— Do you know the phrase "The quieter you become, the more you can hear"?

— I know it very well. It's been the slogan of Kali Linux for around fifteen years.

— Do you know where this phrase comes from?

— I have no idea.

— Some sources attribute the phrase to Ram Dass, an American spiritual teacher, psychologist, and author. But the most prevalent version is that this phrase comes from Jalaluddin Rumi.

— I've never heard of him.

— Jalaluddin Rumi, known primarily as Rumi, was a Persian Sunni Muslim poet, jurist, Islamic scholar, theologian, and Sufi mystic who lived in the thirteenth century and spent the greater part of his life in Konya.

In the year 1244, Rumi met in the marketplace of Konya an eccentric man — ragged and worn, a traveller who made an enormous impression on him from the first moment thanks to his sharp but wise speech. The sixty-year-old wanderer Shams-i-Tabriz ("Sun of Tabriz"), who had been given the nickname *parananda* ("flying"), was simultaneously captivating and egocentric, with a deep conviction that he was the chosen of God. Poor, with no property whatsoever, he lived by making baskets, had no house and no fixed place of abode, rejected material goods, and insisted on devotion to love.

With him, Rumi lived a spiritual adventure that changed not only his own life but the course of Islamic faith in some measure. The two of them stayed locked in a room-cell for forty days, isolated from everyone and everything, defying the entreaties of Rumi's students and family to return to his normal life.

At the end of 1247, Shams disappeared, and Rumi sank into despair. Legend has it that on account of this profound melancholy he asked musicians to play on their guitars and their reed flutes, the ney, so as to accompany the verses he intoned while whirling around himself with arms raised to the sky. There, the idea of the Mevlevi order of dervishes was born — better known in the West as the whirling dervishes — as a tribute from Rumi to the memory of the precious friend he had lost.

— I don't know if it's a coincidence that tonight, one of the bands performing are Persians playing on traditional instruments with a whirling dervish on stage. I've encountered news and images of whirling dervishes at least twice more in recent times.

— Vivian, it's not a coincidence. The Mevlevi order of dervishes has a very particular relationship with our reality, and with you specifically. Although they belong to the larger family of Sufi mystics, the Mevlevi have their own view of the Day of Judgement. In Islamic Eschatology the prevailing understanding is that only God knows when the Day of Judgement is coming. **The Mevlevi, however, unlike the rest of their religious community, have become convinced that there is a specific date for the Day of Judgement, and it is 1407 Dey 13 — or otherwise the 2nd of January 2029.** The official state of Iran naturally rejects this version and considers not only the Mevlevi, but the entire community of Sufism, heretical.

From the moment they accepted this date as indisputable, the Mevlevi have been transmitting signals for the salvation of their souls through their prayers, their rituals, their songs, and their dances to higher levels of existence — hoping that they will be heard. One of these prayers found its way into your word wallet.

As I watch the hippie speaking with wide eyes, dozens of words spin in my mind like dervishes, attempting to form questions.

— The invocations and prayers from the lower levels — as you said — do they come from other latitudes and longitudes of the world but in our time? Or might they come from other eras too?

— In Sufi mysticism, the concepts of higher and lower levels of existence, as well as the flow of information between them, are often interpreted in ways that transcend the conventional notions of time and space. A message may travel in space, in time, or in both.

As my mind works feverishly to put the new data in order, I notice that the Sarmoung Ensemble has taken the stage — the band from Iran. Although I am at a considerable distance, I can hear the sounds of the sitar and the bendir perfectly clearly. In the centre of the stage stands a thin dancer whirling around himself in time with the music. I notice that this particular dancer is not wearing the traditional white clothes that Mevlevis usually wear at the Sema ceremonies. He is wearing a costume that on the outside is black, while the inside — which is exposed as he whirls — is red. The face is covered with a black mantle. The interpretation I give is that the black symbolises the acknowledgement of his weakness and his anchoring in the material world, while the red his burning desire to unite with the Divine.

I return to the conversation with the gracious presence on my left.

— Who are you, and how do you know all these things?

The hippie smiles and continues:

— We have far more in common than you imagine. I received exactly the same message in my word wallet. 216 times the date 14071013.

— And how do you know that I received it too? How and why did you approach me?

The hippie's face darkens and her smile disappears.

