

Finite Automaton in Winter Quarter

by Matt Kang

I can't seem to define the bounds in which my life is encompassed. And I don't mean that in the optimistic, world-is-my-goddamn-oyster sort of way. I am lost.

Take now, for instance. Here I am, writing in my battered red notebook, a veteran of three classes worth of notes. I should be filling these faded blue margins with esoteric mathematical symbols and finite automaton diagrams that snake and undulate. As I cross this 't' and dot this 'i,' each letter I write is mocking and scoffing at my current surroundings.

My professor's German-tinged drawl saunters on as my mind drifts further and further away. His name is Professor Schnoor, and it's so fitting I feel like I'm in a movie or book where all the names are cute *did-you-get-that* references to their character. Like from last quarter for Cryptography, I had Professor Hemaasandra. Occasionally the fresh voice of a student cuts through the din, snapping me back to reality. There's some soft rapping on the whiteboard with dull squeaks sprinkled in.

To my left, the would-be student is toying with his phone, his face aglow, his breath bated, and his fingers making glissandos across the plastic buttons. To my right, blank stares interchange with closed eyelids on an unkempt face. The minutes drip into the endless sea of night outside the window, each time creating a deeper blackness.

“...lambda shift to q-seven. And with that, we will end for today,” said Schnoor, accents and emphasis peppered in all the wrong places.

And away I run, into the freshly brewed darkness.

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I can't call this my home away from home. I'm willing to say it is a tangible purgatory—but not between spaces of time or place. My feet slip slightly on the weathered hardwood as I ascend the topmost flight of stairs that lead to my room, squeaks and creaks and moans and groans effacing any thoughts I had carried in. Spotty carpeting leads me in to the attic (it's Dan's turn to clean), my abattoir between nest and sky.

My drum set greets me, tucked into a corner of the room. It's a five-piece Pearl Forum with deep blue drum coatings and gleaming rims. The film of dust from when I had left it for the year prior has effectively been shaken off by celebratory punk blast-beats. Unfortunately, it's been a long time since the drum set and I had rocked out; we both need some time to retune.

I grasp the drum sticks, tight, and let them fall. There are great hacks and scratches at the tapered side of each one. Each little etch in it represents a note in the rhythm of a cymbal, of a song. “Man, those are chewed-up sticks. It's time to get rid of them,” my old drum mentor Jim used to say as he shook back his mane of frazzled blond hair. He had a weathered, drug-scarred, but good-natured face. I never listened to him about the sticks, and I didn't know why. I always would play them until they were so sawed they broke in half after an emphatic snare hit. Then I would survey the pieces, smile, and shove them in a drawer somewhere, proud and forgotten.

I stride over to my bed and lie down. Books surround it like a page-laden moat. The bindings are all so ripped and creased. It's funny how the more you love a book the more dilapidated it looks. Narnia looks like it was gnawed on by Aslan himself. There is Dickenson here, Tolkien, Lewis, Ludlum, Atwood, Goodwin, Pynchon; even a bit of "the Dickless Dickenson".

I naively thought that this would be easy—purpose was going to magically spill out of me, ready to live. I'm reminded of when I was five, and my mother asked me what I wanted for Christmas. But in all my euphoric daydreams of Pow-Pow-Power Wheels and the latest Megazord, Christmas already came. And there I was, ravenously opening my present, only to find a wool-knit sweater, laying there in a squashed cardboard box like furry roadkill.

I work myself up to the computer and nudge the mouse. The monitor gives a startled flicker. A small dialog box with *Yes* or *No* buttons blips onto the center of the screen before I could react.

Do you want to continue?

