Net Loss

ELVIA WILK

INFINITE DETAIL
BY TIM MAUGHAN   NEW YORK: FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX. TK PAGES. $TK.

In his recent book *New Dark Age*, James Bridle describes the current internet era as one of draconian, top-down control. Blind belief in computation has led to a disastrous imbalance of power, networked technology is being weaponized for mass surveillance, and algorithmic governance is sapping political agency from citizens. Tim Maughan's novel *Infinite Detail* takes up Bridle's thesis by imagining its antithesis: What if the internet kill switch were flipped? Assuming networked technology is the primary enabler of our ongoing political nightmare, what would happen if it just—shut off? As it turns out, Maughan's imagined result is no Luddite utopia. Bridle's Dark Age has nothing on Maughan's medieval post-internet.

On its face, the internet kill switch is such an on-the-nose science fiction premise that it's a wonder Maughan is the first author to get it to market. Luckily, in his hands, the broad-stroke concept trickles down into weird and unexpected crevices: sage futurism, political treatise, and mournful meditation on the violence of technological dependency. Maughan writes in a swift, almost breathless present tense, as if he needs to get this out as quickly as possible. Maybe he does.

The book toggles between two time periods and two cities. In alternating chapters labeled "Before" and "After," we're pre- and post-"Crash"; we're in Bristol and then in New York. The "Before" period is much like today, but marked as futuristic by a prominent piece of wearable tech: Spex, a sort of Google Glasses that didn't flop. Smartphones are now on faces, meaning news and ads and memes and conspiracy theories are on constant, unavoidable scroll.

Our guide to the pre-Crash landscape is "academic researcher turned activist" Rushdi Mannan. He spearheads the People's Republic of Stokes Croft, a two-mile-long street in Bristol commandeered by hacktivists and artists, who have turned it into a "digital no-man's land" where Spex and smartphones can't connect to the internet. Mannan, who is under government surveillance for his anti-internet activities, is desperate to get to New York to visit his American boyfriend. When he manages to get through border control, the New York he finds is entirely compatible with Bridle's grim portrayal of contemporary urban life. Police shootings have skyrocketed since new "predictive software" started marking threats; Wall Street is governed by algorithms no one understands. Mannan is disturbed by his boyfriend's willingness to sign up for a service that tracks every bottle he recycles.

New York has atomized into enclaves of the mega-rich surrounded by everyone else, with the creative class sitting comfortably in the former category while fetishizing the latter. Maughan doesn't miss the opportunity to insert scathing descriptions of Brooklynites, with their "Mason jars and antique trinkets, perfume bottles and too many candleholders, like flea market trash excavated from a dead civilization's landfill."

And yet when Mannan returns from Brooklyn to his People's Republic in Bristol, he can't deny that the idealistic internetless zone has become rife with similar class hypocrisies. After all, who has the luxury to log off? Not Uber drivers. Not itinerant workers. Not the corner store owner, who needs a Wi-Fi connection to run credit cards. Intended as a bastion of freedom from networked governance, Stokes Croft is clearly as much a bastion of privilege. This fundamental predicament—how kernels of political resistance end up replicating the social hierarchies of society at large—is the book's most salient (and tragic) critique.

In an ironic blow, the Crofters' dream of a de-networked society comes crashing upon them, when an Anonymous-like hacker entity called DRONEGOD$ decides the only solution is to ax the internet worldwide. Devices everywhere disconnect. Chaos ensues. On the micro scale, Mannan's relationship is cut off and he's spun into a desperate journey to find his lover. On the macro scale: the collapse of international supply chains, agriculture, hospitals, banks.

Our guide to the technologically deprived future, roughly half a generation later, is the prophet-like Mary, who inhabits the former Stokes Croft with the local gang now occupying the territory. Mary seems to be able to glimpse the ghosts of the dead. Pilgrims seeking closure come visit her, seeking the faces of their loved ones among the portraits she draws in bits of salvaged crayon and pencil. She and her friends marvel over sediments of dead technology they dig up; cassette tapes are holy relics; Spex are a frustrating mystery. Here is the real "dead civilization's landfill" that the Brookynites fetishized—but the DIY is now driven by necessity. Bitterly mourning what they imagine the techno-utopian past must have been, this new generation senses a "nation-scale karmic redistribution" at work. But what, exactly, was the sin? And who, really, is accountable?

Science fiction has notoriously tended toward religious tropes—saviors, martyrs, and apocalypses. Maughan doesn't try to sidestep these, but exploits them to foreground the tech-savior complexes that we're already entirely possessed by. In doing so, he punctures the fantasy of the total reboot, which is the flip side of the fantasy of unstoppable progress—both of which stem from the same set of cultural-religious mythologies about technology. The loss of the privilege that is networked technology, a privilege that has been sorely abused, would by no means disband the belief systems it was built upon. In Maughan's estimation, even if we kill the internet, the ghost of technological solutionism will continue to haunt us.

Today, when the alt right has flipped the playing board of the counterculture, the would-be Left's inability to level class divisions is exactly what has led to the stalemate in which the only option is seemingly to Burn It All Down. "We didn't have any vision, did we?" laments one former Crofter post-Crash. "Just some beliefs and some ideals. But no way of, y'know, making something solid out of them." Imagining the end of everything is easy; the hard part is imagining what comes after. □

Elvia Wilk's first novel, *Oval*, will be published by Soft Skull in June 2019.