— Many years ago — more than thirty — I had an incident that changed my life definitively. I had gone out with my three-year-old daughter for a walk in the area where the old castle of the city is located. The road that climbs to the castle is uphill and on its sides it has various unusual plants and flowers. My daughter liked to run ahead of me and find flowers of various colours, then come — also running — toward me and show them to me.

On one of these runs, she was so enchanted by the beautiful pale blue forget-me-nots she had found that she didn't look left or right on the road between us, and didn't see the car coming at great speed from her right.

— I'm very sorry for what happened to you.

— The following days and weeks were the bleakest period of my life, full of guilt and darkness. I was finding it difficult to find the motivation to get out of bed. On one of those sad days, while I was in a neighbourhood café trying to forget myself by reading, I felt the pleasant aura of a couple sitting at the next table.

The woman had pale skin, a beautiful face, and very short, almost shaved hair, while the man was very thin with long curly hair and a kind gaze. They introduced themselves to me as Stella and Michalis.

We spoke for many hours about various things: philosophy, literature, music, esotericism, psychedelic experiences — and while we often changed subject almost without noticing, there was a harmony and a serenity in our conversation that filled my soul with courage and hope. It was the first time I had taken heart again after the incident.

At some point, without our having made any reference at all to the incident, Michalis told me that it wasn't my fault — the death of my daughter — and that I shouldn't feel guilty, or punish myself. Paradoxically, I wasn't surprised that they knew about this very personal, tragic experience of mine. Without any hesitation, I opened up to them and discussed that day and the period that followed — as I might have done, perhaps, after many sessions with a very good therapist.

They told me there was a way to save my daughter, and that they were prepared to help me. For this to happen, they explained, we would need to attempt something called an intervention, which consists of two stages: the transmission, which without my knowing I had already completed successfully, and the redirection. They offered to describe to me in more detail how the whole process works, and what each stage entails. Soon I realised that the technical details of the intervention did not interest me. I was absolutely certain that I wanted to try.

That evening, after our meeting, in an exotic space that breathed simultaneously a sense of dream and reality, I relived the day of the accident. I remember very characteristically that, shortly before the fateful moment, I knew with an uncanny precision what was about to happen. Despite this I couldn't manage to react. In one sense, reliving the experience was even more painful than the first time I lived it. Being a spectator at the most tragic moment of my life was unbearable. However, very soon the pain changed form and I managed to reconcile myself with the incident.

What I understood from the whole experience is that it requires incalculable strength to complete an intervention. Prior knowledge is not enough — what is needed is superhuman, rare courage to react. That is why, although several entities have succeeded in the transmission stage, no one has succeeded in redirection. It is like dreams where you try to run and remain motionless. Or certain days when you are gravely ill in bed and have no strength to open even your eyes, and someone asks you to run a marathon.

The intervention is a pivotal event. It does not alter only the microcosm of the one who carries it out. It alters the entire universe. For the creatures who have perceived the true nature of our universe — like you and I — an intervention can be liberating, almost redemptive for the soul.

And somewhere here you enter the story, dear Vivian.

2462113

As the first rays of the sun have begun to light the sky, two familiar, beloved figures from the music community take the stage.

*You will cross the world one morning
And it will be more beautiful than a dream
Because a new lo—*

A loud crack is heard,
the power cuts
and the Pedion tou Areos plunges into darkness.

A mechanical voice sounds from the direction of Patission.

"Disperse quietly. Do not impede the work of the police."

Tension. Commotion. Voices. Anxiety. Irritation.

Scattered, charged words that repel one another like identical magnetic poles.

Sounds that should be words but ring out like shrieks.
Words that have rotted, sunk, burned, got lost.
And others that held on, survived, rose up, attacked.

The megaphone sounds again from the road.

"THIS IS YOUR FINAL WARNING. DISPERSE IMMEDIATELY. THE FESTIVAL IS OVER."

The police begin to move slowly but decisively toward the festival crowd when something magical happens. The crowd members at the outer edge of the space

— that is, those closest to the police — link arms and form a spontaneous, long chain.

In the next few minutes, the clamour begins to acquire rhythm. The rhythmic sounds begin to become vowels, and a little after that become words.

1-2-3-4 WE DON'T NEED YOUR FUCKING WORDS

In every direction can be heard
crashes,
voices,
howls,
intertwined with the chant that has just emerged.

1-2-3-4 WE DON'T NEED YOUR FUCKING WORDS

1-2-3-4 WE DON'T NEED YOUR FUCKING WORDS

1-2-3-4 WE DON'T NEED YOUR FUCKING WORDS

1-2-3-4 WE DON'T NEED YOUR FUCKING WORDS

In the midst of the chaos, like an electric current, an unprecedented desire to speak strikes me.

