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(A Great Album of Babel)

Suppose within every book there is another book, and within every letter on every page another volume constantly unfolding; but these volumes take no space on the desk. Suppose knowledge could be reduced to a quintessence, held within a picture, a sign, held within a place which is no place.

—Hilary Mantel (2009)

"THE UNIVERSE (which others call the Library)..."

Thus Jorge Luis Borges began his 1941 story "The Library of Babel," about the mythical library that contains all books, in all languages, books of apology and prophecy, the gospel and the commentary upon that gospel and the commentary upon the commentary upon the gospel, the minutely detailed history of the future, the interpolations of all books in all other books,

the faithful catalogue of the library and the innumerable false catalogues. This library (which others call the universe) enshrines all the information. Yet no knowledge can be discovered there, precisely because all knowledge *is* there, shelved side by side with all falsehood. In the mirrored galleries, on the countless shelves, can be found everything and nothing. There can be no more perfect case of information glut.

We make our own storehouses. The persistence of information, the difficulty of forgetting, so characteristic of our time, accretes confusion. As the free, amateur, collaborative online encyclopedia called Wikipedia began to overtake all the world's printed encyclopedias in volume and comprehensiveness, the editors realized that too many names had multiple identities. They worked out a disambiguation policy, which led to the creation of disambiguation pages—a hundred thousand and more. For example, a user foraging in Wikipedia's labyrinthine galleries for "Babel" finds "Babel (disambiguation)," which leads in turn to the Hebrew name for ancient Babylon, to the Tower of Babel, to an Iraqi newspaper, a book by Patti Smith, a Soviet journalist, an Australian language teachers'

journal, a film, a record label, an island in Australia, two different mountains in Canada, and "a neutrally aligned planet in the fictional Star Trek universe." And more. The paths of disambiguation fork again and again. For example, "Tower of Babel (disambiguation)" lists, besides the story in the Old Testament, songs, games, books, a Brueghel painting, an Escher woodcut, and "the tarot card." We have made many towers of Babel.

Long before Wikipedia, Borges also wrote about the encyclopedia "fallaciously called *The Anglo-American Cyclopedia* (New York, 1917)," a warren of fiction mingling with fact, another hall of mirrors and misprints, a compendium of pure and impure information that projects its own world. That world is called Tlön. "It is conjectured that this brave new world is the work of a secret society of astronomers, biologists, engineers, metaphysicians, poets, chemists, algebraists, moralists, painters, geometers...." writes Borges. "This plan is so vast that each writer's contribution is infinitesimal. At first it was believed that Tlön was a mere chaos, an irresponsible license of the imagination; now it is known that it is a cosmos." With good reason, the

Argentine master has been taken up as a prophet ("our heresiarch uncle," William Gibson says) by another generation of writers in the age of information.

Long before Borges, the imagination of Charles Babbage had conjured another library of Babel. He found it in the very air: a record, scrambled yet permanent, of every human utterance.

> What a strange chaos is this wide atmosphere we breathe!... The air itself is one vast library, on whose pages are for ever written all that man has ever said or woman whispered. There, in their mutable but unerring characters, mixed with the earliest, as well as the latest sighs of mortality, stand for ever recorded, vows unredeemed, promises unfulfilled, perpetuating in the united movements of each particle, the testimony of man's changeful will.

Edgar Allan Poe, following Babbage's work eagerly, saw the point. "No thought can perish," he wrote in 1845, in a dialogue between two angels. "Did there not cross your mind some thought of the *physical*

power of words? Is not every word an impulse on the air?" Further, every impulse vibrates outward indefinitely, "upward and onward in their influences upon all particles of all matter," until it must, "*in the end*, impress every individual thing that exists *within the universe*." Poe was also reading Newton's champion Pierre-Simon Laplace. "A being of infinite understanding," wrote Poe, "—one to whom the *perfection* of the algebraic analysis lay unfolded" could trace the undulations backward to their source.

Babbage and Poe took an information-theoretic view of the new physics. Laplace had expounded a perfect Newtonian mechanical determinism; he went further than Newton himself, arguing for a clockwork universe in which nothing is left to chance. Since the laws of physics apply equally to the heavenly bodies and the tiniest particles, and since they operate with perfect reliability, then surely (said Laplace) the state of the universe at every instant follows inexorably from the past and must lead just as relentlessly to the future. It was too soon to conceive of quantum uncertainty, chaos theory, or the limits of computability. To dramatize his perfect determinism, Laplace asked us to imagine a

being—an "intelligence"—capable of perfect knowledge:

> It would embrace in the same formula the movements of the greatest bodies of the universe and those of the lightest atom; for it, nothing would be uncertain and the future, as the past, would be present to its eyes.

