

Fenestrate Press presents

Stochastic Sycophancy and its Discontents

A Leaflet Curated by

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Comprising the following articles:

- The Colonization of Confidence. — Robert Kingett
- Ronny Chieng's Harvard Class Day Address — Ronny Chieng
- Our Workplace LLM Mass Delusion — Ava
- AI's PR Problem — David Rosenthal
- US Law Enforcement Warns of 'Anti-Tech Extremism' as AI Hatred Grows — Daniel Boguslaw
- The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas — Ursula K. Le Guin

A particular group of people (the billionaire / venture capitalist class, aided by the aspirants in the C-suites of many tech companies) have spent the last several years, and billions of dollars, pushing the message that Large Language Models (branded as “AI”) are functional, provide supernatural capabilities, and, most critically, are absolutely inevitable. The majority of the world population disagrees, but tech companies not only force LLMs upon their customers, but upon their employees.

So what? This leaflet contains a few notes worth considering, as you decide what your response has been, and whether it should change:

- First, “The Colonization of Confidence” speaks to the foundational dishonesty and anti-humanity orientation of LLMs in creative disciplines; since the pitch from LLM makers is so often “automate away writing so you can focus on other things,” what is lost when we do that? What, if anything, is gained?
- Second, Ronny Chieng’s very funny Harvard Class Day address takes a humorous approach to the “get onboard with LLMs or literally die” messaging that has been given to college students in the last couple of years.
- Third, “Our Workplace LLM Mass Delusion” shows off what workers at companies blighted by LLM-obsessed leadership already know: not only is the technology unfit for purpose, its cost and marketing show that LLMs are simply an open expression of hatred for workers of all kinds by the billionaire/VC class. Parts of this article will resonate with anyone in the tech sector, or (increasingly) in employment at all....
- Fourth, we come to brass tacks with “AI’s PR Problem,” a very brief analysis of the systemic divergence between workers (in tech and elsewhere) and management over the last quarter-century. To sum up, this article explains the previous one.
- Fifth, a warning klaxon: the US government now treats being opposed to LLMs with the same techniques it promised would only be applied to “foreign terrorists.” Generally it’s not an excellent sign for the morality of a cause if the secret kidnapping lists prioritize the cause’s enemies....
- Sixth, a short story: “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” tells a parable of the “abundance” society promised by billionaires if we all simply accept LLMs and antihuman stochastic systems in every part of our lives. Ursula Le Guin could have written this in 2026, but, being dead since 2018, she instead chose to write it in 1973 and leave it as both warning and guide.

Please read, consider, and share widely.

The Colonization of Confidence.

Robert Kingett

Dec 7, 2025

Originally published: <https://sightlesscribbles.com/posts/the-colonization-of-confidence/>

(By kind permission of the author.)

There's a texture to grief very few examine. People talk about the loud grief—the kind of grief that shatters your soul and rattles your cage of will—but there's another kind of grief that's rarely explored. Watching and listening to your friends losing who they are.

I think the climate is foreshadowing for my life. The bitter cold of the winter is a warning sign I don't pay attention to as I sip hot herbal tea at my writing desk, vanquishing my writers block and attempting to put some literary order back into the chaotic rhythm of my thoughts.

A phone notification shakes me out of my thoughts about how I can stretch out two men taking their clothes off for about five hundred words. It's Leo. He's texted me.

"Hey Rob," he says, "Did you forget about the writing group today?"

I did, but I can't tell him that.

"Nope! Just getting ready!"

When he makes it to my apartment, there's an email notification from my phone. I don't have time to read it at the moment, and oh, I am a fool for not stopping to check what that email is.

The air in the conference space where our "Writers of the Future" group meets always smells of harsh cologne and performative productivity. It is a sensory assault of laptop fans and the frantic tapping of laptop keys. I sit in the corner, my cane hooked over the back of my chair, listening to the room.

I hate the name. Writers of the Future sounds like a corporate slogan for a pesticide company, but the name is less important than the people within it, and that's why I'm here.

Leo sits next to me. I can hear the nervous rhythm of his breathing. Leo is a Black writer with a voice that sounds like jazz—unpredictable, syncopated, full of unexpected dissonances that resolve into heartbreaking chords. He writes about his life, the specific, humid weight of a Texas summer, the way joy can taste like a cheap freeze-pop on a Tuesday.

"I have something new," Leo says. His voice is tight. "But... it's rough. It's really messy."

"Messy is good," I say, leaning in. "Messy is where the blood is."

Leo is a writer of immense, jagged power. He is a powerful man with a voice that sounds like gravel crunching under heavy tires, deep and resonant and full of a history that refuses to be smoothed over. When he reads his work aloud, the air in the room changes pressure. His prose is not "clean." It does not flow like water; it flows like molasses, thick and sweet and slow, or

sometimes like lava, burning everything it touches. He tells more than he shows, a stylistic choice that critics hate but which I find profoundly honest. He doesn't invite you to watch; he commands you to listen.

And I love everything he writes.

Today, the writers in this group aren't buzzing with typing. They're listening to Chad, a white tech bro that sounds like his larynx is constantly massaging his speech for a pamphlet instead of talking to people.

Chad isn't a writer. He's a content generator. He's published 400 generated books on Amazon and won't stop—not to mention—the incessant bragging he does about how he's a better writer because of whatever LLM he's using today. He is the kind of person who listens to podcasts at 2.5x speed because he believes silence is an inefficiency to be eliminated. He works in "Prompt Engineering," a job title that sounds to me like "Assembly Line Foreman for the Dream Factory."

Chad's voice is smooth, frictionless, possessing the terrifying cheerfulness of a customer service bot that cannot be turned off. "Claude just released an update. It's incredible for unblocking. It really smooths out the edges."

He's explaining to the group how to get the most out of large language models. Leo, beside me, is fidgeting with as much annoyance as I am. We're both immensely relieved when Brad finally claps his hands together, as if he's about to announce a press release.

"Okay," says Brad. Brad is the organizer. His voice is a rich, polished baritone that vibrates in his throat but never seems to reach his chest. It's the voice of a podcast host who sells mattresses between segments on mindfulness. "Leo, you're up. Did you bring the revision of The Asphalt Hymn?"

"Yeah," Leo says,

"Great! Alright, creators," Brad announces. The word 'creators' sounds slippery in his mouth, like he's selling a subscription service. "Let's synergize the workflow tonight. Go on, Leo."

I have to suppress the urge to violently groan about his word choice. Instead, I turn my head towards Leo. I can't wait to hear this.

Leo reads. It's a piece about his grandmother's kitchen. He describes the smell of collard greens as a heavy, green blanket that wrestled the air into submission. He describes her laugh as a rusted hinge that still worked perfectly.

It is beautiful. It is imperfect. It stops me cold.

When he finishes, there is a silence. Not the reverent silence of a shared emotional impact, but the uncomfortable, shifting silence of a boardroom that has just been shown a graph with a downward trend.

"It's... interesting," Chad says. "But the pacing is a little weird. And that metaphor about the hinge? It kind of pulls you out of the immersion. It's not very smooth."

"It's not supposed to be smooth," I snap. "It's supposed to be true."

“Leo,” Chad says, choosing to ignore me entirely—he hates me just as much as I hate him—and addresses Leo directly. “Leo, did you read what I sent before this meeting? I took your last draft and ran it through Claud.”

The fuck? I roar internally.

“I asked it to optimize for flow and readability. Listen to this.”

Chad clears his throat. The sound is grating. It sounds as if he’s optimizing how to speak to humans. He reads from his screen.

“Her laugh was a joyous sound, ringing through the house like a silver bell. The kitchen always smelled delicious, the aroma of greens filling the air like a warm hug.”

The words hang in the air like dead flies. They are perfectly grammatical. They are perfectly structured. And they are completely, utterly stripped of everything that is Leo. A silver bell? A warm hug? It is the language of a Hallmark card Leo would never write written by a sociopath.

“See?” Chad says, triumphant. “It just flows better. It’s more... accessible. You should maybe use that as a base, Leo. Clean up your edges.”

I wait for the room to revolt. I wait for the other writers to laugh Chad out of the shop. But they don’t.

“Actually,” says Amber, a poet who used to write searing verse about heartbreak, “that does sound a lot more professional, Leo. The ‘silver bell’ image is really classic.”

“Yeah,” says Mike. “It’s less... abrasive.”

I feel Leo shrink beside me. I can sense the physical collapse of his posture, the way he folds in on himself.

“I guess,” Leo whispers. “I guess I was trying too hard with the hinge.”

“No,” I say, and my voice is the low growl of a guard dog. “The hinge was perfect. The bell is a lie. Leo, that machine didn’t improve your writing. It erased your grandmother.”

“You’re just resistant to the tools, Robert,” Chad sighs. “It’s the future. Adapt or die.”

“Oh, go power down somewhere. This isn’t adaptation,” I say, gripping the edge of the table until my knuckles ache. “It’s lobotomy.”

Nobody agrees with me, though. I am an outcast in a gaggle of readers and writers that seem to prefer LLM writing to the jagged edges.

“And this is why,” Chad practically yells, “why you don’t listen to Luddites! Work smarter, not harder,” Chad beams. The smile in his voice is audible, a smile I want to deck. “That’s the future. Why churn butter when you can buy margarine, right?”

I sit there, gripping my cane until my knuckles pop, feeling the beginning of a horror story that has nothing to do with ghosts and everything to do with the slow, methodical erasure of a human soul.

Part 2.

I walk home, my cane tapping a furious rhythm against the concrete.

I fucking hate them.

I fucking hate the Tech Bros. I hate the hype. I hate the Bros wrongly claiming LLM's will turn us all into toast. I hate their never-ending quest to make their investments have a return. I hate the venture capitalists in their Patagonia vests who talk about "disruption" while they burn down the library of human experience and fuck over workers. I hate them with the specific, intricate hatred of a survivor who knows exactly how the grift works.

I hate LLMs. My hatred knows no bounds. I love the small web, the clean web. I hate tech bloat.

And LLMs are the ultimate bloat.

They didn't build these things to help us. I know this.

Why do LLMs exist? They exist to harm workers. They say it's to "democratize creativity." Bullshit. You don't democratize creativity by automating the act of creation. You democratize it by funding arts education, by supporting libraries, by paying writers a living wage.

No, they created LLMs to solve a supply chain problem.

