“The Goat Variations” by Jeff VanderMeer

It would have been hot, humid in September in that city, and the Secret Service would have gone in first, before him, to scan for hostile minds, even though it was just a middle school in a county he’d won in the elections, far away from the fighting. He would have emerged from the third black armored vehicle, blinking and looking bewildered as he got his bearings in the sudden sunlight. His aide and the personal bodyguards who had grown up protecting him would have surrounded him by his first step onto the asphal of the driveway. They would have entered the school through the front, stopping under the sign for photos and a few words with the principal, the television cameras recording it all from a safe distance.

He would already be thinking past the event, to the next, and how to prop up sagging public approval ratings, due both to the conflict and what the press called his recent “indecision,” which he knew was more analogous to “sickness.” He would be thinking about, or around, the secret cavern beneath the Pentagon and the pale, almost grub-like face of the adept in his tank. He would already be thinking about the machine.

By the end of the photo op, the sweat itches on his forehead, burns sour in his mouth, but he has to ignore it for the cameras. He’s turning a new word over and over in his mind, learned from a Czech diplomat. Ossuary. A word that sounds free and soaring, but just means a pile of skulls. The latest satellite photos from the battlefield states of Kansas, Nebraska, and Idaho make him think of the word. The evangelicals have been eschewing god-missiles for more personal methods of vengeance, even as they tie down federal armies in an endless guerilla war. Sometimes he feels like he’s presiding over a pile of skulls.

The smile on his face has frozen into a rictus as he realizes there’s something wrong with the sun; there’s a red dot in its center, and it’s eating away at the yellow, bringing a hint of green with it. He can tell he’s the only one who can see it, can sense the pulsing, nervous worry on the face of his aide.

He almost says “ossuary” aloud, but then, sunspots wandering across his eyes, they are bringing him down a corridor to the classroom where he will meet with the students and tell them a story. They walk past the open doors to the cafeteria — row on row of sagging wooden tables propped up by rusted metal legs. He experiences a flare of anger. Why this school, with the infrastructure crumbling away? The overpowering stale smell of macaroni-and-cheese and meatloaf makes him nauseous.
All the while, he engages in small talk with the entourage of teachers trailing in his wake, almost all overweight middle-aged women with circles under their eyes and sagging skin on their arms. Many of them are black. He smiles into their shiny, receptive faces and remembers the hired help in the mansion growing up. Some of his best friends were black until he took up politics.

For a second, as he looks down, marveling at their snouts and beaks and muzzles, their smiles melt away and he’s surrounded by a pack of animals.

His aide mutters to him through clenched teeth, and two seconds later he realizes the words were “Stop staring at them so much.” There have always been times when meeting too many people at once has made him feel as if he’s somewhere strange, all the mannerisms and gesticulations and varying tones of voice shimmering into babble. But it’s only lately that the features of people’s faces have changed into a menagerie if he looks at them too long.

They’d briefed him on the secret rooms and the possibility of the machine even before they’d given him the latest intel on China’s occupation of Japan and Taiwan. Only three hours into his presidency, an armored car had taken him to the Pentagon, away from his wife and the beginnings of the inauguration party. Once there, they’d entered a green-lit steel elevator that went down for so long he thought for a moment it was broken. It was just him, his aide, a black-ops commander who didn’t give his name, and a small, haggard man who wore an old gray suit over a faded white dress shirt, with no tie. He’d told his vice president to meet the press while he was gone, even though he was now convinced the old man had dementia.

The elevators had opened to a rush of stale cool air, like being under a mountain, and, beneath the dark green glow of overhead lamps, he could see rows and rows of transparent, bathtub-shaped deprivation vats. In each floated one dreaming adept, skin wrinkled and robbed of color by the exposure to the chemicals that preserved and pacified them. Every shaven head was attached to wires and electrodes, every mouth attached to a breathing tube. Catheters took care of waste. The stale air soon faded as they walked silent down the rows, replaced by a smell like turpentine mixed with honeysuckle. Sometimes the hands of the adepts twitched, like cats hunting in their sleep.

A vast, slow, repeating sound registered in his awareness. Only after several minutes did he realize it was the sound of the adepts as they slowly moved in their vats, creating a slow ripple of water repeated in thousands of other vats. The room seemed to go on forever, into the far distance of a horizon tinged at its extremity by a darkening that hinted of blood.