Nothing else Laplace wrote ever became as famous as this thought experiment. It rendered useless not only God's will but Man's. To scientists this extreme Newtonianism seemed cause for optimism. To Babbage, all nature suddenly resembled a vast calculating engine, a grand version of his own deterministic machine: "In turning our views from these simple consequences of the juxtaposition of a few wheels, it is impossible not to perceive the parallel reasoning, as applied to the mighty and far more complex phenomena of nature." Each atom, once disturbed, must communicate its motion to others, and they in turn influence waves of air, and no impulse is ever entirely lost. The track of every canoe remains somewhere in the oceans. Babbage,

whose railroad pen recorder traced on a roll of paper the history of a journey, saw information, formerly evanescent, as a series of physical impressions that were, or could be preserved. The phonograph, impressing sound into foil or wax, had yet to be invented, but Babbage could view the atmosphere as an engine of motion with meaning: "every atom impressed with good and with ill … which philosophers and sages have imparted to it, mixed and combined in ten thousand ways with all that is worthless and base." Every word ever said, whether heard by a hundred listeners or none, far from having vanished into the air, leaves its indelible mark, the complete record of human utterance being encrypted by the laws of motion and capable, in theory, of being recovered—given enough computing power.

This was overoptimistic. Still, the same year Babbage published his essay, the artist and chemist Louis Daguerre in Paris perfected his means of capturing visual images on silver-coated plates. His English competitor, William Fox Talbot, called this "the art of photogenic drawing, or of forming pictures and images of natural objects by means of solar light." Talbot saw

something meme-like. “By means of this contrivance,” he wrote, “it is not the artist who makes the picture, but the picture which makes *itself*.” Now the images that fly before our eyes could be frozen, impressed upon substance, made permanent.

By painting or drawing, an artist—with skill, training, and long labor—reconstructs what the eye might see. By contrast, a daguerreotype is in some sense the thing itself—the information, stored, in an instant. It was unimaginable, but there it was. The possibilities made the mind reel. Once storage began, where would it stop? An American essayist immediately connected photography to Babbage’s atmospheric library of sounds: Babbage said that every word was registered somewhere in the air, so perhaps every image, too, left its permanent mark—somewhere.

> In fact, there is a great album of Babel. But what too, if the great business of the sun be to act registrar likewise, and to give out impressions of our looks, and pictures of our actions; and so … for all we know to the contrary, other worlds may be peopled and conducted with the images of persons and transactions thrown off from

> this and from each other; the whole universal nature being nothing more than phonetic and photogenic structures.

The universe, which others called a library or an album, then came to resemble a computer. Alan Turing may have noticed this first: observing that the computer, like the universe, is best seen as a collection of states, and the state of the machine at any instant leads to the state at the next instant, and thus all the future of the machine should be predictable from its initial state and its input signals.

The universe is computing its own destiny.

Turing noticed that Laplace's dream of perfection might be possible in a machine but not in the universe, because of a phenomenon which, a generation later, would be discovered by chaos theorists and named the butterfly effect. Turing described it this way in 1950:

> The system of the "universe as a whole" is such that quite small errors in initial conditions can have an overwhelming effect at a later time. The displacement of

> a single electron by a billionth of a centimetre at one moment might make the difference between a man being killed by an avalanche a year later, or escaping.

If the universe is a computer, we may still struggle to access its memory. If it is a library, it is a library without shelves. When all the world's sounds disperse through the atmosphere, no word is left attached to any particular bunch of atoms. The words are anywhere and everywhere. That was why Babbage called this information store a "chaos." Once again he was ahead of his time.

When the ancients listed the Seven Wonders of the World, they included the Lighthouse of Alexandria, a 400-foot stone tower built to aid sailors, but overlooked the library nearby. The library, amassing hundreds of thousands of papyrus rolls, maintained the greatest collection of knowledge on earth, then and for centuries to come. Beginning in the third century BCE, it served the Ptolemies' ambition to buy, steal, or copy all the writings of the known world. The library enabled Alexandria to

surpass Athens as an intellectual center. Its racks and cloisters held the dramas of Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides; the mathematics of Euclid, Archimedes, and Eratosthenes; poetry, medical texts, star charts, mystic writings—"such a blaze of knowledge and discovery," H. G. Wells declared, "as the world was not to see again until the sixteenth century.... It is the true beginning of Modern History." The lighthouse loomed large, but the library was the real wonder. And then it burned.

