

Honorable Mention
Annotations of Solitude
By Sean Cho A.

You're in the quiet box of a rented room. The desk is flimsy particleboard, plastic veneer peeling at the edges, revealing the cardboard skeleton beneath. A lamp, its neck bent low, illuminates the tired circles beneath your eyes, the blinking cursor, the endless grid of digital solitude. You click, select, annotate, repeat. The task: label images, videos, raw human moments distilled into bits of metadata. Faces smiling, unsmiling, eyes open, eyes closed, expressions measured, condensed into neatly categorized slots of digital nothingness. For eight hours a day, you measure humanity by displacement: the absence of light, the subtle shadows on a cheekbone.

Consider your body as a data point, reduced to eye strain, wrist aches, a slow erosion of posture. Imagine the distance between your body and the life occurring outside your window. Laughter drifts through thin walls. Real voices, real joy. But here you're alone, annotating joy without ever touching it.

In college, they spoke grandly about artificial intelligence, machine learning, neural networks, the boundless potential of data, reminding you of how steam engines and railways once promised breakneck speeds, advancement, the future. You bought in. But nobody prepared you for boredom, the aloneness that settles between clicks, between annotations. Digital solitaire was an ironic comfort at first, easier than sliding from screen to spreadsheet and back again. But joy found there is fleeting, more like forgetting than happiness.

Today you annotate a set of videos labeled "celebrations." A young woman blows out birthday candles; a couple dances at a wedding. Your cursor hovers. Each annotation must be precise: emotion, joy; intensity, moderate; context, social. These markers become truth, or at least a synthetic kind of reality. What good is unexplainable grief, the ache that wells behind your eyes as you distill someone's moment into cold, digital logic?

You remember your professor once saying the difference between truth and authenticity is that one happened, and one feels like it could have happened. You're crafting authenticity, memories synthesized from data.

Last night, you dreamed in third person again, watching yourself click through annotations as if from a distance. Your waking life echoes this displacement. Imagine waking outside of your body, an impossibility that feels more possible each passing day. You consider the mice that once cured your grandfather's rhinovirus, bodies instrumentalized, data points in medical trials. There were no charcuterie boards in their cages, no comfort, only a clinical, measurable utility. You wonder about your own cage, invisible but palpable, built from the algorithms that monetize loneliness.

You try to quantify love once more, though the emotion always requires a response you cannot annotate. Like when your cat brushes your ankles, his small presence demanding affection. Like the absence of Taffy, the dog you lost years ago, an ache no algorithm can contextualize. You wish to tell the dataset about these losses, these loves, but the data won't hold such nuances.

Sometimes, staring out the window, you imagine your annotations reaching a future AI. You picture it learning to feel joy, to grieve authentically. Yet even in imagination, there's sadness. Each day you measure human experience, knowing the truth—there's always something missing, something unlanguageable.

You finish your shift as the sun sets, pixels rearranging your vision. Screens go dark. You're left again with yourself, less measurable, more unknown than the dataset allows. Standing, stretching, you feel the weight of digital displacement. The grid waits patiently for your return tomorrow, the endless loop of truth turned into metadata.

Tonight, stepping into the quiet street, the evening air tangible against your skin, you begin to narrate your body back into being. The distance shrinks, slightly. Realness returns slowly, as subtle as the quiet acknowledgment of your breath. In the space between the screens, between annotations and life, something immeasurable waits: small, authentic, and human.

Bio: Sean Cho A. is a writer living in the southern United States.