

Obituary

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Jo Hammett

Let me tell you about my friend, the late John Esten-Cooke. He died sometime last week on the side of the highway south of New York aged thirty-eight. He leaves no children. He was fluent in German but a mute from birth. Craggy dimples and hoof-like teeth were his trademark, as was his silent cheer and hatred of able-bodies. He had the nickname Jackson after his mother's home town, and loved the lower lands and the prairies. With his love of model aeroplanes and engineering, he could have had a successful career as a pilot had it not been for the thought epidemic. But instead he was appointed as a User with a special unit named Lexington, to gather intelligence and expel people assemblies. Turns out, he had been faced with a simple choice: stay, and face white noise death, or run away under the smoke of an explosion that created an official news black out. Three weeks ago he made his choice, running through and through the Southern States, proclaiming a new truth. His silent truth that defied the prohibition of groups and campaigned against the promotion of the individual as supreme. But too early, I buried him in Virginia.

On the far wall of Thompson's great government hall, hangs a red curtain. Velvet to the eye, nylon to the touch, its majestic folds are eroding, falling like quake valleys to the concrete floor. Its edges yellowing like a clown's face paint, ingrained with years of sallow dust.

In front of the curtain, as if in the front row of a theatre, stands a tiny desk. A male government official sits there wrapped in a greying duvet. The glow from the desk-lamp on his bland face. The incessant static in the room prickling the hairs on the backs of his hands. He slides a button to view the online world, and turns to look for dissident reports. It's cold. There is a slight breeze in front of him as the two curtains separate to reveal a screen of monumental size, a search engine like no other, that can look into the eyes and soul of every dot and criminal cluster in the online world.

John Esten-Cooke is dead. His milky corpse lies like a bent sign-post on the southern highway. But up until last week he was alive. A young boy with an IT management degree, who became a man of society, a government officer of the online many. Every day from six until two, that monstrous curtain blinkering his view, he managed the millions and millions of dots.

Thompson thought John Esten-Cooke was perfect for the User job. Because he was mute. No mouth groping and gouging of the tongue, no threat of traitor white noise death. He was looking for people assemblies. Clusters or societies with a clear purpose: Sexissogood Society, Crown Advocates, Hackney Rights Supporters, that kind of sentiment. Sentiment was all it was, John thought. The government needn't kid themselves that it was actually more than hot pub talk, most of the time. He was to look for unusual groupings or observe the usual individuals. Tracking an online coup d'état. But mostly, he thought, it was harmless fun chat.

Their department had been formed to enforce this very policy that abolished public meetings. It had been called upon to recognise the individual again, to find a sedative for the thousands of splinter terror tribes that had been the cause of daily destruction, and had become like swarming mosquitoes sucking at the human soul.

Clusters with intent, Thompson specified, were the potential trouble spots. Thompson was his senior and had read books on this stuff, books that most people had burnt a long time ago. One afternoon Thompson confessed that he got off on these ideals of power and the individual, but John didn't like to think too much about that.

John had liked Thompson, otherwise. He had a respect for a man that had come from nothing. A man that had reformed himself to like the better things in his pitiful life, Thompson listened to Wagner when he worked the desk in that great hall, and claimed that he had walked away from a life of hanging out in broken telephone boxes, selling sham salvation in the form of self-help books to junkies. John respected a man who had worked his way up to goodness, even if he did spend his time cocooned in that mangy duvet.

Don't get John wrong, he'd never killed a man. John gave the ratings, assessed the risks, and when they became high he told Thompson. Everyone knew it was wrong, now. They knew the risks. It was immoral. They should drop it or suffer the consequences. To make himself feel better he had given himself the nickname Jackson.

He'd never had a nickname at high school. At one time he had been John Esten Tucker. But his mother had wiped away his father's name in just the same way she had wiped his nose when it bubbled catarrh.

He remembered as a child his mother had scrubbed his face till he was raging with the insufferable frustration, red skin and hurt pride: a cropped man with not another word in his good mouth.