Exactly when and how that happened, no one can ever know. Probably more than once. Vengeful conquerors burn books as if the enemy's souls reside there, too. "The Romans burnt the books of the Jews, of the Christians, and the philosophers," Isaac D'Israeli noted in the nineteenth century; "the Jews burnt the books of the Christians and the Pagans; and the Christians burnt the books of the Pagans and the Jews." The Qin dynasty burned China's books in order to erase previous history. The erasure was effective, the written word being fragile. What we have of Sophocles is not even a tenth of his plays. What we have of Aristotle is mostly second- or thirdhand. For historians peering into the past, the

destruction of the Great Library is an event horizon, a boundary across which information does not pass. Not even a partial catalogue survived the flames.

"All the lost plays of the Athenians!" wails Thomasina (a young mathematician who resembles Ada Byron) to her tutor, Septimus, in Tom Stoppard's drama *Arcadia*. "Thousands of poems—Aristotle's own library … How can we sleep for grief?"

"By counting our stock," Septimus replies.

> You should no more grieve for the rest than for a buckle lost from your first shoe, or for your lesson book which will be lost when you are old. We shed as we pick up, like travelers who must carry everything in their arms, and what we let fall will be picked up by those behind. The procession is very long and life is very short. We die on the march. But there is nothing outside the march so nothing can be lost to it. The missing plays of Sophocles will turn up piece by piece, or be written again in another language.

Anyway, according to Borges, the missing plays can be found in the Library of Babel.

In honor of the lost library, Wikipedia drew hundreds of its editors to Alexandria in the eighth summer of its existence—people called Shipmaster, Brassratgirl, Notafish, and Jimbo who ordinarily meet only online. More than 7 million such user names had been registered by then; the pilgrims came from forty-five countries, paying their own way, toting laptops, exchanging tradecraft, wearing their fervor on their T-shirts. By then, July 2008, Wikipedia comprised 2.5 million articles in English, more than all the world's paper encyclopedias combined, and a total of 11 million in 264 languages, including Wolof, Twi, and Dutch Low Saxon, but not including Choctaw, closed by community vote after achieving only fifteen articles, or Klingon, found to be a "constructed," if not precisely fictional, language. The Wikipedians consider themselves as the Great Library's heirs, their mission the gathering of all recorded knowledge. They do not, however, collect and preserve existing texts. They attempt to summarize shared knowledge, apart from and outside of the individuals who might have thought it was theirs.

Like the imaginary library of Borges,

Wikipedia begins to appear boundless. Several dozen of the non-English Wikipedias have, each, one article on Pokémon, the trading-card game, manga series, and media franchise. The English Wikipedia began with one article and then a jungle grew. There is a page for "Pokémon (disambiguation)," needed, among other reasons, in case anyone is looking for the Zbtb7 oncogene, which was called Pokemon (for POK erythroid myeloid ontogenic factor), until Nintendo's trademark lawyers threatened to sue. There are at least five major articles about the popular-culture Pokémons, and these spawn secondary and side articles, about the Pokémon regions, items, television episodes, game tactics, and all 493 creatures, heroes, protagonists, rivals, companions, and clones, from Bulbasaur to Arceus. All are carefully researched and edited for accuracy, to ensure that they are reliable and true to the Pokémon universe, which does not actually, in some senses of the word, exist. Back in the real world, Wikipedia has, or aspires to have, detailed entries describing the routes, intersections, and histories of every numbered highway and road in the United States. ("Route 273 [New York State,

decommissioned in 1980] began at an intersection with U.S. Route 4 in Whitehall. After the intersection, the route passed the Our Lady of Angels Cemetery, where it turned to the southeast. Route 273 ran along the base of Ore Red Hill, outside of Whitehall. Near Ore Red Hill, the highway intersected with a local road, which connected to US 4.") There are pages for every known enzyme and human gene. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* never aspired to such breadth. How could it, being made of paper?

