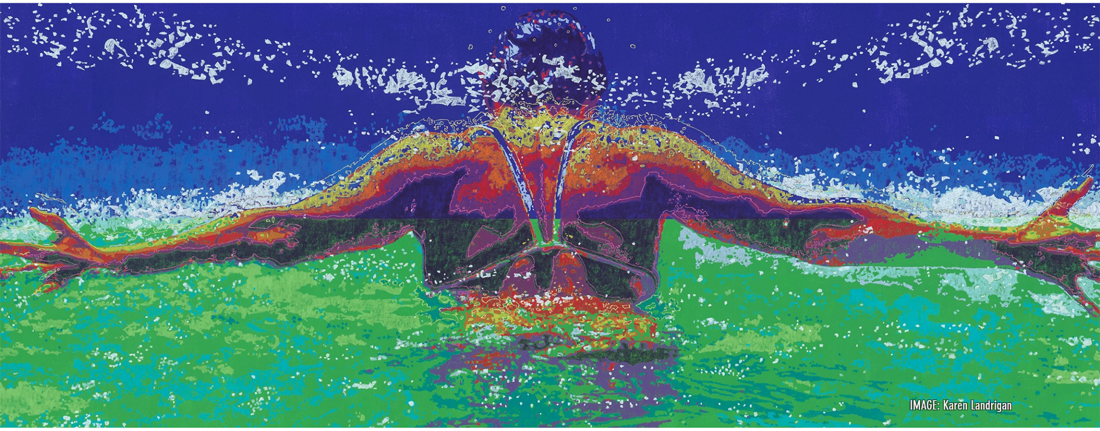
BEBORG

Andrew Seeder



Andrew Seeder is a researcher living in the Dorchester neighborhood of Boston. His visual art has been exhibited in the University of Chicago Library Special Collections Research Center and Cobalt Gallery in Chicago. His nonfiction writing has been published in the *Chicago Review*.

This stretch of Massachusetts Avenue is known as the Methadone Mile. Weekday mornings I walk it to work. A chain-link fence blocks pedestrians like me from falling into traffic. During warmer months, honeysuckle manages to grow and bloom on the fence. It is this place's only saving grace. Today two ambulances drive, sirens wailing, into gridlock.

An encrusted, sunburned man holds a cardboard sign. Drivers do not acknowledge him. He does not really solicit them, either. His presence at the intersection testifies enough about his lot. We make eye contact. I look away. In the distance I see the beacon atop the tower at 230 South Boylston Street. The beacon signals blue for clear skies, red for an approaching storm. The tower glows blue. I walk toward it.

There is a thin property line etched into the sidewalk between Boylston Street and BeBorg. The line is made of 18-karat gold. Mostly it goes unnoticed by passersby. But it is there. On one side, the streets of Back Bay, where the wealthy step over what remains of the destitute. On the other side, BeBorg, where I work.

Hundreds of others stream in with me. The stream does count as a social encounter in the strict sense that we are in each other's company. We are together, true, but there is no social life to be found. No stopping to catch up. No chance encounters. No laughter. We are determined. Before I go through the revolving door I must get in line.

The morning rush is not for the faint of heart. Within seconds I jump in line, adjust all my belongings, and comport my body to fit through the revolving door. Error means jammed limbs and being responsible, shamefully, for a slowed-down queue.

The physical volume I pass through within the revolving door—vanishingly brief and tight as it is—is thick with some of the most potent social-power dynamics in the building, a microcosm of popular neuroses. Passive aggressives and germaphobes let others push the door without making an effort themselves. Sadists muscle the door to clip the heels of the person ahead. I am astonished that the door turns at all, relying as it does on spontaneous human cooperation.

The door delivers me into the Grand Lobby. The building is the renovated former headquarters of a national insurance company, so the Grand Lobby is replete with 20-foot-tall mural scenes of the First Thanksgiving and Independence Day celebrations. Neat museum-quality dioramas depict the arc of Manifest Destiny, from ancient indigenous fish weirs to Plymouth Rock. Red, white, and blue banners drape down from the ceiling.

There is a security desk before the elevator bank. Security personnel check the IDs of pre-registered BeBorg guests, while other guards monitor the approach of BeBorg workers. It is at this moment, on the move between lobby and elevators, that workers get their first assessment.

The assessment verifies whether I belong in the building. Among the growing number of BeBorg offices on the planet, the Boston office is reserved for Analysts and Upper Middle Management. I am an Analyst. We are issued personal RFID badges. The badges designate each worker's status within the BeBorg hierarchy and grant access to a designated floor and office space. I am on the top floor. Each morning, I make a show of opening my wallet and pulling out my badge, lest the security guards think that I do not know the drill.

