

The Ideal Place/Consolidated Story

By Vivian ZH

It turns out there is no terminal point of consolidation. Con Ed, the “Con” already standing in for a longer, more musical “Consolidated”, re-consolidates or further consolidates with Consolid. City Infrastructure, the latter company which has chosen a more medial point of abbreviation along a further stretch of the full word. Together they become the super-thing now referred to as Con Con Ed. A watershed first foray from energy into physical architecture. Force and energy reformed, glommed together onto a corporal corporate center. The newly double-Con Ed plant beside the cemetery vibrates with new and sudden solidity.

Our local Ideal Marketplace is bought out, with the pretext being that groceries are food, which is a form of energy, and that they thus run under the overarching narrative of consolidation. The banner on the scaffolding reads: “coming soon: the Ideal Con Con Ed Store”. It is not properly stuck down on either end. When it flaps in the stiff daily waterside wind you can read, under it still, the old and now mostly effaced “Ideal” and “place”. “Market” occluded.

This Ideal Con Con Ed Store is bombed before the scaffolding comes down. There is a delightful orange scrim over the weather for several days. But by Wednesday it is dissipated and I am back in my null previous mood. And there is no more local grocery store, so our town and surrounding unincorporated area transitions to a system of pure, remote delivery. The whole connected activity of grocery shopping is dissolved into a series of domestic actions of selection on the screen of the phone and then unseen foreign answering actions that together create a system wherein packages are eventually set down atop my personal apartment doorstep. The packages are lined with frozen bags of nontoxic coolant. Sometimes these bags arrive punctured by unusually sharp groceries and parts of the produce appear blueish. Weeks of eating blue groceries has an emotional effect on me. And when I am sad I see the whole thing jutting into the past forever and extant and also into the future unchangeable, sustained by the powers of sequence and retrospect.

When Radian says on the phone that he has invited a young man he met overseas named Pilot to the movie we are using as a safely and cowardly un-interactive first plan after some time apart, the appearance, amid conversation which has been thus far formatted around logistics and context, of a banal and occupationally descriptive noun as substitution for any real/human/American name creates the impression in my mind of more of an object than an individual or possible friend of a friend: a vague object like a lozenge, or a checkers piece. Radian and Pilot are late arriving, and enter from the theater door at frontal left during the brief ruby post-trailer pre-movie dark, then come up the aisle and into row F with a weighty and continuous shuffle. They sit down in seats F15 and F16. I am in F14. Them sitting down is less a moment of cessation than of momentary arrest and recalibration following a twin lateral shift down from standing positions before both men continue with the now reformatted velocity of their previous motion, to set all their respective canteens, packs, rolls, gear, etc. down in the margin of legroom between us and row E. As this dim ankle-height scramble is happening the movie comes on, and in the gray cast of indirect light coming off of the screen I get a glimpse of him for the first time. I see him. Pilot.

He is no object. Not a lozenge at all. Sitting, he hunches the way tall men hunch, with the head bent in almost total overhang of the knees, which are sort of aloft and pointed, due to the legs being very long. For the duration of the movie I sit registering him folded in my periphery, through the familiar and thus visually removable and ignorable shape of an unfolded and F15-ed Radian. After, even when we are standing in the theater lobby and he introduces himself with a handshake extended from under the broad dorsal hulk of man plus hunch plus backpack, and even when my previously depthless image of the side of his face which because of the incomplete angle implied a narrowness and centrality of features becomes a direct, 3D, and all-sided head that reveals an instantaneous widening from central origin/y-axis, even then; at the actual moment I see his fully mapped face for the first time, generous and protrusive, there is still no attraction yet, just an anterior version of the sidelong physical awareness I felt during the movie.

I am surprised when Radian calls me after I get home and asks what I'm doing tomorrow, because I have always held an arbitrary and wordless belief that there has to be a "cooling period" between instances of hanging out. I allow this belief to sustain itself by subconsciously performing a mental incorporation of the year Radian was away for deployment and we were unable to meet as a sort of pretextual buildup of preexistent and indelible "cooling period" which allows for increased frequency of contact in the near future. We agree to meet at the diner the next morning, where Radian tells me that we were not seeing a movie at all, but a play. He says that what seemed to be a flat screen lit by one depthless sheet of narrative signal was actually the transparent wall cutting the audience half of the theater off from the stage half, through which the play was viewable. There was no projected image, just an actual company of actors, lit and filtered, made naiad-ish and sort of subaquatic by Plexiglas. I find this disturbing. I do not really remember any of the play, and when I think of it I can only access a thin and watery diffuse gleam in my back mind, and the leftward radiance coming toward me of: Pilot.