His sense of disgust, revulsion grew as the little man ran out ahead of them, navigated a path to
a control center, a hundred yards in and to the left, made from a luminous blue glass, set a story up and jutting out over the vats like some infernal crane. And still he did not know what to say. The atmosphere combined morgue, cathedral, and torture chamber. He felt a compulsion, if he spoke, to whisper.

The briefing papers he'd read on the ride over had told him just about everything. For years, adepts had been screened out at birth and, depending on the secret orders peculiar to each administration, either euthanized or imprisoned in remote overseas detention camps. Those that managed to escape detection until adulthood had no rights if caught, not even the rights given to illegal immigrants. The founding fathers had been very clear on that in the constitution.

He had always assumed that adults when caught were eliminated or sent to the camps. Radicals might call it the last reflexive act of a Puritanical brutality that reached across centuries, but most citizens despised the invasion of privacy an adept represented or were more worried about how the separatist evangelicals had turned the homeland into a nation of West and East Coasts, with no middle.

But now he knew where his predecessor had been storing the bodies. He just didn't yet know why.

In the control center, they showed him the images being mined from the depths of the adepts' REM sleep. They ranged from montages as incomprehensible as the experimental films he'd seen in college to single shots of dead people to grassy hills littered with wildflowers. Ecstasy, grief, madness, peace. Anything imaginable came through in the adepts' endless sleep.

"Only ten people in the world know every aspect of this project, and three of them are dead, Mr. President," the black-ops commander told him.

Down below, he could see the little man, blue-tinted, going from vat to vat, checking readings.

"We experimented until we found the right combination of drugs to augment their sight. One particular formula, culled from South American mushrooms mostly, worked best. Suddenly, we began to get more coherent and varied images. Very different from before."

He felt numb. He had no sympathy for the men and women curled up in the vats below him — an adept's grenade had killed his father in mid-campaign a decade before, launching his own reluctant career in politics — but, still, he felt numb.

"Are any of them dangerous?" he asked the black-ops commander.

"They're all dangerous, Mr. President. Every last one."
“When did this start?”

“With a secret order from your predecessor, Mr. President. Before, we just disappeared them or sent them to work camps in the Alaskas.”

“Why did he do it?”

Even then, he would realize later, a strange music was growing in his head, a distant sound fast approaching.

“He did it, Mr. President, or said he did it, as a way of getting intel on the Heartland separatists.”

Understandable, if idiosyncratic. The separatists and the fact that the federal armies had become bogged down in the Heartland fighting them were the main reasons his predecessor’s party no longer controlled the executive, judicial, or legislative branches. And no one had ever succeeded in placing a mole within evangelical ranks.

The scenes continued to cascade over the monitors in a rapid-fire nonsense-rhythm.

“What do you do with the images?”

“They’re sent to a full team of experts for interpretation, Mr. President. These experts are not told where the images come from.”

“What do these adepts see that is so important?”

The black-ops commander grimaced at the tone of rebuke. “The future, Mr. President. Its early days, but we believe they see the future.”

“And have you gained much in the way of intel?”

The black-ops commander looked at his feet. “No, not yet, we haven’t. And we don’t know why. The images are jumbled. Some might even be from our past or present. But we have managed to figure out one thing, which is why you’ve been brought here so quickly: something will happen later this year, in September.”

“Something?”

Down below, the little man had stopped his purposeful wandering. He gazed, as if mesmerized, into one of the vats.

“Something cataclysmic, Mr. President. Across the channels. Across all of the adepts, it’s quite clear. Every adept has a different version of what that something is. And we don’t know exactly when,
but in September."

He had a thousand more questions, but at that moment one of the military's top scientific researchers entered the control room to show them the schematics for the machine — the machine they'd found in the mind of one particular adept.

The time machine.

The teachers are telling him about the weather, and he's pretending to care as he tries to ignore the florescent lighting as yellow as the skin that forms on old butter, the cracks in the dull beige walls, the faded construction paper of old projects taped to those walls, drooping down toward a tired, washed-out green carpet that's paper-thin under foot.

It's the kind of event that he's never really understood the point of, even as he understands the reason for it. To prove that he's still fit for office. To prove that the country, some of it, is free of war and division. To prove he cares about kids, even though this particular school seems to be falling apart. Why this class, why today, is what he really doesn't understand, with so many world crises — China's imperialism, the Siberian separatist movement, Iraq as the only bulwark against Russian influence in the Middle East. Or a vice president he now knows may be too old and delusional to be anything other than an embarrassment, and a cabinet he let his family's political cronies bully him into appointing, and a secret cavern that has infected his thoughts, infected his mind.