The protocol states that workers must tap their BeBorg badge on a chip reader, located on the wall next to the elevator bank. A successful scan is indicated by an eraser-sized LED bulb that toggles color from red to green in combination with a short, high-pitched tone. Security guards listen for the tone to determine whether a worker belongs. I learned the badge protocol by seeing it enforced. It is enforced the same way every time.

Whenever someone tries to board an elevator without scanning a badge, a guard barks into the crowd, "EXCUSE ME." If that does not work the guard will try to interpolate the person by assuming their gender. "EXCUSE ME, SIR." At this point, the crowd of workers freezes quiet, assumes guard duty, and turns their collective gaze onto the person who didn't scan a badge. If that pressure does not move the badgeless person to the security kiosk, a nearby worker deputizes themselves and tells the badgeless person that security is looking for them. That always does the trick. I've never seen a security guard get up from their desk in pursuit of someone. Here, at BeBorg, socializing is allowed to the extent that it enforces security protocol.

The elevators are notorious for opening and closing too fast. Elevators used to come with a mechanism that, if met by resistance, re-opened the doors. Such courtesy is not to be expected at BeBorg. This new generation of elevators does not come with automatically re-opening doors. Instead, if met by resistance, the new doors just keep closing. In the event that whatever is blocking the closing doors does not move, the doors will lock – thus trapping the object in place – and an alarm will go off, alerting security personnel of a malfunctioning elevator.

There are no buttons inside the elevators. I must first select my floor on a tablet installed in the elevator bank. The elevator interior includes a steel railing, steel paneling, LED light, and a single LCD display. The LCD display shows the weather, conditions at major international airports, road traffic delays, the crude oil NYMEX Index, and advertisements. The displays occasionally advertise themselves by referencing how many elevator-passengers-as-viewers they intercept. A true captive audience.

The elevators are large enough to fit two people comfortably and seven to eight people uncomfortably. Inside, everyone stares into their phones. Everyone wears headphones. No one speaks to each other, although some do continue their phone conversations. Deep sighs are heard on the ride up. On the top floor, the elevator doors open to the sounds of the Billboard Top 100.

The Top Floor Lobby has open seating, exposed ceilings, designer furniture, art monographs, wallpaper illustrations of carnivorous plants, framed large-format color photographs of an abandoned Soviet theme park, and a panoramic view of King Charles I River. Sunlight pours into the space. No one looks outside, for here at BeBorg we are well on our way to forgetting nature.

The Top Floor Lobby atmosphere is carefully controlled at BeBorg. The company patented a mixture of "all natural" air and essential oils, called InnovationAir. We're told that nitrogen levels are "optimal." With InnovationAir in the lungs, the space gains a certain buzz about it. More than once I've heard someone liken the mood to the after-parties of the Venice Biennale. "So this is the future!" cry newcomers to BeBorg. They are right. This place is the future in the present.

The Top Floor Lobby is filled with young, inspired BeBorg recruits and Upper Middle Management. Managers are easily identifiable. They have tan skin, straight, bright-white teeth, straight salt-and-pepper hair combed straight back, shaved faces, manicured nails, suede boots, designer jeans, a canvas belt, devil-may-care socks, and pressed French-cuff shirts with the sleeves rolled up. They are never in conversation with someone in the room. They are always on the phone. With headphones in their ears their hands are free to gesticulate and project charisma. When they sit they splay their legs and take up three or four seats. When they stand, they pace. Their conversations are loud and impossible to follow. They smile and laugh. They demand eye contact but offer no recognition.

BeBorg has rebranded the water cooler of 20th-century corporate America and replaced it with a glass pitcher filled with refrigerator ice, tap water, and slices of tropical fruit. It is the responsibility of one BeBorg worker to keep the pitcher and jam jars replenished. They are the second lowest-level worker, after the person who cleans the bathrooms. Workers are encouraged to use the bathroom stalls as "flex space" when all the meeting rooms are booked, so some workers spend their days half-naked on the toilet.

I get in line to fill a jam jar with cold-brewed coffee. One of my office-mates accidentally inhales part of a pastry. She clutches her throat, goes red-faced, and begins a coughing fit. Mid-cough, another BeBorger walks by and whispers into her ear: "*Too soon.*" As in: "The reason you're coughing is because you swallowed your pastry too soon." Obviously, they did not think my office-mate was in any immediate danger. Otherwise, instead of an explanation, they would have offered real assistance. Right? Accurate statements of fact devoid of empathy are, after all, very on-brand at BeBorg. When my office-mate recovers her breath she gives me a thumbs-up.