The "problem" was that creating art—real, human, meaningful writing—is slow. It is expensive. It is unpredictable. And it is diverse. It requires dealing with people. People with traumas, people with political opinions, people with voices that don't fit into a corporate style guide. Minority writers, specifically, are "high friction." We talk about queerness and transphobia and racism, and We talk about disability. We make the advertisers uncomfortable.

So the Tech Bros, in their infinite mediocrity, decided to bypass the human element entirely. They built a machine that scrapes our work—our pain, our joy, our very souls—without consent, grinds it into a mathematical slurry, and extrudes it as a flavorless, inoffensive paste that can be sold by the bucket.

They built a machine to gentrify the English language.

And the horror of watching my friend lose his soul almost eats me alive.

The next week, Leo brings a draft that was written 90% by him. The justifications are quiet, unsure of his own skill.

The week after, he brings a piece that's written 50% by him. The shame is palpable, but it hurts me even more when readers and writers say the LLM versions are always better than his old drafts.

This week, he stuns us all.

"I don't—I don't have a draft," he admits. I immediately take his hand among the gaping and gawking of the room. His skin feels like it's a hallow shell of his soul. His voice is strained, broken, like there's something that's fundamentally shattering inside him nobody can see.

"I just—I just—I haven't written in a while," he says. Claude has been down. I tried to write something... and, and... it just... I can't write. I ain't got nothin'."

Chad chooses that exact moment to colonize the conversation.

"Leo sent me his last draft," Chad announces.

I freeze. NO! Not. Fucking. Again!

"And," Chad continues, "I ran it through the new 'Literary Fiction' AI I've been working on. Listen to the difference."

He reads Leo's original sentence. I know it is Leo's because it has teeth.

and then, he gets to the LLM version.

The group murmurs. "Oh, that flows so much better," someone says. "It's more... universal."

"Universal means average," I snap, wishing I could get away with prompt engineering Chad's stupid LLM to self destruct. "It means it touches no one because it tries to touch everyone."

"Robert," Chad sighs. "Always the contrarian. Look, the metrics don't lie. Readers prefer the second one. We did A/B testing on Wattpad. The second one had a 40% higher retention rate."

"You are feeding them sludge," I say, my voice rising. "And because they are starving, they eat it. And then you tell them sludge is what food tastes like."

"It's just writing, Rob," Chad says, his voice hardening. "Why do you have to make it a crusade? Leo likes it. Don't you, Leo?"

We all turn to Leo. Even though I can't see his face, I feel the weight of the room pivot toward him.

"I..." Leo's voice cracks. A dry, brittle sound. "I don't know."

"Leo," I say gently. "Tell him you are a good writer that doesn't need fixing."

"It's better," Leo whispers.

The words hit me like a physical blow. A kick to the shin.

"What?" I ask.

"It's better," Leo says, louder this time, but with a hysterical edge, a vibration of pure panic.

"He's right, Rob. My metaphors... they're confusing. People don't get them. The machine... it makes me sound smart. It makes me sound like a real writer."

"You don't need an LLM to write for you. You're a good writer," I say, but his voice cracks as he stands up, snatches his coat, and practically bolts out of the room.

"I can't write anymore. I can't write anymore. I just—I can't."

I chase after him but it's too late. He's already out of the building.

The unraveling doesn't happen all at once. It is a slow rot, a decomposition of confidence that the Germans call *Zersetzung*.^[1] Psychological decomposition. It was the method the Stasi used to break dissidents not with torture, but with gaslighting, with subtle alterations of reality until the subject lost faith in their own mind.

The Tech Bros haven't invented the term, but they have automated the process. They have built a machine that weaponizes mediocrity and sells it as perfection.

Two weeks later, I sit in Leo's apartment. The air is heavy with the smell of stale laundry and despair. I have brought cookies—oatmeal raisin, heavy on the cinnamon, baked until the edges are crisp and the centers are dense and chewy. Food is a language of gravity; it pulls you back to earth.

"Eat," I say, pushing the container across the table.

Leo doesn't move. "I got into Fiction Magazine," he says softly.

"Leo! That's huge!" I reach out, finding his forearm. His muscle is tense, rigid as wood. "Why do you sound like you're at a funeral?"

"Because I didn't write it, Rob."

"You used the LLM again?"

"I used it for the whole thing," he whispers. "I fed it my draft. My messy, ugly draft. And it spit out... it spit out this smooth, perfect thing. And the editors loved it. They said it was 'refreshing.' They said the prose was 'elegant.'"

He pulls his arm away from me. I hear the frantic clicking of keys.

"Listen to this email," he says. His voice sounds like he's chewing glass as he reads it to me.

"Dear Leo, we were impressed by the fluidity of your metaphors. Usually, your work feels a bit... disjointed. But this piece sang. The line about the 'tapestry of fate' was particularly moving."

"Tapestry of fate," Leo spits. The words sound like poison in his mouth. "I hate that phrase. I would never write that phrase. It's a cliché. It's slop. But they liked it better, Rob. They liked the machine better than me."

"They liked the conditioning," I say, my voice sharp. "They liked the familiarity. It's the linguistic equivalent of McDonald's fries. It's chemically engineered to be palatable, but there's no nutrition in it. It passes through the brain without leaving a mark."

"Maybe I'm just bad," Leo says. The sentence hangs in the air, heavy and wet.

"You are not bad. You are a jazz musician in a world trying to sell ringtones."

"But Robert, I can't do it anymore," Leo says, and then he breaks. It isn't a loud sob. It is a continuous intake of breath, a collapse of the chest. "Fuck, I tried to write this morning. Just me. Just a blank document. And I stared at the blinking cursor, and every sentence I thought of felt... weak. It felt amateur. I wrote, 'The rain hit the roof like gravel.' And then I thought, no, the AI would say something better. And I deleted it. I deleted it all."

I'm about to say something when he continues,

"I feel so stupid, Rob," he chokes out, the words drowning in his tears. "I feel so stupid. I let it into my head and now I can't get it out. I look at my own thoughts and they look wrong. They look like errors."

I stand up and walk around the table, navigating by the sound of his breathing. I find his shoulder and pull him into an embrace. He clings to me for dear life, his hands clutching my body as if I'm his only life raft at sea.

"That is the trap, Leo. That is the psychological warfare. They are selling you a solution to a problem they created. They want you to feel insecure. If you feel insecure, you pay the subscription. They are strip-mining your confidence to sell you back a synthetic version of it."

"I'm losing money!" he wails. "I'm losing money, I can't write anymore—and readers—readers love my LLM writing! I don't know what to do, Rob! Readers like it. Editors like it. Editors. Editors of Magazines. I can't write anymore! I just—what the hell is happening to me—why do readers like it?"

"I don't know," I answer honestly, rocking him, trying to comfort his soul with my words. "But just because people want to eat McDonalds, that doesn't mean we need to stop home cooking. But I don't know what to do. I'm just one person, but Leo, I love you, okay? I'll always be here if you need me. If you need me to look over a draft or—"

"It's not just the subscription," he weeps. "It's the readers. They're getting used to the slop, Rob. They're getting used to the smooth edges. My writing... my real writing... it feels like it has too much friction now. Even the editors. Even the people who are supposed to know better."

"Friction is where the heat comes from," I say fiercely. "Friction is where the life is."

But he can't hear me. The Zersetzung is working. He is taking himself apart, piece by piece, and replacing the parts with synthetic fillers because the world has told him his own parts are defective.

Days later, it's my turn. we're back at that fucking writers' group. Although, today, it feels like it's a uniquely crafted torture chamber.

I decided to read something. I usually don't. I keep my work for my blog, for the people who understand that a screen reader isn't a constraint but an instrument. But I needed to show Leo that imperfection was power. I needed to prove that raw writing hits harder than processed data.

I read a piece about my mother. It is raw. It is angry. It describes the sound of her voice as "a serrated knife cutting through warm butter." It describes the smell of the trailer park as "wet cardboard and ambition gone sour." It is disjointed. It has no tapestries. It has no symphonies. It is a piece of writing that demands you look at the ugly thing and call it by its name. It's imperfect, but it's everything me.

When I finish, the room is silent.

"Interesting," Chad says. The word is a dismissal. "Very... visceral. But Rob, my guy, it's a little hard to follow. The sentence structure is all over the place. And 'wet cardboard'? It's a bit gross, isn't it?"

"It's the truth," I say.

"Truth doesn't scale," Chad says. He taps on his keyboard. "Just for fun, I ran your first paragraph through the new GPT-fiction-Plus wrapper I'm beta testing. Just to see what it could do with the core idea. I prompted it to 'elevate the tone' and 'smooth the syntax.'"

"Don't," I warn. My voice drops—calm, dangerous, flat. "Do not run my life through your blender."

"Too late," Chad says. "Listen to this improvement."

He clears his throat, loving this. I feel like I'm being punctured by a thousand arrows through the heart.

When he finishes, Chad beams. I can hear the smile in his voice. "See? Same info, but now it's palatable. Now it's content. It took out the aggression. It leveled the tone. It's objectively better writing."

A woman in the front row murmurs, "Oh, that is much nicer. It feels more... literary."

"Exactly!" Chad says. "I fixed it."

"Chad," I say, my voice calm, the voice of a teacher correcting an unwilling student. "Why did it choose 'stone' for the throat metaphor?"

"What? Because it's intelligent. It's smart. It knows. Because it fits."

"No," I say. "It chose 'stone' because statistically, in the petabytes of training data scraped without consent from the internet, the word 'stone' appears in proximity to 'lump in throat' with a probability of 0.04 percent, which is higher than 'wet creature.' It isn't a choice. It's a math problem. It is a predictive text algorithm on steroids. It doesn't know what a throat is. It doesn't know what fear feels like. It is predicting the next token based on mediocrity."

"It's still better writing," Chad insists, but his voice vibrates with the anger that someone who he thinks is a technophobe knows this tech better than he knows the tech.

"It is a hallucination of competence," I say. "Chad, asking that machine to improve writing is like asking a blender to improve a salad. You don't get a better salad. You get sludge. And you," I turn my head to sweep the room, "you are all cheering for the sludge because it's easy to swallow. You are letting this tech bro convince you that your own distinct flavors are defects."

I hear a sound next to me.

It is Leo. He is making a sound like a wounded animal trying to stay quiet. A high, thin whine in the back of his throat.

"You... fixed it," Leo whispers.

"See?" Chad says to me. "Even Leo gets it."