And that would lead to memories of his father, and the awful silence into which they told him, as he sat coked up and hung-over that morning on the pastel couch in some sleazy apartment, how it had happened while his father worked a town hall meeting in Atlanta.

All of this has made him realize that there's only one way to succeed in this thing called the presidency: just let go of the reality of the world in favor of whatever reality he wants or needs, no matter how selfish.

The teachers are turning into animals again, and he can't seem to stop it from happening.

The time machine had appeared as an image on their monitors from an adept named "Peter" in vat 1023, and because they couldn't figure out the context — weapon? camera? something new? — they had to wake Peter up and have a conversation with him.

A time machine, he told them.

A time machine?
A time machine that travels through time, he'd clarified.

And they'd believed him, or if not believed him, dared to hope he was right. That what Peter had seen while deprived of anything but his own brain, like some deep-sea fish, like something constantly turning inwards and then turning inwards again, had been a time machine.

If they didn't build it and it turned out later that it might have worked and could have helped them avert or change what was fated to happen in September...

That day, three hours after being sworn in, he had had to give the order to build a time machine, and quickly.

“Something bad will happen in late summer. Something bad. Across the chan-nels. Something awful.”

“What?” he kept asking, and the answer was always the same: We don't know.

They kept telling him that the adepts didn't seem to convey literal infor-mation so much as impressions and visions of the future, filtered through dreamscapes. As if the drugs they'd perfected, which had changed the way the adepts dreamed, both improved and destroyed focus, in different ways.

In the end, he had decided to build the machine — and defend against almost everything they could think of or divine from the images: any attack against the still-surviving New York financial district or the monument to the Queen Mother in the New York harbor; the random god-missiles of the Christian jihadists of the Heartland, who hadn’t yet managed to unlock the nuclear codes in the occupied states; and even the lingering cesspool that was Los Angeles after the viruses and riots.

But they still did not really know.

He's good now at talking to people when it’s not a prepared speech, good at letting his mind be elsewhere while he talks to a series of masks from behind his own mask. The prepared speeches are different because he's expected to inhabit them, and he's never fully inhabited anything, any role, in his life.

They round the corner and enter the classroom: thirty children in plastic one-piece desk-chairs, looking solemn, and the teacher standing in front of a beat-up battlewagon of a desk, overflowing with papers.

Behind her, posters they’d made for him, or someone had made to look like the children made
them, most showing him with the crown on his head. But also a blackboard, which amazes him. So anachronistic, and he’s always hated the sound of chalk on a blackboard. Hates the smell of glue and the sour food-sweat of unwashed kids. It’s all so squalid and tired and oddly close to the atmosphere in the underground cavern, the smell the adepts give off as they thrash in slow-motion in their vats, silently screaming out images of catastrophe and oblivion.

The children look up at him when he enters the room like they’re watching something far away and half-wondrous, half-monstrous.

He stands there and talks to them for a while at first, trying to ignore the window in the back of the classroom that wants to show him a scene that shouldn’t have been there. He says the kinds of things he’s said to kids for years while on the campaign trail, running for ever-greater office. Has said these things for so many years that it’s become a sawdust litany meant to convince them of his charm, his wit, his competence. Later, he won’t re-member what he said, or what they said back. It’s not important.

But he’s thought about the implications of that in bed at night, lying there while his wife reads, her pale, freckled shoulder like a wall above him. He could stand in a classroom and say nothing, and still they would be fasci-nated with him, like a talisman, like a golden statue. No one had ever told him that sometimes you don’t have to inhabit the presidency; sometimes, it inhabits you.

He’d wondered at the time of coronation if he’d feel different. He’d won-dered how the parliament members would receive him, given the split be-tween the popular vote and the legislative vote. But nothing had happened. The parliament members had clapped, some longer than others, and he’d been sworn in, duly noting the absence of the rogue Scottish delegation. The Crown of the Americas had briefly touched his head, like an “iron kiss from the mouth of God,” as his predecessor had put it, and then it was gone again, under glass, and he was back to being the secular president, not some sort of divine king.

Then they’d taken him to the Pentagon, hurtled him half a mile under-ground, and he’d felt like a man who wins a prize only to find out it’s worth-less. Ossuary. He’d expected clandestine spy programs, secret weapons, spe-cial powers. But he hadn’t expected the faces in the vats or the machine.

Before they built the time machine, he had insisted on meeting “Peter” in an interrogation room near the vats. He felt strongly about this, about looking into the eyes of the man he had almost decided to trust.

