Metagestures

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After getting barely any sleep Vilém sprung awake, flew out the door, thought better of it, doubled back, tidied up his nest, fluffed the pillows, brushed away stray bits of twig and tinsel, speed-walked back to the door, locked it behind him, and began his day.

This was a day unlike others. He breezed by friends and neighbors — greeting them, perhaps, with a high-pitched whinny or a buzzy bobolinky whistling or a cha-cha-lac — as he rushed to the telegraph station.

When he arrived he threw open the door and called out to the tuxedoed station manager with his most urgent trilling song. Understanding immediately, and half in shock at the news, the manager quickly pushed a sheet of staff paper and a pen at the other man, stood up, brushed off coat and tails, and proceeded to the piano. When Vilém had finished with his message, he put down the pen and brought the note-splattered sheet to the manager in his new position on the piano bench. That man quickly scanned the half and quarter and eighth notes scrawled on the page, fe-bree’d out a brief question, listened for Vilém’s quacking reply, flexed his fingers, and began to play.
First, the station manager pounded out the code for the appropriate receiving station. As he continued to play, with each note or chord struck on the piano the corresponding keys tapped a series of wires translating it to the other station. There, a player piano sitting on standby plinked and plonked to life as its keys began mimicking the notes of the manager. Its sharps and flats and naturals connected to a system of levers and inks and gears and by the conclusion of the message a thin sheet of staff paper nearly identical to that which Vilém had handed over was extruded from its side.

Once it was done, Vilém honked a thank-you and retreated to a corner of the station to pace and flutter as the manager sped back to his desk in a rush of black and white and awaited a reply. Minutes later, an open-backed banjo mounted under the desk began to pluck out a series of notes in a clawhammer style. As the strings self-strummed, they grooved the paper mounted on the fretboard beneath them, and while the tuxedoed manager quickly read the fretmarks he furiously inked clefs and notes and beams and rests while Vilém looked on and twee-tweed in panic and the banjo twanged and the manager scribbled and listened and so did Vilém as he shuffled to the desk and it was twang-groove-twee-scribble-shuffle twang-groove-twee-scribble-shuffle until, with a phantom drop-thumb, the banjo ceased its message and so did the fretboard and so did the manager and he stared at the paper and then looked up at Vilém and handed him the translation and exhaled and collapsed into a chair.

Vilém read, and his emotions were written on his face by the twisting of ropy eyebrows and the pull of flesh and hair around his nose and chin. Eyes and skin and nostrils gathered into a text on which the station manager read despair. Seeing this, the manager pulled his fear into himself and unfolded his body and dusted off his jacket and went once again to sit at his piano. Without a script to render and not quite knowing what to say, he tuned the instrument to broadcast to all stations, he placed his fingers, and he began to strike the keys. Knowing what was coming — and coming soon — the manager wrote for his life. He played from the beginning — from his first memories in his par-
ents’ nest—and as he played he came to understand, and even as his knuckles cramped and his fingertips bloodied the station manager began to smile, and the warbling behind him faded to an echo, and he knew that it was not going to be alright, but that was alright, and he closed his eyes and kept playing.