

## memo

Monday, November 24, 2003

To: the reader as owner of a perpetual motion machine

From: the author as a lame, gimpy god

Re: excerpt from the novel in progress, *Zen Arcade*, ch. 20, "Whatever"

He turned his head and looked out the door of his room. The part of the house he could see didn't look any different than it had the day before. Perhaps, he thought, there's a little more dust out there. Perhaps I left a little more of myself behind. How many of me must there be in this house now? He had heard somewhere, or read somewhere, or heard somewhere that the skin went through a complete regeneration cycle every seven years. Tomorrow would be the end of his fifth, seven-year cycle, and so, if he had never left the house, never cleaned the house, never done anything but slough off skin cells, there would be enough human dust to make five more of him—five skins at least. He wondered how long it would take to reconstruct a human shell one skin cell at a time. He chuckled when he realized the obvious—it would take seven years of constant work. Taking time out for sleep, and eating, and going to the bathroom—it was too early for math, and what about all of those skin cells lost down the bathtub drain?

He swung his legs around and stood up. He stretched just like people on TV stretch—body cocked at the waist about 45 degrees to the left, clenched fists raised to the corners of the mouth, and a face-eating yawn as the back straightened itself, and the fists were propelled away from the face and toward the ends of the fully extended arms where they would open, and all ten fingers would grab the beginning of the day, grab it and make it their own. *Carpe fucking diem*, he thought, had we but world enough and time . . . what a marvellous way to start the day.

He walked out of his bedroom and to the bathroom where he relieved himself and shuddered. He washed his hands and face and brushed his teeth. As he was brushing his tongue, he wondered if the stuff covering the second—third? first?—strongest muscle in the body was also skin, and if so, how many of those seven years would be spent picking skin cells out of the toothbrush.

As he was walking into the kitchen, he decided the project of building a human shell from dead skin cells was no different from the man who had decided to record every minute of his life in a diary. In Adam's mind, the man had started out writing things like "walked from the desk to the refrigerator, poured myself a glass of milk, drank it and walked back to the desk," but had soon realized he was leaving things out, things like picking up and opening the milk carton, placing it back in the refrigerator, and closing the refrigerator door. The realization that he was leaving some things out led to another realization, which led to writing things like "unconsciously sent a message from my brain to my right leg, the muscles in that leg contracted to lift my leg and move it forward," and on and on until eventually, the only thing the man would have been able to write was "I am writing the sentence I am writing right now. I am writing the sentence I am writing right now" over and over and over again until he died. Adam thought that sounded very much like eternally pushing a boulder up a hill, always up. And so the same with building a human shell one sloughed cell at a time. As soon as you had found and placed one cell, 20 more would have fallen off. His original estimate of seven years as the project's duration had been way off. It was probably something more like seven factorial, or—once again, it was too early for math, and so he focused on making some coffee.