“Are you sure this will work?” he asked Peter, even as he found the question irrelevant, ridiculous.
No matter what Peter said, no matter how impossible his scientists said it was, how it subverted known science, he was going to do it. The curiosity was too strong.

Peter’s eyes were bright with a kind of fever. His face was the palest white possible, and he stank of the chemicals. They’d put him in a blue jumper suit to cover his nakedness.

“It’ll work. I pulled it out of another place. It was a true-sight. A true-seeing. I don’t know how it works, but it works. It’ll work, it’ll work, and then,” he turned toward the black one-way glass at the far end of the room, hands in restraints behind his back, “I’ll be free?”

There was a thing in Peter’s eyes he refused to acknowledge. A sense of something being held back, of something not quite right. Later, he would never know why he didn’t trust that instinct, that perception, and the only reason he could come up with was the strength of his curiosity and the weight of his predecessor’s effort to get to that point.

“What, exactly, is the machine for? Exactly. Not just . . . time travel. Tell me something more specific.”

The scientist accompanying them smiled. He had a withered, narrow face, a firm chin, and wore a jump suit that matched Peter’s, with a black belt at the waist that held the holster for an even blacker semi-automatic pistol. He smelled strongly of a sickly sweet cologne, as if hiding some essential putrefaction.

“Mr. President,” he said, “Peter is not a scientist. And we cannot peer into his mind. We can only see the images his mind projects. Until we build it, we will not know exactly how it works.”

And then, when the machine was built, and they took him to it, he didn’t know what to make of it. He didn’t think they did, either — they were gath-ered around it in their protective suits like apes trying to figure out an inter-nal combustion engine.

“Don’t look directly into it,” the scientist beside him advised. “Those who have experience a kind of . . . disorientation.”

Unlike the apes examining it, the two of them stood behind three feet of protective, blast-proof glass, and yet both of them had moved to the back of the viewing room — as far away from the artifact as possible.

The machine consisted of a square housing made of irregular-looking gray metal, caulked on the interior with what looked like rotted beef, and in the center of this assemblage: an eye of green light. In the middle of the eye, a piercing red dot. The machine was about the size of a microwave
oven.

When he saw the eye, he shuddered, could not tell at first if it was organic or a metallic lens. The effect of the machine on his mind was of a thousand maggots inching their way across the top of a television set turned on but not receiving a station.

He couldn’t stop looking, as if the scientist’s warning had made it impos-sible not to stare. A crawling sensation spread across his scalp, his arms, his hands, his legs.

“How does it work?” he asked the scientist.

“We still don’t know.”

“Does the adept know?”

“Not really. He just told us not to look into it directly.”

“Is it from the future?”

“That is the most logical guess.”

To him, it didn’t look real. It looked either like something from another planet or something a psychotic child would put together before turning to more violent pursuits.

“Where else could it be from?”

The scientist didn’t reply, and anger began to override his fear. He continued to look directly into the eye, even as it made him feel sick.

“Well, what do you know?”

“That it shouldn’t work. As we put the pieces together . . . we all thought . . . we all thought it was more like witchcraft than science. Forgive me, Mr. President.”

He gave the scientist a look that the scientist couldn’t meet. Had he meant the gravity of the insult? Had he meant to imply their efforts were as blasphemous as the adept’s second sight?

“And now? What do you think now?”

“It’s awake, alive. But we don’t see how it’s . . . ”

“It’s what?”

“Breathing, Mr. President. A machine shouldn’t breathe.”
“How does it take anyone into the future, do you think?’

The temperature in the room seemed to have gone up. He was sweating.

The eye of the thing, impossibly alien, bored into him. Was it changing color?

“We think it doesn’t physically send anyone into the future. That’s the problem. We think it might somehow . . . create a localized phenomenon.”

He sighed. “Just say what you mean.”

The pulsing red dot. The shifting green. Looking at him. Looking into him.

“We think it might not allow physical travel, just mental travel.”

In that instant, he saw adept Peter’s pale face again and he felt a weakness in his stomach, and even though there was so much protection between him and the machine, he turned to the scientist and said, “Get me out of here.”

Only, it was too late.

The sickness, the shifting, had started the next day, and he couldn’t tell anyone about it, not even his wife, or they would have removed him from office. The constitution was quite clear about what do with “witches and warlocks.”