Alone among the great enterprises of the early Internet, Wikipedia was not a business; made no money, only lost money. It was supported by a nonprofit charity established for the purpose. By the time the encyclopedia had 50 million users daily, the foundation had a payroll of eighteen people, including one in Germany, one in the Netherlands, one in Australia, and one lawyer, and everyone else was a volunteer: the millions of contributors, the thousand or more designated "administrators," and, always a looming presence, the founder and self-described "spiritual leader," Jimmy Wales. Wales did not plan initially the scrappy, chaotic, dilettantish, amateurish,

upstart free-for-all that Wikipedia quickly became. The would-be encyclopedia began with a roster of experts, academic credentials, verification, and peer review. But the wiki idea took over, willy-nilly. A "wiki," from a Hawaiian word for "quick," was a web site that could be not just viewed but edited, by anyone. A wiki was therefore self-created, or at least self-sustaining.

Wikipedia first appeared to Internet users with a simple self-description:

> *HomePage*
>
> *You can edit this page right now! It's a free, community project*
>
> *Welcome to Wikipedia! We're writing a complete encyclopedia from scratch, collaboratively. We started work in January 2001. We've got over 3,000 pages already. We want to make over 100,000. So, let's get to work! Write a little (or a lot) about what you know! Read our welcome message here: Welcome, newcomers!*

The sparseness of the coverage that first year could be gauged by the list of requested articles. Under the heading of Religion: "Cat-

holicism?—Satan?—Zoroaster?—Mythology?" Under Technology: "internal combustion engine?—dirigible?—liquid crystal display?—bandwidth?" Under Folklore: "(If you want to write about folklore, please come up with a list of folklore topics that are actually recognized as distinct, significant topics in folklore, a subject that you are not likely to know much about if all you've done along these lines is play Dungeons and Dragons, q.v.)." Dungeons and Dragons was already well covered. Wikipedia was not looking for flotsam and jetsam but did not scorn them. Years later, in Alexandria, Jimmy Wales said: "All those people who are obsessively writing about Britney Spears or the Simpsons or Pokémon—it's just not true that we should try to redirect them into writing about obscure concepts in physics. Wiki is not paper, and their time is not owned by us. We can't say, 'Why do we have these employees doing stuff that's so useless?' They're not hurting anything. Let them write it."

"Wiki is not paper" was the unofficial motto. Self-referentially, the phrase has its own encyclopedia page (see also "*Wiki ist kein Papier*" and "*Wikipédia n'est pas sur*

papier"). It means there is no physical or economic limit on the number or the length of articles. Bits are free. "Any kind of metaphor around paper or space is dead," as Wales said.

Wikipedia found itself a mainstay of the culture with unexpected speed, in part because of its unplanned synergistic relationship with Google. It became a test case for ideas of crowd intelligence: users endlessly debated the reliability—in theory and in actuality—of articles written in an authoritative tone by people with no credentials, no verifiable identity, and unknown prejudices. Wikipedia was notoriously subject to vandalism. It exposed the difficulties—perhaps the impossibility—of reaching a neutral, consensus view of disputed, tumultuous reality. The process was plagued by so-called edit wars, when battling contributors reversed one another's alterations without surcease. At the end of 2006, people concerned with the "Cat" article could not agree on whether a human with a cat is its "owner," "caregiver," or "human companion." Over a three-week period, the argument extended to the length of a small book. There were edit wars over commas and edit wars over gods, futile wars

over spelling and pronunciation and geopolitical disputes. Other edit wars exposed the malleability of words. Was the Conch Republic (Key West, Florida) a "micronation"? Was a particular photograph of a young polar bear "cute"? Experts differed, and everyone was an expert.

After the occasional turmoil, articles tend to settle toward permanence; still, if the project seems to approach a kind of equilibrium, it is nonetheless dynamic and unstable. In the Wikipedia universe, reality cannot be pinned down with finality. That idea was an illusion fostered in part by the solidity of a leather-and-paper encyclopedia. Denis Diderot aimed in the *Encyclopédie*, published in Paris beginning in 1751, "to collect all the knowledge that now lies scattered over the face of the earth, to make known its general structure to the men with whom we live, and to transmit it to those who will come after us." The *Britannica*, first produced in Edinburgh in 1768 in one hundred weekly installments, sixpence apiece, wears the same halo of authority. It seemed finished—in every edition. It has no equivalent in any other language. Even so, the experts responsible for the third edition ("in Eighteen Volumes, Greatly Improved"),

a full century after Isaac Newton's *Principia*, could not bring themselves to endorse his, or any, theory of gravity, or gravitation. "There have been great disputes," the *Britannica* stated.