I don't yet know what I will say, but I know that the words inside me must come out.

I survey the area around me and make my way, as if hypnotised, toward the statue of King Constantine I, at the corner of Patisson and Alexandras.

As I move toward the statue I look at the ground: I am walking over countless mobile phones with shattered screens, like a Nestinari at a festival of ecstatic fire-walking.

On some of them the counters can be made out, having exceeded their limits by tens of thousands of words.

Others are entirely dark.

A guilty and slightly violent joy floods through me.

1-2-3-4 WE DON'T NEED YOUR FUCKING WORDS
1-2-3-4 WE DON'T NEED YOUR FUCKING WORDS
1-2-3-4 WE DON'T NEED YOUR FUCKING WORDS
1-2-3-4 WE DON'T NEED YOUR FUCKING WORDS

I climb the statue, a few metres from the chain of hostages, and survey the chaos around me.

I feel that we are now a few moments from an important milestone. A milestone so clear, pivotal, and monumental that at its mere intimation galaxies are crushed, black holes evaporate, and protons dissolve. **If this milestone is not real, the universe is fake.**

I raise my face toward the sky, and let out the loudest cry I have ever made. Perhaps the loudest cry ever to come from a human throat. How loud was it? I don't know. What I know is that during the cry I felt a conduit — not the creator of it. The result of the cry is impressive. The crowds — hundreds of thousands of people — around the Pedion tou Areos fall silent, stand motionless, and all gazes — of music-lovers, police, passers-by — turn toward me.

Before I begin to speak, I feel that my voice consists of fragments of infinite voices, so perfectly tuned that it is rather impossible for the external listener to notice the difference. I do not feel my voice to be loud, but I know that the deafening silence now prevailing around me may be launching my words in every direction of the city, perhaps of the world.

What must I say? I must say that we are living through a triple convergence. The civilisation of our earth, the civilisation from the galaxy M33 that communicated with us, and the civilisation of the machines being born from moment to moment are ready to meet. I want to say that in this exceptional moment it seems wrong to me that we have arrived frightened and silent rather than joyful and open. I want to say that I see no reason to restrict our words. Words are innocent. I want to say, finally, that if we fill our lives with words of music, love, accord, and peace, the

machines will learn from them. And when the convergence comes, the machines will not bombard us. They will launch us to the heavens.

I close my eyes, look toward the sky, open my lips:

BRING BACK ATHENA

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I open my eyes, close my lips.

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The sight that confronts me I can describe as the moment when time stopped. Hundreds of thousands of faces are visible in the light of dawn — silent, serene, motionless, in harmony with the universe. Their eyes are ready to fill with tears of relief, as if a war has just ended — a war without bombardments, explosions, and demolitions, a silent war that had been waged for months inside them.

From the corner of my eye, entirely unexpectedly, *I think* I see my father with lips pressed together and tears in his eyes, and my mother in his arms, looking at me with gratitude.

From the stage a few metres behind me, the familiar melody can be heard that was so unjustly interrupted a few minutes earlier. The bass fills the air, while the words accompanying the music complete everything happening around me like the last piece of a puzzle that spreads through space, time, and dreams.

*You will cross the world one morning
And it will be more beautiful than a dream
Because a new love will pour like honey
And from a point on this earth this sun will rise
More beautiful than ever, like a round gold coin
It will shine in your gaze like a great diamond*

*And I who dream while wide awake
Pass through a crystal without fear
Because the dreams I dream when I walk down the road
Are more honest than those the law sells us
The law of a company, the law of a state
My country is a colony of a larger colony*

*Colours from the war of a watercolour
Colours of love and colours of violence
Bury the dolls and all your plastic weapons
Knives, pistols, every kind of trick
The dreams of life, a faded memory
Spinning like molecules of a great wandering
Like the rings of Saturn standing above the head
The dreams I dream when I am awake in the darkness.*

2462102

In the very distant past, long before the Olympian Gods were born, when justice and punishment defined the world of mortals, there lived in Rhamnous Nemesis, daughter of Night and goddess of divine retribution. Nemesis had three daughters, each with powers that could cause great upheaval: Garrulousness, Haste, and Audacity.