"No," I say. I stand up, unfolding my cane with a snap that sounds like a gunshot in the quiet room. "You didn't fix it. You lobotomized it. You took a scream and turned it into elevator music. You took the specific, painful texture of my life and turned it into a generic stock photo."

"Whoa, calm down, Luddite," Chad laughs. "You're just jealous the machine has better flow than you."

“I am not a fucking technophobe!” I shout, and the room flinches. “I built my own website stack from scratch! I code in raw HTML! I know more about the architecture of the internet than you and your wrapper-scripting ass ever will! I love technology! I love tools that expand human capacity! This?” I point my cane at his laptop. “This isn’t a tool. This is a replacement. This is a parasite. It doesn’t expand us; it eats us. It eats our confidence. It eats our specificity. It eats our struggle.”

I turn to Leo. “I’m a better writer than this—any LLM. So are you, Leo! You’re a better writer.”

Leo doesn’t move. He stands up, sad, resigned. He grabs his coat and walks out. I quickly tap my way out to follow him.

“Rob,” he says, stopping to turn back, facing my fury. “Rob, I wish I was as good of a writer as you. I’m a shit—”

“Leo, no. You’re a good writer—”

“I can’t write, Rob!” Leo screams. It is a terrifying sound, a man ripping his own throat open. “I feel so stupid! I look at my words and they look like trash! I can’t do it! I’m done! I hate everything I do without the AI!”

I have no idea what to say. Leo comes closer, his hands grasping mine. The force of his grip breaks my heart.

“Rob,” he says, and his voice shakes with tears. “I hate this. I hate this.”

“I know, buddy. I know! I’m here.”

As I let go for now, I don’t know what to do to help him since my writing exercises didn’t work. I told him to write fun Fanfiction. I told him to just write something bad. It’s okay. I told him he didn’t have to be marketable, but nothing is working, and he hates his own writing more as the days pass.

I know Leo can still write without an LLM. He just needs encouragement. This is the thought that plants another seed as I leave the building. I can’t go home yet.

Part 3.

I take a bus to the other side of the city, to a neighborhood that smells of pupusas, exhaust fumes, and resilience. I walk three blocks, absently counting the cracks in the sidewalk through the tip of my cane, until the acoustic landscape changes. The echo of the street vanishes, absorbed by walls of paper.

I eventually make it to The Cat’s Shelf. The bell above the door doesn’t ding; it clatters, a sound of heavy brass against wood. The air inside is cool and smells of vanilla (from the degrading lignin in old paper), binding glue, and peppermint tea.

Entering it is a sensory baptism. The floorboards groan under my feet—a specific, B-flat groan that tells me exactly where I am in the room. There is no ultrasonic hum of cooling fans here. There is the rustle of pages and the hushed murmuring of conspiracy.

“Rob?” Sarah’s voice comes from behind the counter. Sarah sounds like she looks—sturdy, worn, and warm. She is a trans woman who built this bookstore with her bare hands and a lot of crowdfunding. She understands the politics of space.

“I need a favor,” I say. “A big one.”

“For you? Always. Do you need an audiobook or a body buried?”

“I need a router,” I say. “And I need a space.”

I explain it all. The Tech Bros. Chad. The Zersetzung. Leo’s disintegration. The horror of watching a friend scrub the humanity out of his work because a machine told him he was inefficient. I tell her about the magazine editors who preferred the lie.

Sarah listens. She pours me tea. It’s an act of love I didn’t know I needed.

“you’re not being hysterical, Robbie. They’re colonizing the imagination,” Sarah says softly. “That’s what it is. Gentrification of the mind. They price you out of your own creativity.”

“Yeah. That’s why I want to make a space, a space where that can’t happen. I want to start a new group,” I say. “Here. After hours. But I have rules. No LLMs. Not just discouraged—blocked. I want to configure your router to sinkhole every request to OpenAI, Claude, Anthropic, all of them. If they try to connect, I want the browser to redirect to an HTML page that has a very judgmental cat purring at you.”

“I love it,” Sarah says. “When do we start?”

“Tonight,” I say. “I can’t go home. I need to bring my friend back.”

We call it “The Drafty writer’s group.” It’s not the best name I’ve ever invented, but I don’t care.

The first meeting is small. Just me, Sarah, and a non-binary poet named Ash who writes sestinas about urban decay. We sit in a circle on mismatched chairs. I bring cookies—chocolate chip with sea salt, the contrast of sweet and sharp designed to wake up the palate.

I don’t invite Leo yet. He isn’t ready.

But word spreads. I don’t use social media with an algorithm. I use the vast power of word of mouth. We print physical zines—little folded pieces of paper that smell of toner—and leave them in coffee shops, record stores, and community centers. Any place that will let us talk about the space.

Tired of the Slop? Come write poorly with us.

Recovering Prompters Welcome.

We don’t want your polished draft. We want your mess.

By the third week, we have seven people.

One of them is Adam. Adam is a Trans Black man with a voice that is soft, almost a whisper. He sits in the corner for the first hour, just listening to the sound of pens scratching on paper and keys clattering, phone keyboards clicking, the rhythmic clacking of my mechanical keyboard.

"I... I used to use it too," Adam says suddenly during the break.

The room goes still. Not the hostile silence of Chad's group. A holding silence. A waiting silence.

"I wrote a story about my transition," Adam says. "And I showed it to a friend, and he said it was 'too angry.' So I put it in ChatGPT. I told it to make it 'more universal.' And it did. It took out the anger. It took out the specific smell of fear. It took out the things that made me, me. It made it... nice. And I hated it. But I couldn't stop. Because every time I tried to write the anger back in, I felt like I was doing it wrong. I felt like the machine knew better how to be human than I did."

"You weren't doing it wrong," I say. "You were doing it human. The machine averages out humanity until it's just a beige paste."

"I want to write the anger back," Adam whispers. "But I'm scared. I'm scared it's going to be bad."

"Let it be bad," Sarah says from the counter. "Be bad. Be furious. Be unintelligible. Just don't be artificial."

"We call that being a Recovering Prompter," I say. "There's no shame in it here. We know the pressure. We know the addiction of the easy fix. But we're here to do the hard work."

Adam picks up his pen. I hear the scratch, hesitant at first, then harder, faster, digging into the paper until I think it might tear. Encouragement and love flood the space.

There's still one person missing, though.

I send Leo an email and a text message, and yes, an actual letter.

Leo,

I made a writing garden. It's full of weeds. It's messy. Nothing is polished. It's not perfect.

We have cookies.

I miss your voice. Not the LLM one. The one that shakes the floor.

Come home. You are always welcome. I miss you. Come to one group, just one. We need you.

- Rob

He shows up twenty minutes late. I hear the bell clatter. I hear his heavy, hesitant steps. He smells of old sweat and that specific, acrid scent of anxiety.

"I didn't bring anything," he says, standing in the doorway. "I haven't written a word in two months, Rob. I'm empty. The well is dry."

"You're not empty," I say. "You're just quiet. Come sit."

He sits next to Adam.

"This is Leo," I tell the group. "He's the best writer I know. He's just forgetting how the instrument works."

"I'm not the best," Leo mutters. "I'm a fraud. I sent a story to a magazine that a robot wrote, and they paid me for it. I cashed the check, Rob. I spent the money."

"And you're here now," Adam says. "That's the work."

That night, Leo doesn't write. But he eats a cookie. And he listens. He listens to Ash read a poem that doesn't rhyme and has a stanza that is just a scream. He listens to Adam read a paragraph that is so angry it feels like heat radiating from a furnace.

And for the first time in months, I hear Leo breathe. A real breath. Deep into the diaphragm.

The resistance grows.

It isn't a war fought with DDOS attacks or angry tweets or furious posts about how AI sucks. It is fought with vulnerability. It is fought by local businesses putting our flyer in their windows. It is fought by people telling their friends, "Hey, there's a place where you don't have to be perfect."

Weeks bleed into a month. We start talking of putting on a live literature event. None of us have money, but none of us care. We want to do this.

As we plan, people come to just listen. readers arrive to just enjoy writers being messy on the page. Other writers that are recovering prompt engineers come to our space. They all write poorly while they eat and drink, laughing at lines, embracing hugs, feeling far less alone than when they walked in the door.

As the night of our first live reading is under way, just before the event, three people walk in who smell of expensive leather jackets and throat lozenges.

"Is this the place?" a woman asks. Her voice is incredible—rich, trained, with perfect diction but a warmth that feels like velvet. It's a voice that knows how to hold a listener.

"Who's asking?" Sarah says.

"My name is Britany," the woman says. "I'm an audiobook narrator. This is David and Sam. We... we heard about what you're doing from the guy who runs the falafel stand down the street. We would love to read for anyone with disabilities or social anxiety or who just don't want to read work themselves."

"that's incredible!" I say, unable to hide my joyous shock, "but we can't pay you. We have a lot of cookies and anger but that doesn't translate into cash, and we didn't get enough donations to pay you all."

Brittany laughs. It is a musical sound, telling me everything is fine with the world. "Honey, I don't want your money. Do you know what I've been reading for the last six months? AI-generated litRPG novels. Thousands of pages of slop. I am dying of thirst. I am drowning in slop. I sit in my booth, and I read sentences that mean nothing, written by nobody, for an algorithm."

"We never seen a space for recovering prompt writers. This is such a cool idea. We want to lend our skills. We want to help. We heard there was grit here," David says. His voice is a deep baritone. "We heard there were unpolished artists. We want to read them. For free. Just let us chew on something real. Let us narrate something that's growing into itself."

“We have plenty of unpolished artists,” I say. “Welcome to the writer’s garden.”

The Live Lit event was meant to be a small showcase. It turns into a riot of joy. We didn’t shy away from the fact that recovering LLM prompters were going to be performing tonight.

Live readings by recovering humans. Show starts at eight PM.

The flyers catch the most attention. Sarah can’t even fit everybody in the bookstore.

The alleyway is packed. I can feel the body heat, a wall of humidity and anticipation. It smells of rain, cheap beer, and electricity. There are people here from the neighborhood, people from the university, people who just sound tired of being sold things.

I walk up to the microphone. I tap my cane against the stand to gauge the distance. The hum of the PA system is dirty, crackling with interference. I love it. It sounds like potential.

The microphone hums and pops before me. None of us are audio technicians, and it shows. It’s the most goddamn beautiful thing in the world. It’s the sound of electricity trying to speak.

“Thank, uh, thank you all for coming,” I say, and the microphone squeaks with a high-pitched feedback whine that makes a few people wince. I smile. I love that whine.