Perhaps it was this search for goodness that had provoked John Esten-Cooke to make illegal contact. John believed the consensus that 'people assemblies' were the path to violence. Or perhaps it was his search for a voice that made him to take an flagrant risk on the first Wednesday of last month, when Lexington had been quiet, and he had typed in his first words of greeting to a criminal cluster who were discussing abolished ideals. He had delayed telephoning Thompson about this one, and had deemed them and himself low risk on the monitor.

He had been shy at first. But that Wednesday by a single click he had made contact.

<DEMON> THIS IS NOT PRIVATE SOMEONE ELSE OBS-

<JACKSON> Hello

<DEMON> left chat.

It hadn't lasted for very long, John had been convinced that Thompson was going to walk in at any moment. That thought had pushed him further, like a curious school boy.

<JACKSON> I have no others. Just me.

<DEMON> THIS CAT HAS NO FACE, HE'S A BULL DON'T SAY AFUCKIN
WORD TO HIM

<JACKSON> Hi, meet?

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<DEMON> YOU'RE A CRAZY BULL, GOONA TAKE US DOWN, HE HE HE
HE HE H EH HE EG HE

<IGGY> FRiendly are you

<SUMMERSDAY> Fuckin GET THAT crazy WOMA-

<JACKSON> Yeah

<SUMMERSDAY> -N OFF-

<JACKSON> I'm, yes friendly, a gentleman

<SUMMERSDAY> -THE CHAT,

<DEMON> HAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA HAA HA AHA AHA

<JACKSON> This place is a jungle

<DEMON> fu you

<SUMMERSDAY> freaks and weirdos and prophets

<JACKSON> CAN'T speak

<SUMMERSDAY> jeeesus. Shut up. Gov individuals!

<IGGY> I'm the same U Jackson, no speak

<JACKSON> YOU ALL SPEAK OVER EACH OTHER

<ALFIE> speak here.

<ALFIE>IT'S quiet.

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<JACKSON> ok

Till the day he finally met Mary Jane Amadeus.

<JACKSON> TOOO MCUH OF A RISK-

<ALFIE> We're having a silent picnic.

<JACKSON> -HERE

<ALFIE> Fancy dress...

<JACKSON> WANT TO MAJE CONTACT.

<ALFIE > ...shop.

<JACKSON> OTHERS NEAR.

<ALFIE> Pinkerton St

<JACKSON> I CAN HEAR BUT I CANT USE THEIR WORDS

<JACKSON> meet others soon?

<ALFIE> Soon.

<JACKSON> How many?

<ALFIE> More than two.

<JACKSON> YOU HEAR WORDS?

<ALFIE> Not any more.

<JACKSON> You speak

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<ALFIE> With my hands.

<JACKSON> You have a wife?

<ALFIE> No!

<JACKSON> Type me a question.

<ALFIE> Aren't you tired of being alone?

<JACKSON>

<ALFIE> ?

<ALFIE> ???

<ALFIE> you still here?

<JACKSON> has left chat.

Mary Jane Amadeus and John Esten-Cooke were sat in Central Park having their silent picnic, the first of many. It was about to rain. Not the Alfie he pictured. She was a woman. John cupped his hand to create the sign for horse riding. Never a horse rider, she mouthed. They had covered most 'conversation' topics. She put her umbrella up. John thought she would have been at home with a colt, saddled, silent and panting. Mary Jane Amadeus was flat nosed, with a knuckle-like forehead and stout ungovernable shoulders a discoloured blonde that buried her hearing injury deep within.

Mary Jane and John are stood outside Peking Paris, a cheap fancy

dress and party accessories shop. An entire shop of fancies and colours. Balloons to match the colour of your eyes. A whirlpool of snakeskin coats and fake government hats. Feathers. Fur for the bitch inside. Fake frogs for the witch inside. The pirate ship ride. Horse and cowboy couple set. The boards covering the display window said that Peking Paris had gone bust since parties were regulated against. But in fact it was curtains and not soldiers stopped people meeting these days.

Inside Peking Paris, behind the hanging racks of demons and fairies sits an illegal assembly. The circle first appears to be knitting, but further observation shows that this is hot chat: fingers and thumbs speak a quiet cacophony, fingering numbers, words and expletives to each other. To a government officer like John Esten-Cooke this silent chatter, is a secret immoral society. The group are in disguise. A red afro wig, a clown nose and flowing goldilocks tails strike small talk with their upturned palms, it's hard to tell what's real and what's not.