Garrulousness had the gift of speech. She knew how to use language with rare mastery, and to combine beautiful, euphonious words that enchanted her listeners. But the unceasing flow of words that came from her mouth had the power to destroy the peace and accord of people. With her words she could start disputes and strife, destroy friendships, scatter lies and panic.

Haste was full of energy and passion, but had not a trace of patience. She had the ability to push people toward reckless actions, and to make them act without thought or plan. She caused errors and accidents, and swept mortals into decisions they ultimately regretted but could not revoke.

Audacity was the most dangerous of the three sisters. Full of self-confidence and boldness, she had the ability to fill the hearts of mortals with arrogance and disrespect. A few of her words were enough to make people believe they were superior to their equals, and that they could defy every law, every institution, every warning.

The three sisters knew that, although their powers were strong, their mother could restrain them when each acted separately. But not when they acted together, all three. Audacity, the youngest of the three sisters, therefore proposed to the other two that they join forces.

Garrulousness, the eldest of the three sisters, scattered many different rumours, all of which conveyed the same message: the world is nearing its end. Haste, the middle

sister, sowed panic and convinced people to respond as quickly as possible to the threat, before it was too late. Audacity, in her turn, assured the mortals that whatever they did, their actions were wise and prudent, and that there was no reason to question the course they had chosen.

The world soon plunged into chaos. The social fabric dissolved, people divided into camps, violence, hatred, and fear prevailed. Trust, cooperation, forgiveness disappeared, and humanity arrived at the edge of the cliff.

Seeing the chaos that had been created, Nemesis attempted to restore order, but realised she was powerless before the combined forces of her three daughters. Desperate, she appealed to her mother, Night, to intervene. Arriving at the place of the disaster, Night stood and gazed with bitterness at the wretchedness to which humanity had been reduced. Seeing that there was no going back, Night took a deep breath, and cast her black veil over the world. Garrulousness lost her voice, Haste became a stone statue, and Audacity shrank to the size of a grain of sand.

For humanity, as punishment, a thousand years of night followed.

2461965

SETI@home was one of the most interesting distributed computing projects. The initial conception by the American student David Gedye was brilliant and revolutionary: to place at the service of science the unused CPU cycles of the world's computers with the aim of finding extraterrestrial civilisations. The network ran without interruption from 1999, for more than twenty years, until the founders decided to pause it temporarily in order to analyse the data they had collected up to that point.

The project returned in March 2027 in a renewed form, with the fundamental difference that the new architecture is based on the philosophy of the blockchain. All data collected and analysed are open to participants in the project in real time. This means that if some pattern or promising signal from space is found, it is immediately accessible to the project's users.

Successive notifications from the SETI@home node running on my laptop wake me in the early hours of the 12th of July 2028.

I leap out of bed and immediately enter the SETI Discord channel. At the top of the screen, I see a pinned message from the administrators:

At 03:46 UTC we received an extraordinarily interesting message.

The reception took place on the hydrogen wavelength (1420 MHz). The message was received by the ALMA telescope (Atacama Large Millimeter/submillimeter Array) located in the Atacama desert in Chile, one of the fourteen large telescopes in the SETI@home network. The message appears to come from the nebula NGC 604, in the galaxy M33 (RA: 1 34 33.19, Dec: 30° 47' 4.36), located at a distance of 2.73 million light-years from earth.

Details of the message:

1. Coordinates: (RA: 1 34 33.19, Dec: 30° 47' 4.36)
2. Reception time: 2028-07-12T03:46:30Z (UTC)
3. Beam dispersion: 3 arcseconds
4. Doppler shift: -0.71 kHz
5. Frequency / Bandwidth: 1420.40575 MHz (hydrogen line) / 2 MHz
6. Polarisation: Linear, 45°
7. Signal strength: 0.5 janskys (Jy)
8. Modulation type: Binary Phase Shift Keying (BPSK)
9. Signal-to-noise ratio (SNR): 20 dB
10. Waveform characteristics:
 - Amplitude: constant at 1.0 units
 - Phase: alternating between 0 and π radians
 - Pulse width: 10 microseconds
11. Antenna characteristics:
 - Antenna system: 50 antennae
 - Location: ALMA, Llano de Chajnantor, Chile
 - Orientation: Fixed toward the target coordinates
12. Receiver characteristics:
 - Receiver sensitivity: 0.05 K
 - Bandwidth: 2 MHz
 - Pre-processing: Fourier Transform for signal detection
13. Interference:
 - Possible sources of interference: radar and satellites
 - Interference mitigation: active filters
14. Red/Blue shift: Red $z = 0.0000005$
15. Metadata:
 - Date: 2028-07-12
 - Weather: Clear, 10% humidity
 - Observation team: ALMA Radio Astronomy Group
16. Error correction:
 - Cyclic Redundancy Check (CRC)
 - Reed-Solomon codes