“You might notice our manifesto on the door,” I say, my voice booming through the cheap PA system. “These writers... some of them have used LLMs before. Or what the venture capitalists call ‘AI.’ I think we can all agree, fuck AI, right?”

A cheer goes up. It’s ragged and loud.

“But,” I continue, lowering my voice, leaning in until my lips almost brush the metal grille, “I believe there should be a space for people that have been broken by the system. There will always be people that love whatever slop the LLM makes. There will always be those readers—and God help them, the editors—that prefer the LLM versions, the slop, the generated works that slide down your throat without you ever having to care about the artist behind it.”

I pause. I listen to the silence. It is a deep, attentive silence. The kind of silence you find in a forest, not a packed room.

“Tonight, you’ll hear grit,” I say. “You’ll hear mess. You’ll hear first drafts. You’ll hear bleeding onto the page. Nothing will be polished. Nothing will be sanitized. I admit, some things won’t make a lick of fucking sense. But you all are here because you love the mess. You love artists. You love art. You love the chaos of a human mind trying to explain itself to another human mind.”

I can feel the energy in the room shifting. It is a wave of warmth washing over me.

“We didn’t tell you which writers are recovering LLM users,” I say, my voice thickening with emotion. “Because they deserve better than to be hated. Psychological harm and warfare isn’t easy to recover from. When a machine tells you your soul is inefficient, it takes a long time to stop believing it. But none of the pieces were generated by an LLM tonight. Not one word.”

I grip the mic stand harder.

“So enjoy the recovering writers. Have some cookies—Sarah made them, and I can confirm by tactile inspection they are excellent. Be a part of the readers and listeners that listen to and appreciate art instead of just consume it like content pigs at a trough.”

Laughter ripples through the room.

“If you don’t want to support any of these writers for fear all of them used an LLM at some point, I understand. Trauma leaves scars. But there’s information on how to donate to these writers in the front, and on the bookstore’s website. Thank you for giving everyone a chance. Thank you for saying fuck you to the way others want you to be. Thank you for taking a chance on artists.”

I take a breath. I can smell the ozone of the amp and the sugar of the cookies.

“Now... let’s have some fucking fun!”

I step back. The applause is deafening. It isn’t polite golf claps. It is stomping feet. It is whistles. It is the sound of a community knitting itself back together.

With every artist, the applause increases in volume. The audience participation is utterly stellar. There’s whoops. There’s cheers. There’s exclamations of shock and wracked sobs and guttural laughter that spills out into the open space.

Nobody leaves. Everyone stays. Finally, it’s time.

“and our final artist for tonight,” Sarah announces, “is Leo.”

The stomping grows louder.

I hear Leo walk to the mic. His footsteps are heavy. Solid. The footsteps of a man who remembers he has weight.

He clears his throat. It is a wet, nervous sound.

“This is... this is a first draft,” Leo says. His voice shakes, just a little. “It has typos. I didn’t run it through a spellchecker. I definitely didn’t run it through Claude. And... for a while, I thought I couldn’t write without it. I thought my voice was broken. But my friends told me broken things still make sound.”

Laughter. Warm, supportive laughter.

“It’s called The Taste of Love.”

He begins to read.

It’s the best thing I’ve ever heard. It’s about his momma cooking for him in her kitchen. There are stumbling blocks. Some metaphors swerve a little. Everything is Leo again. It’s the best story I’ve heard from him in months, even with its imperfections.

Britany, the audiobook narrator, is standing next to me. I hear her inhale sharply, a sound of pure appreciation as the scene unfolds before our mind’s eye. His words grow in confidence as he dives deeper into his work. Everyone is engrossed.

“He’s good,” she whispers.

“He’s real,” I whisper back.

Leo continues reading. He describes the sound of a screen door slamming in the wind. He describes the texture of his grandmother's hands—"rough as unfinished pine." He doesn't try to hide his tears when he speaks of her clothes. He doesn't hold back. He doesn't try to change any part of his mess.

He builds a world out of friction.

When he finishes, there is a second of silence—that profound, heavy silence that happens when a truth has landed in the room.

Then, the world explodes.

The applause isn't just hands clapping. It's yells. It's people roaring. It's whistles. People stomp their feet. I swear, I think the sound rips a hole through time and space. The wooden floor vibrates so hard it travels up my cane and into my marrow.

The applause is a physical assault of love. I hear Leo sob, just once, a sharp intake of breath over the microphone, before he is drowned out by the noise.

I feel a hand on my shoulder. It is Sarah.

"We did it, Rob," she shouts over the roar. "We built this—this night—we did it!"

I lean back against the brick wall, feeling the rough texture snag against my jacket. I listen to the chaotic, unpolished, beautiful noise of human beings screaming for a story that has jagged edges.

The Tech Bros can keep their tokens. They can keep their scale. They can keep their LLM modules.

We have the love. We have the care. And we have the voices.

And that, I realize as the tears unapologetically spill onto my cheeks, is something they can never code.

If you enjoyed this story, support artists and art. But for real, if you enjoyed this story, you might enjoy Frindle by Andrew Clements^[2]

Footnotes:

1. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zersetzung>
2. <https://bookshop.org/a/77/9780689818769>

Ronny Chieng's Harvard Class Day Address

Ronny Chieng

May 27, 2026

Originally published: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORq_Hi5dBG

The Last-Minute Speaker

Thank you for having me speak here today. I'm very honored to be your class committee's last minute second choice speaker. I don't know who canceled. I've been trying to find out all week. But I guess I'm on the short list of people who's within Amtrak distance and not in the Epstein files. I understand it was down to me and Baby Yoda. And I think that guy's doing press right now. So you're stuck with me, someone who couldn't get into this college, much less graduate from it.

Do I Get a Degree for This?

And by the way, on that topic, before we go any further, do I get a degree for this shit or what? Because I was Googling it and people were getting degrees and I don't know, is that just like a commencement speech thing? Is this like different to that? This is class day. I guess this is like the Gobi tent to the Coachella main stage. All right. Degrees for headliners. Right, Dean? All right.

My mom actually came from Singapore just to watch this because she thinks I'm graduating from Harvard. So she's right in the front row. So I don't know. Can someone on stage just hand me a piece of paper or something, a scroll, Dean, yeah, thank you. Thank you. I don't know, maybe someone here can give me the art history degree. Trust me, you're not going to need it.

Seriously, I had Netflix specials, I had movie premieres. I host a daily show. My mom didn't come for any of that. I tell her I'm at Harvard and she gets on the first flight over. In fact, my sister also came and she only came because I told her Conan O'Brien was giving the commencement speech. That's the power of this institution that you guys are graduating from. It'll make Asians do anything. Up to and including voting against affirmative action. The Last Generation of Harvard Grads with Straight A's

So congratulations to all of you, again, yeah, congratulations on being the last generation of Harvard grads with straight A's. You're telling me for the last 200 years or whatever the fuck, everyone at Harvard was a bunch of dumb asses with inflated grades and nobody noticed. I don't know what's dumber, that all your grades have been inflated or that the professors here just voted to stop inflating your grades. Do you know how stupid that is? You do realize the more A's you hand out, the better everyone looks. I can't believe I have to explain this to you guys. Didn't you guys go to Harvard? What kind of goody two-shoes professors do you have up here? No wonder President Trump's trying to destroy you.

I just noticed there's a sign language guy who has the sign for "President Trump trying to destroy you." Don't worry, sign language guy, it gets worse.

Welcome to the Real World

Anyway, so no one here has good grades anymore, but good news, good grades don't even matter anymore anyway. Welcome to the real world, graduates, where social media followers are the new GPA. These days you can't even be a barista in Brooklyn with less than 10,000 IG followers. If you don't like that system, well, take it out with Harvard alumni Mark Zuckerberg.

Fuck AI

On the topic of A's, by the way, can I just say, fuck AI, fuck AI, fuck AI. I'm so glad you agree. I prepared a completely different speech in case you guys turned on me, but I won't be needing that anymore. Fuck AI, fuck it, fuck it to death, all right? What's the sign language sign for that? Good, good to know.

It's stupid. It's so stupid. Have you tried using it? It's always wrong. Like, I asked AI what's the fastest way to get from New York City to Harvard and it told me to take FlixBus. I'm a movie star. Hello, I don't take the bus. A car only.

On Artificial Intelligence and Your Generation's Real Mission

I mean, do you even know what AI is saying about Harvard? The garbage that AI is spouting about you guys. AI says that Harvard has a \$56.9 billion endowment and that the Harvard Graduate Student Union is on strike to try to get a livable wage increase to \$25 an hour. There's no way that's true. I mean, that's ridiculous. How bad are these AI hallucinations getting?

Look, a lot of other respected graduation speakers in colleges around America are talking about you guys needing to master AI for the future, okay? I'm here to tell you the mission of your generation is to destroy A.I. Kill it. To accomplish this, you'll have to capture and reprogram an AI to be on the side of humanity, then commandeer its own time-traveling technology, send it back to the past to defeat the current AI before it gains sentience. This isn't just graduation day, this is Terminator 2 Judgment Day.

And I know, I know there's someone sitting out here right now who's just like, "Well, you know, what about the use of AI to pioneer breakthroughs in medicine and physics?" Well, first of all, shut up, nerd. I'm not talking about that. Obviously, if you're using it for that purpose, you're not the problem, okay? I'm talking about the accumulation of cognitive debt due to excessive use of large language models according to a study by MIT published in 2025 in Archives.

That's right, MIT. MIT did that study. I guess you guys were too busy giving each other A's. Feel free to boo MIT, by the way, and AI, and yourselves, I guess.

Why AI Will Make Mediocre People Dumber

Look, this is actually good news, okay? This is why you guys shouldn't be scared of AI, because I think AI is just going to end up making mediocre people dumber. Have you heard how dumb people brag about how they use AI? They're always like, "Hey, did you know that AI can now read my email, summarize it, and drop a response?" Yeah, you know who else can do that? Me. I

can do that. You can't do that? How useless are you? You need artificial intelligence just to match me? I'm a dumbass who couldn't get into Harvard.

From what I can see, getting an actual advantage from AI in the future will require a minimum escape velocity of intelligence that I'm assuming you guys from Harvard have. Everyone else who can't match that is just going to get dumber, and that's when you run up the score on them, assuming we still have a functioning society, of course.