Coffee in hand, I tap my badge to enter the office floor. The L-shaped floor has suites, side cubicles along the wall, and cube pods. Most coveted are the suites in the corner. They have large windows and reclining furniture. Suites are reserved for Senior Upper Middle Management. I am in a four-person side cubicle. Thankfully, it has a small window. Side cubicles are preferred over one of the windowless cube pods, which only fit two workers apiece. The pods are optimized for volumetric efficiency, not human comfort. You can watch someone in a pod burn out in real time, because all the offices have floor-to-ceiling glass walls and sliding doors. From the right vantage points, everyone is visible to everyone else.

I tap my badge to enter my cubicle. My three cubicle-mates are already at their desks. Our desks are arranged so that two of us face away from each other, aimed to stare into adjacent cubicles. The other two face us, so that when they look up they are greeted by our profiles. We are each afforded one desk, one stack of lockable drawers on wheels, one chair, one laptop, one monitor, and one mouse. My desk is too small for my body.

The expectation is that I'll be staring into a computer screen all day. This is the expectation for every BeBorg Analyst. At this stage in my career, I am able to stare into a screen and type for four hours straight. It is one of my few marketable skills, though it comes with a toll. I am beginning to feel carpal tunnel in the wrist of my dominant hand. Each morning I take 800mg of ibuprofen for my neck.

The work itself is tedious. My main task is manual data entry. My job will be automated out of existence in the very near future. Here's one of my data entry algorithms:

RIGHT CLICK + LEFT CLICK + LEFT CLICK + CTRL-X + LEFT CLICK + CTRL-V + LEFT CLICK + RIGHT CLICK + LEFT CLICK + RIGHT CLICK + LEFT CLICK + LEFT CLICK + CTRL-X + LEFT CLICK + CTRL-V + LEFT CLICK + RIGHT CLICK + LEFT CLICK + LEFT CLICK + CTRL-X + LEFT CLICK + CTRL-V + RIGHT CLICK + LEFT CLICK

I have trained this script into my muscle memory. It takes ninety seconds to execute. The steps are numerous enough to require my full attention. They are not challenging enough to provide any lasting satisfaction, unfortunately. On paper, I'm paid for the output of this algorithm. But I know my work has never been checked. I do not produce anything tangible to anyone anywhere. Still, I am committed. I discipline myself for the sake of the work. When I go home, I eat, stretch, and sleep in ways that make reproducing this muscle memory easier when I'm back at my desk. I need BeBorg's health insurance. What do I provide in return?

At my desk, my attention swings back and forth between the Void and the Zone. The goal of every Analyst is to get into the Zone as often as possible for as long as possible. We're told it makes for cleaner data entry. Today, like every day, is a struggle between these two subjectivities. The Void is a place of relentless re-adjustment. I adjust my seat, my posture, my breathing, the tabs I have open, the music I'm listening to, the brightness of my monitor, what feeds I'm refreshing, what account notifications I'm checking. In short, I cast my attention to as many different combinations of content as I can, hoping that one of them will be powerful enough to inspire me. I can't get into the Zone without going through the Void first. Some days I can't get into the Zone at all.

To get into the Zone I must be seated with my back upright, listening to ~150bpm at 100 decibels, and high on 200mg caffeine. Together, these are not enough. I must genuinely want to be in the Zone. Desiring being there comes with an understanding that, when I get there, all the other parts of my life will melt away. My single-point of concentration in the Zone excludes me from thinking about my family, my friends, and all other aspects of my personal life. Is this not a kind of violence?

I desire it. I leave my self behind for the health insurance. I need to be on brand to stay covered. I need to look good. I enter the Zone.

Muscle memory takes over. I do not consciously intend or reflect upon my actions. The mind's higher-order executive functions are reserved for Upper Middle Management. I churn out hours of data entry without breaking concentration. Time passes as a smooth succession of long intervals. One hour. Blink, breathe. Ninety minutes. Blink, breathe. Two hours. Blink, breathe. Pause to drain my bladder. I am like a machine. It feels so good. I want to do this all day. My cubicle-mates can tell I'm in the Zone now. They see me rocking back and forth.

They say I'm dancing.

I left my elbow dangling in the gap between the edge of my desk and the path of the sliding door. Someone opens the door and slams my funny bone. This pulls me out of the Zone. I take off my headphones. I wince and rub my elbow until the pain has subsided enough for me to ignore it and return to my data entry posture.

A BeBorg tour, another interruption, comes down the hallway. Tour guides show off the office floor to recruits. The goal is to convince recruits that BeBorg is an important place to work by virtue of its amenities. You might think that the power dynamics of the situation — talented potential workers shopping around for the best companies — would demand a conciliatory tone from BeBorg tours. Not so. The power dynamics are reversed. BeBorg does not offer jobs to just any recruit. The recruits themselves must be already on-brand to get hired. They must, at minimum, be young, privately educated, have a strong social media following, and have low BMI. Low BMI makes it easier to fit them into cubicles. To be sure, the recruits know they're competing against each other for the same position, so they fall over themselves in their praise of the BeBorg corporate culture. The best heap praise in a way that also communicates an on-brand identity. No mean feat.