At this point, his aide would hand him the book. They’d have gone through a dozen books before choosing that one. It is the only one with nothing in it anyone could object to; nothing in it of substance, nothing, his people thought, that the still-free press could use to damage him. There was just a goat in the book, a goat having adventures. It was written by a Constitution-alist, an outspoken supporter of coronation and expansion.

As he takes the book, he realizes, mildly surprised, that he has already become used to the smell of sweating children (he has none of his own) and the classroom grunge. (Ossuary. It sounded like a combination of “osprey” and “sanctuary.”) The students who attend the school all experience it differently from him, their minds editing out the sensory perceptions he’s still receiving. The mess. The depressed quality of the infrastructure. But what if you couldn’t edit it out? And what if the stakes were much, much higher?

So then they would sit him down at a ridiculously small chair, almost as small as the ones used by the students, but somehow he would feel smaller in it despite that, as if he was back in college, surrounded by people both smarter and more dedicated than he was, as if he is posing and being
told he's not as good: an imposter.

But it's still just a children's book, after all, and at least there's air conditioning kicking in, and the kids really seem to want him to read the book, as if they haven't heard it a thousand times before, and he feeds off the look in their eyes — the President of North America and the Britains is telling us a story — and so he begins to read.

He enjoys the storytelling. Nothing he does with the book can hurt him. Nothing about it has weight. Still, he has to keep the pale face of the adept out of his voice, and the Russian problem, and the Chinese problem, and the full extent of military operations in the Heartland. (There are cameras, after all.)

It's September 2001, and something terrible is going to happen, but for a moment he forgets that fact.

And that's when his aide interrupts his reading, comes up to him with a fake smile and serious eyes, and whispers in his ear.

Whispers in his ear and the sound is like a buzzing, and the buzzing is numinous and all-encompassing. The breath on his ear is a tiny curse, an infernal itch. There's a sudden rush of blood to his brain as he hears the words and his aide withdraws. He can hardly move, is seeing light where there shouldn't be light. The words drop heavy into his ear as if they have weight.

And he receives them and keeps receiving them, and he knows what they mean, eventually; he knows what they mean throughout his body.

The aide says, his voice flecked with relief, “Mr. President, our scientists have solved it. It's not time travel or far-sight. It's alternate universes. The adepts have been staring into alternate universes. What happens there in September may not happen here. That's why they've had such trouble with the intel. The machine isn't a time machine.”

Except, as soon as the aide opens his mouth, the words become a trigger, a catalyst, and it's too late for him. A door is opening wider than ever before. The machine has already infected him.

There are variations. A long row of them, detonating in his mind, trying to destroy him. A strange, sad song is creeping up inside of him, and he can't stop that, either.

He's sitting in the chair, wearing a black military uniform with medals on it. He's much fitter, the clothes tight to emphasize his muscle tone. But his face is contorted around the hole of a festering localized virus, charcoal and green and viscous. He doesn't wear an eye patch because
he wants his people to see how he fights the disease. His left arm is made of metal. His tongue is
not his own, colonized the way his nation has been colonized, waging a war against bio-research
gone wrong, and the rebels who welcome it, who want to tear down anything remotely human,
themselves no longer recognizable as human.

His aide comes up and whispers that the rebels have detonated a bio-mass bomb in New York
City, which is now stewing in a broth of fungus and mutation: the nearly instantaneous
transformation of an entire metropolis into something living but alien, the rate of change has
become strange and accelerated in a world where this was always true, the age of
industrialization slowing it, if only for a moment.

“There are no people left in New York City,” his aide says. “What are your orders?”

He hadn’t expected this, not so soon, and it takes him seven minutes to recover from the news of
the death of millions. Seven minutes to turn to his aide and say, “Call in a nuclear strike.”

... and his aide comes up to him and whispers in his ear, “It’s time to go now. They've moved
up another meeting. Wrap it up.” Health insurance is on the agenda today, along with social
security. Something will get done about that and the environment this year or he'll die trying...

He’s sitting in the chair reading the book and he's gaunt, eyes feverish, military personnel
surrounding him. There’s one camera with them, army TV, and the students are all in camouflage.
The electricity flickers on and off. The school room has reinforced metal and concrete all around it.
The event is propaganda being packaged and pumped out to those still watching in places where
the enemy hasn’t jammed the satellites. He’s fighting a war against an escaped, human-created,
rapidly reproducing intelligent species prototype that looks a little bit like a chimpanzee crossed
with a Doberman. The scattered remnants of the hated adept underclass have made common
cause with the animals, disrupting communications.