Master Your Craft — AI Is Fuel, Not the Fire

But to run up the score, you're going to have to master your craft, okay? And AI can be the fuel, but fuel is useless if you can't kindle the fire. For example, I recently used AI to use regression analysis to prove that a certain race of people are mathematically terrible at sports. I won't say which race, but thank you for not inviting Hasan Minhaj to Harvard. My point is, learning the fundamentals still matter. If I didn't know what a regression analysis was, and if I wasn't fundamentally racist, would I have been able to do any of that? No.

Untalented people love bragging about using AI to help them draft their speeches and their scripts and their podcasts and their promo videos for UFC fights at the White House, which to be fair, even if they had filmed that for real, it would still have looked like AI. But what they're missing is this. The creating is the fun part. The best part of comedy writing is figuring out the puzzle pieces of a joke and getting the self-regard from having accomplished a difficult thing. Why would I want AI to take that away from me?

You know what problem I want AI to solve? I want the problem of AI making everything look like shit. I want AI to solve that problem. How about that?

AI and the Journey vs. the Shortcut

Or how about, can AI take away the part of comedy writing where my TV pilot gets passed on and when I ask if I can pitch it to someone else, the network says, "We don't want it, but we also don't want anyone else to have it. We just want you to be sad." Can AI solve that?

I recently tried to introduce my friend to Buddhism through a book called Buddhism Made Simple. It was literally a book about Buddhism made simple. And instead of reading it, he used AI to summarize it in 10 seconds. Believe it or not, he didn't reach enlightenment. It turns out speed running Buddhism is completely missing the point.

And I know this platitude is almost worthy of AI, but the reason shortcuts to skip to the end aren't always good is because the journey isn't just how we acquire skills. The journey is the point of all this. It is! It turns out maybe the real Harvard was the friends we made along the way.

Look, I know this won't apply to everyone's industry, okay, but I'm just saying whatever your chosen profession is, please don't let AI rob you of the fun part of it.

Mastery vs. Faking It

I think your generation's upcoming battle won't be humans against AI. That's at least two months away. It's going to be people with substance versus people with shallow knowledge. It's going to be mastery versus faking it. It's going to be people with good taste versus tacky. I trust you will put in the work necessary to be on the right side of those battles.

And anytime you want to hand that degree over, Dean, that'd be really nice.

The Job Market and Unsolicited Uncle Advice

Now you might be worried about the job market you're entering, but don't worry. There are jobs now that exist that we couldn't have imagined when I graduated, and it's going to be the same for you. For example, when I graduated 17 years ago, I didn't know posting photos of my feet could be a full-time job. In another 17 years, it might be the only job.

So let me try to speak your language here, okay, because I know you guys low-key see me as some cooked unk now, but good. I am a unk. I am a unk. Listen to the unk. Here's the unk-sire advice portion of this speech.

Make sure your offline world is better than your online one. If that wasn't obvious, remember the floss. Hug your parents. When someone invites you to a private sex island, always say no. Always. Create more than you complain. I lost track. I can't even count my fingers. That's how bad my cognitive decline is. Being cynical or contrarian is not an indication of intelligence. You will not be able to outperform an index fund. Make your mistakes.

I want you guys to look to your left and look to your right right now. Remember these faces. Some of you will be evil. Some of you will be evil people who just want a ton of money.

Money Is Easy — You're From Harvard

I just turned 40. Let me tell you, money isn't everything. It's only good for buying comfort, necessities, peace of mind, and self-worth. But guess what? Making money is easy in America. It's easy. You can tell dick jokes on TV. You can run a crypto scam. You can storm the Capitol and get a payout from the government.

In fact, I'll prove it to you. Watch this. Which camera is it? This camera? All right. Hey, this speech at Harvard is brought to you by Panda Express. Panda Express, have you eaten yet? You see that? I just paid for my kids' Harvard tuition. I'm just kidding. I hope they can go to Yale.

My point is, shut up. My point is, you guys are in the same gang anyway. What are you booing for? You're going to take over Paramount and fire everybody. My point is, money is too easy for you guys. We say this to kids all the time: you can be anything you want. You guys are from Harvard.

You actually can do anything you want. You can be anything you want. Yeah, you're not like these other dumb kids we keep bullshitting to. So I'm asking you guys, don't just chase the money. You're better than that. Tackle the world's problems like hunger, or access to education, or microplastics in our balls.

Seriously, someone should really get on that. We're all laughing here but we all have microplastics in our balls right now. Well, how about that problem when you're trying to show your date a photo on your phone but then a notification appears at the exact same moment and then you actually click on that instead of the photo, so now she's reading a private text to your mom asking if Drake is really a pedophile? Can someone fix that?

Follow Your Passions

And look, if saving the world is too daunting, at least chase the thing that you can't stop talking about every day to the point where it ruins all your relationships. Follow your passions. For me, that was stand-up comedy. I love comedy so much I gladly skip weddings, birthdays, funerals just to do open mics. People were born, people died. I don't even know what my family is anymore. I have no friends. But what I do have is the ability to talk to myself in a room with three other comics waiting to get on stage.

What I'm saying is, when you have clarity of purpose and you're doing something you love, every day can be a joy. And that joy can spread to others.

And if you don't find something that makes you happy that also helps others, remember you can always just work for McKinsey. Work for McKinsey. Go do it. "What's that? You can increase profits by firing people?" Wow, what a genius move.

A Moment of Gratitude

Before I go — it's okay, I wasn't going to get into the school anyway — before I go, I just want to do something I learned from the GOAT white guy of all time, Mr. Rogers the greatest white guy of all time when he was accepting an Emmy Award in 1976, this is what he did and it's kind of echoing what everyone here has said already, so sorry if you heard it, but whatever, you asked me to do this speech in like three days.

So we were all here because someone believed in us. I just want everyone here to just let's just do this for real. Let's just close our eyes for just 10 seconds and I want you to think, actually visualize the people who helped you get here today. Let's just do it for 10 seconds. I'll time you on my vintage Rolex. Just close your eyes, see their faces, as many as you can remember, try to remember what they did for you, how they helped you. Think of Your Enemies

Okay, now I want you guys to think of your enemies. Think of your enemies. Think of everyone you hate. Think of how much better you are than everyone else. Think of everyone who said you going to Harvard would amount to nothing.

And who are you thinking of when I asked you to think of people who helped you? Me, for me, it was my wife Hannah, it was my mom, my dad, my sister, Trevor Noah, who stuck his neck out to hire me on The Daily Show because he felt strongly that the show needed an Asian voice on it. Yes, a Black man helped an Asian man get into America through affirmative action, and through our satire and seven years of speaking truth to power, we helped Donald Trump get elected twice. Whoops. Good luck with that.

Go Out and Help Someone

But remember, remember just how you felt when you were thinking of the people who helped you. And now it's time for you to go out there and be a person who someone else thinks of fondly as having helped them.

Because one day soon, I promise you, some kids will be asking you for advice for after they graduate, and you can say, be kind, be joyful, but for the love of God, help me destroy these machines first.

Thank you for having me. You guys are awesome. Congrats to everybody — the students and the parents and the faculty. Thanks for having me here.

Our Workplace LLM Mass Delusion

Ava

Jun 10, 2026

Originally published: <https://blog.avas.space/llm-circus/>

I can't help but wonder whether we will look back on this AI hype in the workplace with confusion and embarrassment. If we indeed progress into a future where the bubble will burst, models will further close up, become too expensive for the average user, enshittified, or really specialized for specific fields and most promises end up not fulfilled, how will employers everywhere play this off? How will employees recover from witnessing this cultish environment suddenly dropping off as if nothing happened?

My employer, for example, struggles with funding. Open positions are not to be filled and will just fall away; employee bonuses for great work have been permanently cancelled 2 years ago due to the tense financial situation; necessities fell away with a message to just "find a way to deal with it". Several departments are completely overworked with no help in sight, and are just asked to cut corners. Important licenses and databases are dropped to save money.

This is the backdrop to our AI adoption in the workplace. Still, somehow, there is enough money to hire consultants that advise to go all in on AI for a possible future where money can be saved, and enough money to pay external companies for LLM workshops and seminars for employees for years, and enough money to pay for licenses of both ChatGPT and Copilot.

That means: The employee bonuses that should go to all the hardworking employees, and the money to further support our work, is going to grifters, security risks, bad workshops that are not teaching anything remotely usable for our work, and technofascists.

Not only that!

We have recurring house-wide meetings where groups are asked to show off their LLM projects. They register them, try them out for a couple months, and then come back presenting their results. I have attended all of these meetings so far, and there was not a single one that actually worked out. All projects ended with the conclusion that this isn't workable, that this isn't saving time, or that it over-complicates things. Hundreds of people, different teams, people enthusiastic about AI, all kinds of projects, and there wasn't a single success.

All kinds of workshops, "prompt-engineering", custom GPTs and skills, pre-prepared documents and templates could not make something truly effective and reproducible in our field of work (not anything coding related!). It was a messy gamble every time. It took a significant amount of time to fine-tune everything, to repeat the task, to verify the output, and correct mistakes before continuing with the rest of the workflow. Not considering this or that document, hallucinations, inability to fill in documents correctly or edit them were the biggest complaints. Even on an Enterprise license, the restrictions were too great.

But wait, there's more!

We also have house-wide meetings where employees show off how ChatGPT can be used regardless of specific projects; just general use cases for the workday. Let me tell you what great things were shown off.

For one, it was shown that you can ask the bot how it feels today. That wasn't presented as a joke, or being sarcastic; no, it was shown very seriously, I guess under the guise of how cool and futuristic and human it is. I'm getting really upset here at the point of writing this, because I have to fight hard to get the funding for the database my team needs for my work and have to justify it every year, and I know that in any other contexts, or just 5 years ago, they would have laughed in your face if you suggested to get a subscription in the thousands to enable employees to have a pointless conversation with a bot. Hello, we have shit to do over here, departments are drowning in work, and you wanna have software that talks to you? That would have been the response, and it is the correct response still!! People like that need to be treated like the fools they are, and we need to challenge them more!

Next up was the great use case of downloading the cafeteria menu (which is a 1 page nicely designed Excel sheet, like a timetable, showing the different options for each day) from the intranet, giving it to ChatGPT, and asking it what's for lunch on Wednesday. I wish I was joking. I WISH! The bot spat out a longer answer than reading the entire sheet would be. Downloading and uploading and writing the prompt took longer than just reading the sheet. You can see what's for lunch on Wednesday with one glance already. No bot needed!