Radian then tells me that though he met Pilot recently, many of his friends have already expressed attraction towards him, but that Pilot has not reciprocated. He is famously emotionally unavailable. I find myself regarding this humorously as a challenge. Only after leaving the diner do I realize that I have made a sort of wordless decision towards Pilot, a colorless Pilot imprint centered axially inside me, a retrievable imagined impression of him. Because he is novel, and because I am unhappy. Inside, the sustained awareness of him from yesterday had been waiting doggedly to be changed into some other texture of feeling. Now, once the personal alchemical moment has taken place, I have no way of reclaiming any true or unaffected impression of the real Pilot.

In retrospect he takes on a quality of overlay, like a hydroplane cutting through gray water, flattened and made unsubstantial by distance. I cannot remember any of his specific facial protrusions, but he swans vaguely and translucently ahead, and I follow him forward into the day. The day after the diner I call Radian, remembering that he seems to have established a rhythm where we can see each other three days in a row without issue, but he says he is busy. Unfortunately I have already unfurled an anticipatory form for the day wherein we do meet, and the sudden removal of a not even ever actually actualized plan drives my general state of nullity into something itchy and frenzied. This is also because of the Pilot flagella that are now in imaginary billow from the mental cell of "Radian"; both seem thwarted as one melded unit. On

the phone I tell Radian that I find Pilot attractive, and he says something else overlapping that is not really a response, and doesn't seem to hear me. Outside, the Con Con Ed plant vibrates slightly faster and becomes fuzzy to those walking past. Briefly. Then it's back and functional again.

My phone service also becomes fuzzy and then restabilizes as the carrier of two messages, whose points of actual arrival are dissolved into the stretch of no connectivity. One is from Radian, and one is from my supervisor. The one from my supervisor says: *you have been given many opportunities to improve, and you have not taken those opportunities and you have not improved. So, unfortunately, yesterday was your last day.*

This is so passive it's funny. Both form and content are without time or action or instant of receipt. The message from Radian says: *our call cut out, I'll call you back later because I'm spending time with Pilot today. Also he asked for your number and I gave it to him.* Then I receive a message from Pilot, which seems to have been sent in the same indefinite pocket of time, possibly even the exact moment Radian texted, but which has come in slightly later, at what now appears to be a preordained delay. It says: *This is Pilot from F16. He wants to see F14 again.* Another message: *This time NO mediating F15.* I feel a neutral but potent internal gush and then when said gush becomes manageable I text back: *Copy. even Fs only.* He sends back "ha" and a photo of his hand, which has the odd-numbered fingers folded down. I am impressed by the dexterity this requires. On the obscenely large and veiny pointer finger my initials are written repeated and tiny in close-order ballpoint letters on one long phalanx. A third message comes in which reads: "*when are you ____?*" I respond that I am currently unemployed, then send a long final text with nothing but _____.

During this exchange the sun has shrunk to a weak roseate rim lining the lower pane of the window. There is a growing shadow of dread on the wall opposite. And while I'm in the uncertain period of no Pilot response to my last text, without which there is no date and time for consummation, and so no pinned point of certainty for what is so far a flaccid and unsubstantial piece of flirtation, I find that I am hungry and make some of my blue broccoli for dinner. In the bowl, over yellow rice, the blue mixes down and both broccoli and rice become a median green that is almost the original pre-coolant color of undelivered produce.

Some time later I am in bed. Radian calls me. He has completed his time with Pilot. I am fed and reclined. Hearing Pilot's name has a mild effect of refreshment on the feeling I have towards him, which has been on soft logarithmic decline while he has not responded. The refreshment has an additional quality of jealousy. I imagine the two of them without me, and ask Radian again how they met. It takes several tries for him to hear me, because he is often just waiting to say something else instead of listening, which is an annoying quality of his I had forgotten while he was away; also the service is still uneven from continued plant inconsistency. Radian's answer is that he doesn't remember. He seems to have returned with the friendship already solidified and known. He says it's similar to how we, him and I, have been able to easily resume our relationship upon his return. Actually he remembers very little from being overseas at all. There seems to be a vague and formless pain that he has felt since moving back, but that may have presented itself in deployment too. He only remembers feelings from where he is wherever

he is. He feels nothing in transit. I respond that I experience something similar, but with time instead of place.

After hearing this imperfect intermodal information transcribed and transmitted to me by a totally traumatized Radian, I feel a pure probe of pleasure that is somehow possessed of more power than any actual interaction so far with Pilot.

That secret undercurrent of feeling encoded in my half of the call remains focused in potency from staying suppressed, unspoken, and overridden. I am silently sure that telling Radian anything would have an effect of ruination. I am afraid of emitted and unrecapturable information. I believe in the safety of language coming in one-way only towards me, all of it sieving inward through my personal communicative netting, with no reciprocal reveal of my personal self. Radian moves on to express Pilot's positive perception of me from our meeting. I express a casual and blurry reciprocation of said good impression. "Let's get groceries together tomorrow at noon," Radian then says, before I have fully finished speaking. A period of still damaged plant cell signal effaces the word "groceries", so I don't know to tell him that there is no longer a store, and instead agree to "let's get together tomorrow at noon", assuming that he has only extended an initial social action of half-specified temporal "holding", which will be completed and locationally settled in the morning by a piece of secondary contact, which now never happens. I have only a time and no place, and the same blue coolant-affected mood, and do not follow up. Radian stands in the scraped post-storescape, waiting. He feels post-traumatic in what presents essentially like a minor and decontextualized envelope of Fallujah, and does not contact me again.