There are about a dozen recruit tours every day, hundreds every year, thousands of recruits at any given time. There is a strict separation of responsibilities at BeBorg. Analysts like me and my cubicle-mates aren't allowed to ask or answer questions during a recruit tour. When recruits happen to stop in front of our cubicle, an arms-length away, separated by a glass wall, they look us up and down. They make silent judgments about BeBorg based on how we look. They continue their conversations like we can't see or hear them. Surreal, perhaps, but it is easy enough to be ignored.

Except this is not an ordinary recruit tour. This is an investor tour. Rare. There is only one investor. He is in formalwear. There are two tour guides in suits, neither of whom I've seen before. The investor speaks quickly. He asks questions. The guides point at us and give answers. They walk slowly, deliberately. The investor folds his hands behind his back. They walk toward our cubicle. Does a major investment depend on this tour? My cubicle-mates stare at their keyboards. I am intimidated.

I try to get into the Zone. I want to look good. I want to be on-brand. I get into my data entry posture, put my headphones on, and flow. The investor approaches. Our cubicle door is still open. He steps halfway inside. He stands over me. He crouches below me. He brings his face to mine. He stares into my eyes, follows my pupils as I enter data. His breath smells like Listerine.

He is testing my concentration. I do my data entry as if he were not there. I have single-point concentration. Sixty seconds. Blink, breathe. I make no errors. He gets up and walks away. The tour guides follow behind him and look back at me. I make eye contact with them. I am afraid. They leave the office floor. I take off my headphones and begin to hyperventilate.

This is my real value, what I exchange to BeBorg for health insurance. The data I enter measures my time in the Zone, useful for nothing else. My labor produces an image. To the eyes of a potential investor, the image of me in the Zone answers a question about BeBorg's labor supply: How well do we pour our attention into a screen? I am window-dressing for a corporate brand and I perform spectacularly.

I catch my breath.

My cubicle-mates give me high-fives.

Then, one after the other, three loud, high-pitched tones declare an evacuation of the building. Everyone is startled. We jump to our feet.

The alarm stops.

My coworkers sit down and laugh. But my heart is still racing. I put on my jacket and run out to the Top Floor Lobby.

The alarm went off twenty seconds ago, yet there is no panic. I see PowerPoint presentations in full swing. I hear light banter, laughter. I bound up to a maintenance worker and ask, "Do we need to evacuate the building?" They say, "No. We are repairing the alarm system today. Everything is normal." To my side, a BeBorg worker dressed in a banana costume offers me a promotional incentive program to lose weight. I can taste the InnovationAir. I wonder if I am in a dream. I must get outside.

I ride the elevator down, tap my badge on my way out, and stumble through the revolving door. I fall to my knees. I clutch my chest, trying to manually pump my lungs full of air. It stings. My eyes sting. There is a spray in the air. I inhale a clump of hair and gag. There is a crowd around me, around a pool of blood. My blood? No. Two dogs are killing each other. One dog's jaw is shattered. Its tongue falls loose from its head. The other dog has a row of stitches across its belly. The stitches are torn open. The dog drags its intestines over the property line. Both die before me.

Above us the tower beacon light shines brighter and brighter. I rise to my feet. The light is too bright. I close my eyes. It shines through my eyelids. I use my hand to shield my eyes from the light, but see through my hand to the bones. Traffic comes to a stop. People get out of their cars to stare into the light. Mouths gape. Birds cease their singing. The wind rests. It does not hurt. The light I mean. It does not hurt.

In the light an aureole takes shape. Purple waves emanate from its center and roil the sky. First a profile, hands, bare feet, and arms—arms outstretched. They descend from the top of the tower beacon and land big toe first onto Boylston Street. I fall to my knees. They bend over and pull into their arms the dead dog bodies. I cannot see their face but I hear them quietly sobbing. They cradle the dogs in their arms. They lift and turn away from us, rising to the tower beacon. I rise to my feet.

"Wait!" I cry to them.

They stop their ascent and turn back toward us on the street.

"What about us?" I plead.

They turn their face to behold the dogs in their arms and then they look down to us. They look up into the sun as a ring of arms uncoils from behind their back. All their hands stretch to open palms. They look back down to us but do not descend any farther. I throw my hands up to them. Others around me jump to reach them. We cannot reach. Their palms close. They turn back toward the tower beacon.

"Who will save us?" I ask.

They rise and vanish into the light. The light dims.

The birds start singing. The wind begins blowing. The crowd disperses. People get back into their cars. Someone lays on their horn to get traffic moving. The tower beacon glows red. I go back to work.