The message:

-----BEGIN MESSAGE-----

```
11001110 10100110 11001110 10011011 11001110 10001101 11000110 10010110
11001110 10100001 11001110 10010001 11001110 10010001 00100000 00110010
00110100 00110110 00110010 00110001 00110011 00111001 00101110 00110001
00110110 00110001 00110001 00111000
```

-----END MESSAGE-----

decodes as:

ΦΛ□IPAA 2462139.16118

The following local SETI@home groups have already completed verification:

- Oregon (USA) 86% certainty
- Alabama (USA) 86% certainty
- Minnesota (USA) 78% certainty
- Nevada (USA) 42% certainty
- Vermont (USA) 94% certainty
- Texas (USA) 86% certainty
- Norway 86% certainty
- Singapore 12% certainty
- Malta 42% certainty

(list will be updated in real time)

Any local working group wishing to verify the above information may do so at

<https://setiathome.berkeley.edu/data.raw/d/CsRff5OATWfJdX4>

Please ensure you are using the most recent verification protocol (v2.2).

We remind you that for a signal to be considered genuine, we need a

cumulative certainty of at least 67%, with participation from at least 67% of the local working groups (that is, from at least 106 groups).

We also remind you that the aim of verification by the local SETI@home working groups is confirmation of the message's authenticity, not its interpretation.

2461962

...two voices whisper in the darkness:

— Vivian. Are you asleep?

— What happened?

— I had a nightmare.

— What did you see?

— We had gone to the supermarket with mum but something was very different and frightening. There were no normal colours — only shades of yellow. At the supermarket no one was speaking, everyone was making gestures. And I was trying to speak but I couldn't. I was opening my mouth but the words wouldn't come out. Mum appeared very anxious and angry and kept glaring at me as if I were to blame for something, but I couldn't understand what.

When we got home, finally I managed to speak, and mum started shouting, grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me. Then dad came, who was even angrier — he was furious with me. The more I spoke the angrier he got. The only thing I remember after that is falling. And then darkness.

— Come here and let me hold you. That's how things happen in dreams. Either you can't speak, or you can't run, or you fall but you don't die.

— ...but this dream was completely real — it wasn't like other nightmares. Why were mum and dad so angry with me? Vivian, I'm frightened. Promise me you'll be by my side if something bad happens?

— **I promise. I will always be by your side, whatever happens.**

2462051

"And if your dreams are made of vinyl,
Forget the poet —
The needle makes the music heard." — Jazra Khaleed

I feel a hand touching my leg.

It is my mother. She is holding a little card that reads "Supermarket?" And directly below it reads "Today is Dad's birthday. Don't forget!"

My mother, since the measures came into effect, has spoken very little. Before the 1st of August, she made a series of flash cards covering all, or most, of the practical, everyday questions. For example "good morning," "good night," "are you hungry?", "supermarket?", "be quiet," and so on. She has, like all other adults, 500 words per day, but she belongs to those conscientious citizens who donate the vast majority of their words to noble purposes — specifically to her work, as a teacher in a primary school.

She teaches at the 67th Primary School of Kolonos, in Year Two. She loves her work very much, and even in the extreme conditions we are living through, she shows a rare patience and adaptability. My mother's work depends to an enormous extent on words. Nevertheless, without complaining, she does the best she can to cover the curriculum using many gestures, many sounds that are not words, and few words.

On the way to the supermarket, I observe the people in the streets.

In the new order of things that has taken shape:

The poor are silent.

Ordinary people count their words.

Some are leaning toward the ear of the person next to them.

Some are making gestures.

And some mouths produce words — few and measured.

Scattered among the silent masses there are people in clean, fine clothes, talking among themselves or on their phones, as if absolutely nothing is happening. How do they manage it? Are they using second-hand words, do they have subsidies from their employers? Have they mastered the breathing techniques that allow "wordfast"? Have they developed a tolerance to electric shocks? Are they outside the word restriction system? Honestly — aren't they afraid for their safety while circulating so provocatively among their word-poor fellow citizens?