He took a harlequin costume from a hanger, slipped it on and fastened it. As he sat down and signed along, did he know that he was betraying them all? Did he know that he was also condemning himself? Did he know that only one of them would get away?

Mary Jane Amadeus is looking around Thompson's great hall. She sits in his chair, feeling the impression of his bottom in the foam. She releases the disk from the envelope. Start. Open. Breathing in deeply, the breath rising between her ribs, she thinks of John Esten-Cooke. She scans the first vowels and syllables of the obituary. He wasn't a bad man. She edits the document, trying to lift her sentences from the grief.

With finality, Mary Jane walks to the curtain that covers the online world. The curtain smells of cigarettes, she fingers the moth eggs. Such a quiet security guard you are, she thinks. I wonder if you know anything of the interface you hide. Her right hand grasps the pulley, and as she feeds the rope from her left hand to her right the curtain opens with a sigh.

The vast monitor screen is still. Not much activity this early in the morning. An update appears, it is a window warning. She chooses to ignore and instead finds the messenger.

She has coded her obituary into some viral software. Like a kiss on the forehead, she taps out the code . Enter. Save. Slowly her message is carried into the heart of the machine, connecting with every data dot, hosting and reproducing within seconds of the click. John Esten-Cooke's obituary spreads like an infection across the online world. His silent truth is heard.

Off-white calves stick out from underneath his duvet as Thompson enters the great hall. He sits in his chair unaware of the foreign body that was in the same position moments earlier. He heaves his cotton armour over his shoulders and walks to his beautiful screen , caressing its burgundy cloak. You will outlive me, he thinks.

With cracking knuckles, he pulls at the rope system, but groaning the curtain remains fast, unusually stubborn, a knot is strangled in a clasp. He eases off on the rope, lets it slip, then with a final tug, it slips through with a sigh. But the universal screen projects nothing but his own sketchy reflection.

Thompson coughs from the exertion and waddles back to his seat.

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The interface remains still. No activity. No reports. Nothing. Unusual for the morning. Puzzled, he picks at the label on his duvet. A pigeon pops up in the corner of the monumental screen: 156 messages. Thompson starts to pick more quickly at the label.

The first message begins.

Let me tell you about my friend, the late John Esten-Cooke. He died sometime last week on the side of the highway south of New York aged thirty-eight. He leaves no children.

Thompson's duvet feels itchy on his back. He reads from the very beginning to the very end of his colleague's obituary. He learns of John's love for aviation, his mother's real maiden name, high school accomplishments, certificates of outstanding achievement, events in college, his first job, measures of his second job, his job at Lexington, his coming to terms with his useless mouth, his love for Mary Jane Amadeus, his unborn child, his online nickname, his dead friends, his dissident group, his immoral group, his reasoning on our society: tiresome old self-philosophy, infected with poor thought. There were few surprises. Such a shame that she had mentioned those details on Lexington he thought. Why did he end his useless life as a traitor?

Thompson read all 156 messages, and they were all exactly the same. He couldn't help noticing the single discoloured blonde hair caught on the curtain, catching the light of the interface in the lunchtime loom.

Mary Jane Amadeus is under observation. Like a respectable citizen, she stands alone on a bridge built in homage to writers. She is a traitor. The clouds are low overhead, holding the rain thick in their breath.

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Funny, she thinks, that writing obituaries has become my death sentence. She rubs her stomach and turns to face the encroaching pack of male government officials? Writing was not my choice, she silently protests. Why would I want to 'speak' in words? When you're deaf you don't need words. Her thoughts hang inside her head like cloud. A cough diverts her attention to the metallic cylinders of white noise death. Traitor's death. What fingered requiem can I give? A bloody useless language. Water trickles down her forehead. It has started to rain.

This story was written during the Science Museum's Listening Post short story workshops with Tony White, Science Museum writer in residence for summer 2008. Fragments of text from the following sources were cut-up and remixed by the author to create a completely new story:

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Jo Hammett works in theatre and performance and hopes to carry on developing her writing.