His aide whispers in his ear that Atlanta has fallen, with over sixty-thousand troops and civilians
massacred in pitched battles all over the city. There's no safe air corridor back to the capital. In
fact, the capital seems to be under attack as well.

“What should we do?”

He returns to reading the book. Nothing he can do in the next seven minutes will make any
difference to the outcome. He knows what they have to do, but he's too tired to contemplate it
just yet. They will have to head to the Heartland and make peace with the Ecstatics and their
god-missiles. It's either that or render entire stretches of North America uninhabitable from nukes,
and he's not that desperate yet.

He begins to review the ten commandments of the Ecstatics in his mind, one by one, like rosary beads.

He's in mid-sentence when the aide hurries over and begins to whisper in his ear — just as the first of the god-missiles strikes and the fire washes over and through him, not even time to scream, and he's nothing anymore, not even a pile of ashes.

He's in a chair, in a suit with a sweat-stained white shirt, and he's tired, his voice as he reads thin and raspy. Five days and nights of negotiations between the rival factions of the New Southern Confederacy following a month of genocide from Arkansas to Georgia: too few resources, too many natural disasters, and no jobs, the whole system breaking down, although Los Angeles is still trying to pretend the world isn't coming to an end, even as jets are falling out the sky. Except, that's why he's in the classroom: pretending. Pretending neighbor hasn't set upon neighbor for thirty days, like in Rwanda except not with machetes, with guns. Teenagers shooting people in the stomach, and laughing. Extremist talk radio urging them on. Closing in on a million people dead.

His aide comes up and whispers in his ear: "The truce has fallen apart. They're killing each other again. And not just in the South. In the North, along political lines."

He sits there because he's run out of answers. He thinks: In another time, another place, I would have made a great president.

He's sitting in the classroom, in the small chair, in comfortable clothes, reading the goat story. No god-missiles here, no viruses, no invasions. The Chinese and Russians are just on the cusp of being a threat, but not there yet. Adepts here have no real far-sight, or are not believed, and roam free. Los Angeles is a thriving money pit, not a husked-out shadow.

No, the real threat here, besides pollution, is that he's mentally ill, although no one around him seems to know it. A head full of worms, insecurity, and pure, naked need. He rules a country called the "United States" that wavers between the First and the Third World. Resources failing, infrastructure crumbling, political system fueled by greed and corruption.

When the aide comes up and whispers in his ear to tell him that terrorists have flown two planes into buildings in New York City, there's blood behind his eyes, as well as a deafening silence, and a sudden leap from people falling from the burning buildings to endless war in the Middle East, bodies broken by bullets and bombs. The future torques into secret trials, torture, rape, and hundreds of thousands of civilians dead, or displaced, a country bankrupted and defenseless,
ruled ultimately by martial law and generals. Cities burn, the screams of the living are as loud as the screams of the dying.

He sits there for seven minutes because he really has no idea what to do.

. . . and his fate is to exist in a reality where towers do not explode in September, where Islamic fundamentalists are the least of his worries.

There is only one present, only one future now, and he’s back in it, driving it. Seven minutes have elapsed, and there’s a graveyard in his head. Seven minutes, and he’s gradually aware that in that span he’s read the goat story twice and then sat there for thirty seconds, silent.

Now he smiles, says a few reassuring words, just as his aide has decided to come up and rescue him from the yawning chasm. He’s living in a place now where they’ll never find him, those children, where there’s a torrent of blood in his mind, and a sky dark with planes and helicopters, and soldiers blown to bits by the roadside.

At that point, he would rise from his chair and his aide would clap, encouraging the students to clap, and they will, bewildered by this man about whom reporters will say later, “Doesn’t seem quite all there.”

An endless line of presidents rises from the chair with him, the weight almost too much. He can see each clearly in his head. He can see what they’re doing, and who they’re doing it to.

Saying his goodbyes is like learning how to walk again, while a nightmare plays out in the background. He knows as they lead him down the corridor that he’ll have to learn to live with it, like and unlike a man learning to live with missing limbs — phantom limbs that do not belong, that he cannot control, but are always there, and he’ll never be able to explain it to anyone. He’ll be as alone and yet as crowded as a person can be. The wall between him and his wife will be more unbearable than ever.

He remembers Peter’s pale, wrinkled, yearning face, and he thinks about making them release the man, put him on a plane somewhere beyond his country’s influence. Thinks about destroying the machine and ending the adept project.

Then he’s back in the wretched, glorious sunlight of a real, an ordinary day, and so are all of his reflections and shadows. Mimicking him, forever.