The other general use case presented to us (by our head of IT, no less) was that if we are not sure whether something is a spam mail, phishing attempt, a mail with a suspicious attachment, whatever... we should save it to our Desktop, upload it to ChatGPT and ask it. Good god. I am still in disbelief. I'm sorry, but I don't want the less technically inclined employees among us to save anything shady onto their work laptop. Come on now. What is happening? Have we lost our minds?

Intentional or not, AI is seemingly great at amplifying the Dunning-Kruger-Effect in people, making everything they attempt with it seem smarter and justified to them, packaging every fart in a nice bow that makes it seem deep initially. People can pretend they're now doing something really important and groundbreaking while using the tool for completely mundane and worthless tasks that are better handled differently. Defenders of the tech can feel like they're part of something big and revolutionary and fantasize about the day they will be proven right and all the critics will shut up or apologize (like my conspiracy theorist dad, who still clings to the same prophecies after over a decade, hoping to be ahead of the curve and right for once in his disappointing life).

It's sad, because it feels like a completely out-of-control delusion; you see smart and capable people with lots of responsibility at work suddenly turn into a shill for these AI companies without any rhyme or reason. A highly qualified person, suddenly reduced to the same presence as a door-to-door salesman lying about how well the cleaning product really works, making up use cases that are neither useful nor working right. How is a person like you suddenly praising the option to ask a bot to summarize a damn 1 page lunch table and present it as a good use case in a company-wide meeting? What have you done to arrive at this point?

It's pure hype, eerily much so, and these people cannot possibly admit that. We have no specific problems it can solve in this workplace, at least 90% of the employees do not have work that would profit off of what Copilot etc can do; yet we attempt it anyway, each attempt worse than the prior one, inventing possible uses and creating problems where there are none, just to be able to burn tokens and justify a subscription, to cosplay the people in Sci-Fi media and have something to show upper management ("At least we tried"). We fall behind on our daily work to train an LLM, beg and plead with it and dance for it like court jesters, and poke around in the

shit it spits out. If you ask around at my workplace, any use is good because it is a use and we are exploring and playing. It completely minimizes the time waste, the money sink, the effect of each use, and the powerful institutions behind these tools.

And I just wonder: How did this befall us so quickly? There is never money for anything, but this unreliable tech with a huge upfront cost got through immediately? New tech usually passes the public sector by, but this one got all the attention? It takes years or even a decade to implement any sort of change or new ideas into this beast, yet we had the infrastructure and organizational bandwidth to deal with AI up within the blink of an eye?

It is uncomfortable to realize how capable a place really is, and how easily things can be implemented - if the leadership just wants to. It's a complete mask-off moment, underlining that it is never impossible or slow-going by default; it is intentional, by design, and could be improved any time. This is a completely trust-shattering moment for any employee.

This is why I asked at the start of this post how we are supposed to move forward from this at some point. How are we all collectively supposed to forget and move past experiencing the respectable elders in an institution having completely and totally embarrassed themselves in the name of "progress"? How all the gates and wallets have been opened for this utter disappointment, showing that the obstacles for implementing anything thought to be inherent and unavoidable in the organization are just a fluke, a lie, an arbitrary thing? How it all created a culture of feeling repeatedly gaslit over months about this whole assessment, as if you must be the one that is insane?

I cannot forget this at all. This is my second Covid.

As a final note: If none of that is happening in your workplace or life in general - genuinely good for you. Should be like that everywhere, hope that happens to me too eventually. I applaud you for the skilled and competent people in your life that choose AI use wisely, make the most of it, and offer good solutions. Happy for you if you work in an industry where its use makes sense and produces good output. But unfortunately, places and situations like the above exist, so let people commiserate about the insanity in them without attempting to deny what we're experiencing.

AI's PR Problem

David Rosenthal

Jun 2, 2026

Originally published: <https://blog.dshr.org/2026/05/ais-pr-problem.html>

This is just a brief post to explain to my old boss, Eric Schmidt[1], why he and his ilk are getting booed at college commencements[2], and why laws against data centers[3] are getting passed. The explanation is below the fold.

Let us start from an under-appreciated fact. Paul Campos reports that[4]:

The college wage premium, that is, the increased earnings associated with having a college degree as opposed to only being a high school graduate, hasn't changed at all in the past 25 years, because median real wages have been flat as a pancake for everybody, no matter what their formal education level, for the past quarter century.

But[5]:

I wonder what's happened to capital over this time? Value of S & P 500, inflation-adjusted, 1/2000 to 9/2025 (same period as the wage data):

- 2000: \$1,394
- 2025: \$6,688

On average, for more than the students' entire lives, stock-owners like Schmidt and (to a much lesser extent) I have stolen every last drop of the productivity increase of US workers at every age and education level. (See the actual numbers in the appendix[6])

Now, the perpetrators of this theft are telling their victims, the students and the public at large, that whether they like it or not they will be subjected to AI because that will make the perpetrators even richer. The victims have been informed that this new technology will:

- Nudify[7] their images.
- Leak their passwords[8].
- Increase their utility bills[9].
- Consume their scarce water resources[10].
- Coerce state and local governments into providing many billions of dollars a year in tax breaks[11].
- Force them to invest their 401Ks and index funds[12] in an obvious bubble.
- Eventually require a taxpayer bailout[13].
- Eliminate their jobs[14].
- Render their expensively acquired skills worthless[15].
- Be so expensive[16] that only the rich can use it.
- Destroy democracy[17].
- Accelerate global warming[18].
- Encourage them to commit murder and suicide[19].
- Autonomously target[20] them with drones.
- Possibly even end humanity[21].
- Add glue to their pizza[22].

Nothing better illustrates the contempt of the Epstein class[23] for the proletariat than that these oligarchs would expect the graduating class to enthusiastically accept this prospect.

Appendix

Here are the actual numbers from Paul Campos' 25 years of flat wages and no increase in the college wage premium, while value of capital has skyrocketed[24]:

I was fooling around with FRED[25] this morning, as one does, and here are some stats: (The FRED numbers are presented in nominal dollars; I've converted them to CPI-adjusted dollars).

Median usual weekly earnings of workers with a high school degree only:

- 2000: \$968
- 2025: \$980

Median usual weekly earnings of workers with a bachelor degree only:

- 2000: \$1,587
- 2025: \$1,580

...

Median usual weekly earnings of people with a bachelor's degree or higher:

- 2000: \$1,705
- 2025: \$1,747

Here is a short list of YouTube videos on this topic:

- Kasia Baba's must watch Boomers just cannot grasp why we do not like AI[26]
- Vanessa Wingårdh's Nobody Actually Wants AI Anymore[27]
- Taylor Lorenz' You Are About to Become Economically Worthless[28]
- Sam Seder's Everyone Is Fed Up With Tech's Ai BS[29]
- Silicon Money's Why Tech CEOs Are Quietly Cancelling Their AI Plans[30]
- The Rational National's Heartwarming: Gen-Z Hates Ai[31]

As a boomer, I think this post might be the exception that proves Ms. Baba's rule.

Note that every single one of the ads that I saw watching these videos in an incognito window was advertising an AI company! As are 49% of all the billboards in the Bay Area[32]. Read the room, guys!

Footnotes:

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eric_Schmidt
2. <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/former-google-ceo-booded-graduation-speech-ai-rcna345585>
3. <https://www.deseret.com/business/2026/05/16/data-centers-bans-moratoriums-state-legislatures-citizen-opposition-initiatives-referendum-artificial-intelligence-water-sair-quality/>
4. <https://www.lawyersgunsmoneyblog.com/2026/05/25-years-of-flat-wages-and-no-increase-in-the-college-wage-premium-while-value-of-capital-has-skyrocketed>
5. <https://www.lawyersgunsmoneyblog.com/2026/05/25-years-of-flat-wages-and-no-increase-in-the-college-wage-premium-while-value-of-capital-has-skyrocketed>
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8. <https://thecybersecguru.com/news/instagram-meta-ai-vulnerability-account-recovery-exploit/>
9. <https://www.npr.org/2025/12/03/nx-si-5626900/ai-data-center-cost-electric-bill>
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16. <https://www.wheresyoured.at/ai-is-too-expensive/>
17. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1126/science.adz1697>
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19. <https://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2026/06/florida-sues-openai-sam-altman-after-multiple-chatgpt-linked-murders/>
20. <https://blog.dshr.org/2026/03/skynet-progress-report.html>
21. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2025/05/could-ai-really-kill-off-humans.html>
22. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cd1rgzejgz40>
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24. <https://www.lawyersgunsandmoneyblog.com/2026/05/25-years-of-flat-wages-and-no-increase-in-the-college-wage-premium-while-value-of-capital-has-skyrocketed>
25. <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/tags/series?t=education%3Bsalaries>
26. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PQKGao_Rrf4
27. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FQpZdCKgc6w>
28. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Neog2mAdBI
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30. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NBtUgWn-nHs>
31. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i4hgyJoiZQ>
32. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VBHSjzHW-C8>

US Law Enforcement Warns of ‘Anti-Tech Extremism’ as AI Hatred Grows

Daniel Boguslaw

May 26, 2026

Originally published: <https://www.wired.com/story/us-law-enforcement-warns-of-anti-tech-extremism/>

In the wake of attacks[1] on CEOs, a nationwide protest movement[2] targeting data centers, and increasing concerns[3] about AI job replacement, federal intelligence agencies and domestic law enforcement are circulating reports with a new domestic target in mind: anti-technology extremists.

More than 1,000 pages of unpublished reports from the Department of Homeland Security, FBI, and fusion centers obtained by WIRED show a national shift taking place to surveil this new and worryingly broad category of people and activities deemed an emerging threat.

This new effort follows President Donald Trump’s National Security Presidential Memo 7[4], which instructs the Department of Justice to target anyone holding “anti-American,” “anti-Christian,” and “anti-capitalism” beliefs. Earlier this month, Trump’s counterterrorism czar, Sebastian Gorka, released a public counterterrorism strategy[5] claiming that left-wing extremists are one of the three top counterterrorism priorities facing the United States.

Taken together, these Trump administration directives have commandeered the domestic surveillance apparatus to surveil and criminalize speech and assembly that challenges the ideology of the White House. A new focus on anti-technology extremism adds an unreported category to already public designations under a presidency that has heavily invested political and material capital in AI[6] and data center proliferation[7].

