

# Periscope

Text by Maya Manvi

Maybe they learned how to cruise playing Doom, and Myst.

They've forgotten the control key for zoom; the directions were given at the beginning, but their memory's not so good... so now, they only know how to throw and thrust their body forward, backward, and side to side. The ease of speed makes movement ungraceful, fits of starting and stopping from one place to another. They feel like a hawk, all jarring pivots giving way to abrupt views. 24 bit games make ungainly hunters of us all.

The year they were born the architect Jan Gehl clarified the 'edge effect', a concept derived from bulkily large data sets. It suggests that humans tend to gravitate towards the planar boundaries of public arenas, to face the public flow — both to watch, and to not leave our backs vulnerable to what could come from behind.

When they are here they are trying to remember that they have a body — although to be fair, even under the best circumstances, they've never been quite certain of its' edges, or what parts of it need protecting.

A chord, suspended, swells and ebbs as they move through gleaming white hallways. They're aware that this composition has nothing to do with them per se — coded into the architecture of the space, they bare only passive witness to it. The sound is thick and unyielding, obliterating room for anything else: the pulse of footsteps, the undulations of sighs turned to moans. Now — now, they are acutely aware of their back. They find themselves waiting to be surprised into touch.

For a moment, they so deeply miss fingernails dragged across the small of their back, they feel it in both places.

But in this environment the use of small is a misleading linguistic foil, a corporeal diminution. Here, their back is as large as the mausoleum of the world. Clawing would take a lifetime; neural networks of sinewed youth transfigured to liver spot dissolution. The fingernails that rake this back would collapse and decay a short ways into the journey, only to be reconstituted from digital soot a millennia (second?) later, moving across in an endless loop — so that by the time those hands got from one side to the other, the fingernails would be the  $\times 10^{345}$  grand kin of the originals.

Here, their back would no longer recognize the hands trying to get them off, nor would the hands know why the fingers did what the fingers did, only that it had been this way since the beginning of time.

Somewhere else, their other back shudders, sweat beading in the space between skin and antimicrobial couch cover.

Here, the hunger unfurls at the soft throb of pink around the corner; sharpens as they follow the color, entering the room bathed in fuchsia. They circle the diorama of slender bodies, frozen in physical exaltation. As they weave in and out of the scene's cross sections, they mistake the taste of copper for pride, for their ability to move. To consume every angle of the displayed images at will. It's in the awkward moment of extricating themselves from between a corner and a wall that the light itself clarifies. All the bodies in the room have shadows, except them. Stricken, they leave, moving through the Catacomb that sings to itself, both gallery and bathhouse.

Much later they will wonder at how familiar it felt to see no reflection of themselves, but of all other things, on every glistening surface.

They do the only thing they can do, they drift back to the room with Three Views. They take a moment, drinking in the images... the way the colors give way to one another, each layer complicating the other with its' own transparency, until a figure emerges — a body not quite legible. They smash their thumb into the forward arrow. They are still holding it down as the window blooms with pixelated cyan and magenta. They revel in the soreness of their hand as they release the button, and notice for the first time the condensation of their breath resting on the lit screen.