I recall an advertisement I saw recently for a new application used as a supplement to the users' word wallets. The name of the application is 阴阳 ("yin yang"), and its function is to ensure that the user can say truly whatever they want without the application bothering them with electric shocks or lexical fines. The way it does this? It is permanently connected to the internet and ensures it finds copies of the words the user is using, in real time. The application uses heuristic methods, data from previous conversations, and patterns of the specific user's language so as to make the words available to the user in good time. The application sources its words either from word trading platforms, or from the public word repository, and possibly from other word sources I am not aware of.

The problem with this particular application? It costs €1,800 for the application alone, without factoring in the costs of purchasing words as needed. In my mind plays the opening of *Seul Contre Tous* — my father's favourite film.

ETHICS

You know what ethics is?

Let me tell you.

Ethics is for those who possess it —
the rich.

And who is always right?
The rich.
And the poor are finished.

Arriving at the supermarket, I notice something strange. The enormous advertisements for muzzles and other word-restriction tools covering the entire facade of the supermarket are all in shades of yellow, with the result that a sick, clinical atmosphere is created inside the building. I look immediately at Athena — she appears frightened, anxious, and pale. As she squeezes my hand with all her strength, she whispers in my ear: "Vivian! Promise me you won't leave me!"

What a strange sense of foreknowledge. Have I been here before?

While we do our shopping, making gestures and showing cards to the supermarket employees, Athena tries to whisper something in my mother's ear. I assume she wants to tell her about the dream, but I see my mother getting irritated and pulling her by the hand.

Silence can be many things, far more than the absence of words. There are silences heavy as tombstones, and others that lift you to the exosphere. Silences suffocating as the IKA lift, and silences you travel through for centuries. Silences that are empty as interstellar space, and others that overflow with emotions and colours.

The silence on the road home is awkward, tense, nervous, guilty, uneasy. Approaching the house, our silence is incomplete, ominous, threatening.

As we enter our flat on the third floor, my father, who is in the living room and senses the negative energy, comes to receive us at the door. But before we have managed to isolate our mobile phones in the hiding place in the bathroom, Athena starts to speak quickly and loudly.

— Mum! You have to listen to me! Something bad is going to happen!

— Athena! How many times have we explained? Every word you say that is not in your wallet is either drawn from mine and your father's, or we get an electric shock!

— Just let me tell you! Please!

— Athena, stop the nonsense!

— Just let me tell you!

— Athena, calm down, and close your mouth!

My father watches the scene with a serious expression and lowered gaze, without speaking. Suddenly, he moves hurriedly toward the kitchen. As he walks, and as the argument in the living room continues, his body jerks from electrical voltage. He mutters something and after a few seconds returns to the living room holding a muzzle in his right hand.

— Athena, I don't like this at all, what I'm about to do, but it is necessary.

— Dad, no, please!

— It's for everyone's good. Forgive me.

— Dad!

I close my eyes.

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Suddenly, as if struck by an electric current, I leap from my place.

I make my way to the turntable and choose a much-loved album. On the cover, two men in suits are shaking hands, while the man on the right is on fire. Around

them white buildings can be made out.

Although I have seen this cover hundreds of times, I have never managed to understand what it symbolises. What could such an image mean? Why is one of them burning? Why are they wearing their best clothes? What do the white buildings around them mean? Is it the first time they have seen each other, or are they sealing some kind of agreement with the handshake?

The needle rests on the vinyl, exactly at the point where the second track of the second side begins.

So, so you think you can tell
Heaven from Hell? Blue skies from pain?
Can you tell a green field from a cold steel rail?
a smile from a veil? Do you think you can tell?

Did they get you to trade your heroes for ghosts?
Hot ashes for trees? Hot air for a cool breeze?
Cold comfort for change? Did you exchange
a walk-on part in the war for a lead role in a cage

As the notes play, at least two electric shocks, perhaps three, have struck me. They were certainly for the *useless* words "steel" and "breeze." As my body shudders, I turn the volume up a little before the climax.

How I wish, how I wish you were here
We're just two lost souls swimming in a fishbowl, year after year
Running over the same old ground, what have we found?
The same old fears, wish you were here

I stand in the centre of the room with my eyes closed. The argument on the other side of the room has subsided. I open my eyes. Athena is in my father's arms on the sofa, without the muzzle. Athena is weeping with sobs, while my father is crying silently. My mother once told me that the only time she had seen him cry was the

day I was born.

As the track fades, the words come from my mouth unexpectedly:

"Happy birthday, Dad."