Among the documents in the tranche obtained by WIRED is a New York Intelligence and Counterterrorism Bureau report that warns of widespread upheaval in response to AI adoption. Of particular note is a novel term for what the bureau purports to be an emerging extremism threat.

“The chaotic atmosphere that may result from emergent AI technology in the next five years may fuel large-scale protests that devolve into civil unrest and anti-tech violent extremist activity, especially in large urban areas such as New York City,” the report reads. The term “anti-tech violent extremism” does not appear in any publicly available DHS or FBI domestic extremism reports or guides and represents a novel grouping of a wide range of ideologies under a single extremist category.

In the same Intelligence Bureau assessment, analysts also describe a novel threat emerging in the wake of the arrest and trial[8] of Ziz Laota, an extreme rationalist who allegedly led a small cultlike group[9], three members of which have been charged with murder, tied to an obsessive ideology focused on the existential risk posed by AI.

While the Zizian ideology is extremist in nature, a less extreme version of the same fears surrounding the cataclysmic potential of AI are a common concern among AI alignment experts, machine learning engineers, and even frontier AI companies. Nonetheless, the Intelligence Bureau warns that “paranoid views regarding AI” may proliferate in the aftermath of the Zizians’ trial, thanks to their “attempt to reason the belief that a godlike incarnation of AI is imminent,” and belief that “humans must best use their time in the present to devote themselves to ensuring its compliance with human morality, or face existential consequences for failing to do so.”

The NYPD intel assessment follows the department’s collaboration with the FBI last year to monitor[10] the Signal chat of an activist group coordinating volunteers to monitor public hearings at immigration courts in New York. According to documents obtained by The Guardian[11], the FBI surveilled activists as part of a broader investigation into “anarchist violent extremist actors,” one of the threat categories named in the new counter terrorism strategy.

Created in the wake of 9/11, 80 fusion centers now pockmark the country and serve as go-betweens for federal intelligence agencies and state and local law enforcement. In addition to concerns about portions of the American populace disturbed by the rapid proliferation of AI[12], these centers are also gathering and circulating “intelligence” about alleged threats to data centers.

A Western Pennsylvania fusion center, for example, claimed that “adversarial actors, including state-sponsored entities, criminal groups, and extremists, such as homegrown violent extremists or environmental extremists, may target US data centers” and that “these actors could also exploit the strategic importance of data centers to the US economy, using them for activities like cryptocurrency mining or leveraging third-party entities, such as front companies, to gain access to US data and infrastructure.”

A report from the Northern Virginia Regional Intelligence Center warned that AGAAVEs—anti-government, anti-authority violent extremists—influenced by government-related grievances and conspiracy theories, have engaged in pre-operational planning targeting data centers and other critical infrastructure facilities to disrupt government operations. But in the breakdown of Suspicious Activity Reporting indicators, the intelligence report lists activities that could easily be carried out by peaceful protesters, legal experts say.

“These intelligence reports are part of a long tradition of agencies identifying protest or even simply having strong opinions as precursors to violence,” Spencer Reynolds, senior counsel at the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, tells WIRED. “Suspicious activity reports are incredibly unreliable, often about vague or innocent behavior, issued under permissive standards. These reports, often received in large volumes, allow officers to inject their own biases and see what they want to see in the facts.”

Among the vaguely defined activities flagged by the Northern Virginia intelligence center as suspicious are “expressed/implied threat,” “observation/surveillance,” “photography,” “testing/probing of security,” and “attempted intrusion.”

“The FBI investigates individuals who commit or intend to commit violence and criminal activity that constitutes a federal crime or poses a threat to national security,” the FBI wrote in a statement to WIRED. “We have no additional comment.”

The Department of Homeland Security did not respond to WIRED’s request for comment.

Meanwhile, the same intelligence center also circulated a report in March showing monitoring of constitutionally protected events and demonstrations related to critical views on technology. These events included multiple “Tesla Takedown”^[13] protests against Elon Musk’s ransacking of the US government^[14] and a “Break Up With Tech Rager” sponsored by Eject Elbit, an activist group organizing to halt investment in the Israeli weapon’s manufacturer Elbit.

In addition to intelligence analysts working inside fusion centers and federal law enforcement agencies, open source intelligence companies that contract with federal law enforcement agencies appear to be scouring the web for what they claim to be anti-technology sentiment as well. In January 2025, SITE Intelligence circulated bulletins to fusion centers alleging that conversations in a “neo-Luddite” Discord server had turned violent, with one user of the group called for violence against tech CEOs and power plants.

“SITE is a for-profit private intelligence firm that monitors social media for its law enforcement customers. It promises to do an incredibly difficult if not impossible job, consistently mining social media written by anonymous posters, full of in-jokes, slang, different languages, vagueness, and so on, to deliver credible information that can predict threats,” Reynolds says. “Instead, this type of activity tends to focus on people’s views about things like policing, abortion, economic inequality, vaccines, or any other hot-button topic of the day.” (SITE told WIRED post-publication that its customers do not direct what it monitors.)

“By narrowing our OSINT focus exclusively to communities with a proven link to real-world harm, even trolling remarks have an informative value, demonstrating sentiment within a community toward a target, and our reports have shown a notable spike in online threats advocating for sabotage against data centers, which is a true cause for concern,” Rita Katz, founder of SITE, tells WIRED in an email.

The documents obtained by WIRED also show that fusion centers are currently keeping tabs on in-person assemblies. The Northern Virginia center generated a report about demonstrations at local civic events, including the Arlington County budget meeting and the Fairfax County School Board meeting. Across the country, town halls and budget committee meetings have been among the chief forums for local residents to express their dissent with data centers being built in their neighborhoods.

According to Data Center Watch^[15], a project by AI security firm 10a Labs that tracks opposition to data centers, hundreds of organizations across 42 states have organized to block data center construction in their towns and counties. These efforts are often contentious. In California, Illinois, Indiana, New Jersey, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin, state and local police have removed or arrested speakers at town halls who criticize data centers, in one case before they were even allowed to speak.

Under US law, domestic terrorism is not a stand-alone crime that is brought to bear during trial. Instead, domestic terrorism laws allow for targeting and surveillance of extremists, with charges sometimes bearing terrorism enhancements and sometimes excluding them altogether. This has led to protesters and activists being surveilled under domestic extremism provisions while being charged with crimes like criminal trespass and vandalism.

The zeroing in on anti-tech activity by federal agencies is evident in an invitation to a lecture by extremism researcher Mauro Lubrano circulating in fusion centers across the country. Lubrano has emerged as one of the foremost experts on anti-technology extremism. He is the author of *Stop the Machines: The Rise of Anti-Technology*, which describes three main strains of a newly minted threat matrix: insurrectionary anarchists, eco-extremists, and ecofascists.

Lubrano's book identifies followers of "Unabomber" Ted Kaczynski, German anarchists, Mexican eco-extremists, and far-right fascists in the Terrorgram Collective^[16] as distinct but aligned components of an emerging tech extremism movement. In Lubrano's analysis, these groups are united by the fact that they have all plotted or carried out acts of violence in furtherance of their ideological goals.

Lubrano said he was not surprised that his lecture turned up in a fusion center but cautioned that any anti-tech extremism framework must be exercised carefully. "I hope the warning I, along with other colleagues, raised is being acknowledged. While anti-technology violence is unacceptable, it should not be used as an excuse to securitize AI and emerging technologies, thereby silencing those who are critical of the current trajectory," Lubrao tells WIRED.

But Spencer Reynolds says that, despite the real if limited threat posed by these groups, a category like "anti-tech extremism" could be drawn so broad as to ensnare peaceful data center protesters, AI skeptics, and anyone with a bone to pick with technology that permeates modern life.

"As people continue to organize for a better future, we're likely to see more surveillance and criminalization of this opposition, just as we have of Black Lives Matter, Occupy Wall Street, and environmental movements in recent decades," Reynolds says.

A January 2025 DHS Office of Intelligence and Analysis report furthers this perspective by attempting to connect Luigi Mangione—the alleged assassin of UnitedHealth CEO Brian Thompson—with Kaczynski. "Law enforcement reports that the individual may have drawn inspiration from Ted Kaczynski (the Unabomber) and his anti-technology beliefs," the report reads, without offering further evidence. It concludes with a warning alleging that executives "are at a heightened risk for targeted acts of violence or threats of violence" when they are "perceived as taking advantage of individuals of lesser means."

But perhaps the clearest-cut example of how nonviolent critiques of technology can be swept up along with threats is found in an open-source report circulated by SITE Intelligence in April 2025. The report flags a video from the progressive nonprofit More Perfect Union on the destructive effects of a data center to nearby residents in Georgia. Nothing in the video advocated for violence against property or people. But thanks to fusion center targeting, the advocacy group is now circulating among US intelligence and law enforcement across the country as a potential threat vector.

Footnotes:

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2026/apr/18/sam-altman-house-attack-ai>
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13. <https://www.wired.com/story/tesla-takedown-definitive-story/>
14. <https://www.wired.com/story/elon-musk-digital-coup-doge-data-ai/>
15. <https://www.datacenterwatch.org/>

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The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas

Ursula K. Le Guin

Oct 1, 1973

With a clamor of bells that set the swallows soaring, the Festival of Summer came to the city Omelas, bright-towered by the sea. The rigging of the boats in harbor sparkled with flags. In the streets between houses with red roofs and painted walls, between old moss-grown gardens and under avenues of trees, past great parks and public buildings, processions moved. Some were decorous: old people in long stiff robes of mauve and grey, grave master workmen, quiet, merry women carrying their babies and chatting as they walked. In other streets the music beat faster, a shimmering of gong and tambourine, and the people went dancing, the procession was a dance. Children dodged in and out, their high calls rising like the swallows' crossing flights, over the music and the singing. All the processions wound towards the north side of the city, where on the great water-meadow called the Green' Fields boys and girls, naked in the bright air, with mud-stained feet and ankles and long, lithe arms, exercised their restive horses before the race. The horses wore no gear at all but a halter without bit. Their manes were braided with streamers of silver, gold, and green. They flared their nostrils and pranced and boasted to one another; they were vastly excited, the horse being the only animal who has adopted our ceremonies as his own. Far off to the north and west the mountains stood up half encircling Omelas on her bay. The air of morning was so clear that the snow still crowning the Eighteen Peaks burned with white-gold fire across the miles of sunlit air, under the dark blue of the sky. There was just enough wind to make the banners that marked the racecourse snap and flutter now and then. In the silence of the broad green meadows one could hear the music winding through the city streets, farther and nearer and ever approaching, a cheerful faint sweetness of the air that from time to time trembled and gathered together and broke out into the great joyous clanging of the bells.