At home, now with no Radian forever and no plans, only the never clarified vertical clock-hand impression of "noon", I wait uselessly for Pilot. For hours I have gone in to look at our conversation to see it truncate at my long, lonesome underscore. It has curdled into a softer and more shameful shape: not even a straight line anymore, but more an anxious and up-facing end parentheses, curved and stupid. It has the stink of a continual and self-restoring atmosphere of "being thwarted". OK, so if Pilot does give me a date and time: now a first logistical situation has been extended with a preformed lack that requires me to reciprocate with my own freeness, and possibly provide some kind of an idea for an activity. I can't imagine seeing him, and can't imagine seeing him opposite me, bodied and exposed to the real air of a shared environment. What does Pilot look like? I find an image where he is sitting facing camera in a group with other men, and at first do not recognize him, because he is absolutely frontal and so the known hunch in posture is not visible. There is none of the dim side angle of my theatered memory. When you are infatuated, you hold the infatuation in the angled mind with no real access or penetration possible, only a repetitive surface dipping. A sensitive poke towards just the side semantic container or sachet of the name, the sign, "Pilot". Who is the passive, preformed Pilot I have retained inside myself?

He is flying me. I am no girl, but cockpit. I am unsolid, and un-with. And it's been a few days. I've made myself leave my apartment. I am digesting coolant.

The sun is encoded by a flat gray weather. There are no discrete and separable nodes of any unconsolidated companies or respective place-names anymore, so it all bleeds. Other than store, diner, movie theater, the city is mixed and runny. These nodes used to demarcate distance;

without them walking seems uncoupled from geography, now, with no anticipatory or retrospectively defining power of destination, either, because I am unemployed, and have nowhere to be.

Near the water, where all the old infrastructure of intermodal shipping has been bought and gutted by Con Con Con Ed, behind two warehouses painted over with a dark, recent lacquer, still unused but prepared for their new function, there is a third one which has already begun to wear and reveal a pearly underlayer of the original building color, made nacre and paradoxically natal-looking by age. Its windows are embedded at equal distances, like margined paragraphs, so while walking at a consistent personal pace close and directly parallel to the building I have temporary control over both distance and time. The sun is removed from cloud cover, suddenly pure and honest, unencoded, in unambiguous angled sheets planing white off the windows. Because of that I don't realize what is through the glare until I've walked past three, which is when there is the sound of something percussive and implosive inland, and then a visual return of the fine orange scrim from the beginning of this story, sun gone again, purpose returned. I am here. Inside the warehouse is what appears to be a grocery store, but with all outward facing signs and information removed: no advertisements, displays, notification of bargain, no lighted and colorful interface with the customer. Only colorless aisles, each numbered and overcast with a hanging sign in grayscale, and then self-checkout machines. The windows narrow after the sixth and basically turn into embrasures. I have to really peer to see the shoppers, and even then they are only visible in short apertured bursts of parallax image.

At the twentieth and final window, which is a slit that is essentially one photon wide, all the shoppers are stilled and gathered by the action of checking out, so I can see that they have been made anonymous and almost invisible by a generalizing uniform of scrambled beige. Then, truly finally, at the last and post-window area of glassless brick, where this wall beside me should meet the next wall, there is a mediating face instead of a corner, inset by automatic doors, at a 120ish degree or 2.0944 radian angle to both abutting sides. Pilot is on the sidewalk here, loading groceries into a Con Con Con Con Con Con Con Con Con Con Con Con Ed van.

There is no pure, remote delivery system. They're undeploying choice soldiers with large hands and optimally grocery-loadable arms to come back and do the shopping. The newly restructured and broken act of shopping with choice and leisure excised. Shoppers in repurposed fatigues moving smoothly through the aisles in correlation to: from somewhere else a remote signal of directive. The grocery store not gone, just reduced to a totally inward thing, hidden in architecture that used to be for something else. You can remove no part of the system, just put it elsewhere. Market occluded. I watch as Pilot fills a coolant-lined box. He used to fly an F16, overseas. As I am watching him lade I recognize my own product selection. Because everything is still real. I feel so relieved, so connected, so un-null. I feel the vague attractive affixation of "Pilot" becoming flat and lightless, actual and bodied, in downward motion inside me, to be meta-bolized and removed with my next meta-textual output of odorless blue waste.

When he turns around and sees me again, I am already repulsed.