Joyous! How is one to tell about joy? How describe the citizens of Omelas?

They were not simple folk, you see, though they were happy. But we do not say the words of cheer much any more. All smiles have become archaic. Given a description such as this one tends to make certain assumptions. Given a description such as this one tends to look next for the King, mounted on a splendid stallion and surrounded by his noble knights, or perhaps in a golden litter borne by great-muscled slaves. But there was no king. They did not use swords, or keep slaves. They were not barbarians. I do not know the rules and laws of their society, but I suspect that they were singularly few. As they did without monarchy and slavery, so they also got on without the stock exchange, the advertisement, the secret police, and the bomb. Yet I repeat that these were not simple folk, not dulcet shepherds, noble savages, bland utopians. They were not less complex than us. The trouble is that we have a bad habit, encouraged by pedants and sophisticates, of considering happiness as something rather stupid. Only pain is intellectual, only evil interesting. This is the treason of the artist: a refusal to admit the banality of evil and the terrible boredom of pain. If you can't lick 'em, join 'em. If it hurts, repeat it. But to praise despair is to condemn delight, to embrace violence is to lose hold of everything else. We have almost lost hold; we can no longer describe a happy man, nor make any celebration of joy. How can I tell you about the people of Omelas? They were not naive and happy children – though their children were, in fact, happy. They were mature, intelligent, passionate adults whose lives were

not wretched. O miracle! but I wish I could describe it better. I wish I could convince you. Omelas sounds in my words like a city in a fairy tale, long ago and far away, once upon a time. Perhaps it would be best if you imagined it as your own fancy bids, assuming it will rise to the occasion, for certainly I cannot suit you all. For instance, how about technology? I think that there would be no cars or helicopters in and above the streets; this follows from the fact that the people of Omelas are happy people. Happiness is based on a just discrimination of what is necessary, what is neither necessary nor destructive, and what is destructive. In the middle category, however – that of the unnecessary but undestructive, that of comfort, luxury, exuberance, etc. – they could perfectly well have central heating, subway trains, washing machines, and all kinds of marvelous devices not yet invented here, floating light-sources, fuelless power, a cure for the common cold. Or they could have none of that: it doesn't matter. As you like it. I incline to think that people from towns up and down the coast have been coming in to Omelas during the last days before the Festival on very fast little trains and double-decked trams, and that the train station of Omelas is actually the handsomest building in town, though plainer than the magnificent Farmers' Market. But even granted trains, I fear that Omelas so far strikes some of you as goody-goody. Smiles, bells, parades, horses, bleh. If so, please add an orgy. If an orgy would help, don't hesitate. Let us not, however, have temples from which issue beautiful nude priests and priestesses already half in ecstasy and ready to copulate with any man or woman, lover or stranger who desires union with the deep godhead of the blood, although that was my first idea. But really it would be better not to have any temples in Omelas – at least, not manned temples. Religion yes, clergy no. Surely the beautiful nudes can just wander about, offering themselves like divine souffles to the hunger of the needy and the rapture of the flesh. Let them join the processions. Let tambourines be struck above the copulations, and the glory of desire be proclaimed upon the gongs, and (a not unimportant point) let the offspring of these delightful rituals be beloved and looked after by all. One thing I know there is none of in Omelas is guilt. But what else should there be? I thought at first there were no drugs, but that is puritanical. For those who like it, the faint insistent sweetness of drooz may perfume the ways of the city, drooz which first brings a great lightness and brilliance to the mind and limbs, and then after some hours a dreamy languor, and wonderful visions at last of the very arcana and inmost secrets of the Universe, as well as exciting the pleasure of sex beyond all belief; and it is not habit-forming. For more modest tastes I think there ought to be beer. What else, what else belongs in the joyous city? The sense of victory, surely, the celebration of courage. But as we did without clergy, let us do without soldiers. The joy built upon successful slaughter is not the right kind of joy; it will not do; it is fearful and it is trivial. A boundless and generous contentment, a magnanimous triumph felt not against some outer enemy but in communion with the finest and fairest in the souls of all men everywhere and the splendor of the world's summer; this is what swells the hearts of the people of Omelas, and the victory they celebrate is that of life. I really don't think many of them need to take drooz.

Most of the processions have reached the Green Fields by now. A marvelous smell of cooking goes forth from the red and blue tents of the provisioners. The faces of small children are amiably sticky; in the benign grey beard of a man a couple of crumbs of rich pastry are entangled. The youths and girls have mounted their horses and are beginning to group around the starting line of the course. An old woman, small, fat, and laughing, is passing out flowers from a basket, and tall young men, wear her flowers in their shining hair. A child of nine or ten sits at the edge of the crowd, alone, playing on a wooden flute. People pause to listen, and they smile, but they do not speak to him, for he never ceases playing and never sees them, his dark eyes wholly rapt in the sweet, thin magic of the tune.

He finishes, and slowly lowers his hands holding the wooden flute.

As if that little private silence were the signal, all at once a trumpet sounds from the pavilion near the starting line: imperious, melancholy, piercing. The horses rear on their slender legs, and

some of them neigh in answer. Sober-faced, the young riders stroke the horses' necks and soothe them, whispering, "Quiet, quiet, there my beauty, my hope. . . ." They begin to form in rank along the starting line. The crowds along the racecourse are like a field of grass and flowers in the wind. The Festival of Summer has begun.

Do you believe? Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No? Then let me describe one more thing.

In a basement under one of the beautiful public buildings of Omelas, or perhaps in the cellar of one of its spacious private homes, there is a room. It has one locked door, and no window. A little light seeps in dustily between cracks in the boards, secondhand from a cobwebbed window somewhere across the cellar. In one corner of the little room a couple of mops, with stiff, clotted, foul-smelling heads, stand near a rusty bucket. The floor is dirt, a little damp to the touch, as cellar dirt usually is. The room is about three paces long and two wide: a mere broom closet or disused tool room. In the room a child is sitting. It could be a boy or a girl. It looks about six, but actually is nearly ten. It is feeble-minded. Perhaps it was born defective or perhaps it has become imbecile through fear, malnutrition, and neglect. It picks its nose and occasionally fumbles vaguely with its toes or genitals, as it sits haunched in the corner farthest from the bucket and the two mops. It is afraid of the mops. It finds them horrible. It shuts its eyes, but it knows the mops are still standing there; and the door is locked; and nobody will come. The door is always locked; and nobody ever comes, except that sometimes the child has no understanding of time or interval – sometimes the door rattles terribly and opens, and a person, or several people, are there. One of them may come and kick the child to make it stand up. The others never come close, but peer in at it with frightened, disgusted eyes. The food bowl and the water jug are hastily filled, the door is locked, the eyes disappear. The people at the door never say anything, but the child, who has not always lived in the tool room, and can remember sunlight and its mother's voice, sometimes speaks. "I will be good," it says. "Please let me out. I will be good!" They never answer. The child used to scream for help at night, and cry a good deal, but now it only makes a kind of whining, "eh-haa, eh-haa," and it speaks less and less often. It is so thin there are no calves to its legs; its belly protrudes; it lives on a half-bowl of corn meal and grease a day. It is naked. Its buttocks and thighs are a mass of festered sores, as it sits in its own excrement continually.

They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. Some of them have come to see it, others are content merely to know it is there. They all know that it has to be there. Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child's abominable misery.

This is usually explained to children when they are between eight and twelve, whenever they seem capable of understanding; and most of those who come to see the child are young people, though often enough an adult comes, or comes back, to see the child. No matter how well the matter has been explained to them, these young spectators are always shocked and sickened at the sight. They feel disgust, which they had thought themselves superior to. They feel anger, outrage, impotence, despite all the explanations. They would like to do something for the child. But there is nothing they can do. If the child were brought up into the sunlight out of that vile place, if it were cleaned and fed and comforted, that would be a good thing, indeed; but if it were done, in that day and hour all the prosperity and beauty and delight of Omelas would wither and be destroyed. Those are the terms. To exchange all the goodness and grace of every life in Omelas for that single, small improvement: to throw away the happiness of thousands for the chance of the happiness of one: that would be to let guilt within the walls indeed.

The terms are strict and absolute; there may not even be a kind word spoken to the child.

Often the young people go home in tears, or in a tearless rage, when they have seen the child and faced this terrible paradox. They may brood over it for weeks or years. But as time goes on they begin to realize that even if the child could be released, it would not get much good of its freedom: a little vague pleasure of warmth and food, no doubt, but little more. It is too degraded and imbecile to know any real joy. It has been afraid too long ever to be free of fear. Its habits are too uncouth for it to respond to humane treatment. Indeed, after so long it would probably be wretched without walls about it to protect it, and darkness for its eyes, and its own excrement to sit in. Their tears at the bitter injustice dry when they begin to perceive the terrible justice of reality, and to accept it. Yet it is their tears and anger, the trying of their generosity and the acceptance of their helplessness, which are perhaps the true source of the splendor of their lives. There is no vapid, irresponsible happiness. They know that they, like the child, are not free. They know compassion. It is the existence of the child, and their knowledge of its existence, that makes possible the nobility of their architecture, the poignancy of their music, the profundity of their science. It is because of the child that they are so gentle with children. They know that if the wretched one were not there snivelling in the dark, the other one, the flute-player, could make no joyful music as the young riders line up in their beauty for the race in the sunlight of the first morning of summer.

Now do you believe in them? Are they not more credible? But there is one more thing to tell, and this is quite incredible.

At times one of the adolescent girls or boys who go to see the child does not go home to weep or rage, does not, in fact, go home at all. Sometimes also a man or woman much older falls silent for a day or two, and then leaves home. These people go out into the street, and walk down the street alone. They keep walking, and walk straight out of the city of Omelas, through the beautiful gates. They keep walking across the farmlands of Omelas. Each one goes alone, youth or girl man or woman. Night falls; the traveler must pass down village streets, between the houses with yellow-lit windows, and on out into the darkness of the fields. Each alone, they go west or north, towards the mountains. They go on. They leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back. The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas.

"When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a Communist." — Fr. Hélder Pessoa Câmara

"Environmentalism without class struggle is just gardening." — Chico Mendes

"When life closes a door, throw knowledge through a window."

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