> Many eminent philosophers, and among the rest Sir Isaac Newton himself, have considered it as the first of all second causes; an incorporeal or spiritual substance, which never can be perceived any other way than by its effects; an universal property of matter, &c. Others have attempted to explain the phenomena of gravitation by the action of a very subtile etherial fluid; and to this explanation Sir Isaac, in the latter part of his life, seems not to have been averse. He hath even given a conjecture concerning the matter in which this fluid might occasion these phenomena. But for a full account of … the state of the dispute at present, see the articles, Newtonian Philosophy, Astronomy, Atmosphere, Earth, Electricity, Fire, Light, Attraction, Repulsion, Plenum, Vacuum, &c.

As the *Britannica* was authoritative,

Newton's theory of gravitation was not yet knowledge.

Wikipedia disclaims this sort of authority. Academic institutions officially distrust it. Journalists are ordered not to rely upon it. Yet the authority comes. If one wants to know how many American states contain a county named Montgomery, who will disbelieve the tally of eighteen in Wikipedia? Where else could one look for a statistic so obscure—generated by a summing of the knowledge of hundreds or thousands of people, each of whom may know of only one particular Montgomery County? Wikipedia features a popular article called "Errors in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* that have been corrected in Wikipedia." This article is, of course, always in flux. All Wikipedia is. At any moment the reader is catching a version of truth on the wing.

When Wikipedia states, in the article "Aging,"

> After a period of near perfect renewal (in humans, between 20 and 35 years of age [citation needed]), organismal senescence is characterized by the declining ability to respond to stress, increasing homeostatic

> imbalance and increased risk of disease. This irreversible series of changes inevitably ends in death,

a reader may trust this; yet for one minute in the early morning of December 20, 2007, the entire article comprised instead a single sentence: "Aging is what you get when you get freakin old old old." Such obvious vandalism lasts hardly any time at all. Detecting it and reversing it are automated vandalbots and legions of human vandal fighters, many of them proud members of the Counter-Vandalism Unit and Task Force. According to a popular saying that originated with a frustrated vandal, "On Wikipedia, there is a giant conspiracy attempting to have articles agree with reality." This is about right. A conspiracy is all the Wikipedians can hope for, and often it is enough.

Lewis Carroll, near the end of the nineteenth century, described in fiction the ultimate map, representing the world on a unitary scale, a mile to a mile: "It has never been spread out, yet. The farmers objected: they said it would cover the whole country, and shut out the sunlight." The point is not

lost on Wikipedians. Some are familiar with a debate carried out by the German branch about the screw on the left rear brake pad of Ulrich Fuchs's bicycle. Fuchs, as a Wikipedia editor, proposed the question, Does this item in the universe of objects merit its own Wikipedia entry? The screw was agreed to be small but real and specifiable. "This is an object in space, and I've seen it," said Jimmy Wales. Indeed, an article appeared in the German Meta-Wiki (that is, the Wikipedia *about* Wikipedia) titled "*Die Schraube an der hinteren linken Bremsbacke am Fahrrad von Ulrich Fuchs*." As Wales noted, the very existence of this article was "a meta-irony." It was written by the very people who were arguing against its suitability. The article was not really about the screw, however. It is about a controversy: whether Wikipedia should strive, in theory or in practice, to describe the whole world in all its detail.

Opposing factions coalesced around the labels "deletionism" and "inclusionism." Inclusionists take the broadest view of what belongs in Wikipedia. Deletionists argue for, and often perform, the removal of trivia: articles too short or poorly written or unreliable, on topics lacking notability. All these criteria are understood to be variable

and subjective. Deletionists want to raise the bar of quality. In 2008 they succeeded in removing an entry on the Port Macquarie Presbyterian Church, New South Wales, Australia, on grounds of non-notability. Jimmy Wales himself leaned toward inclusionism. In the late summer of 2007, he visited Cape Town, South Africa, ate lunch at a place called Mzoli's, and created a "stub" with a single sentence: "Mzoli's Meats is a butcher shop and restuarant located in Guguletu township near Cape Town, South Africa." It survived for twenty-two minutes before a nineteen-year-old administrator called ^demon deleted it on grounds of insignificance. An hour later, another user re-created the article and expanded it based on information from a local Cape Town blog and a radio interview transcribed online. Two minutes passed, and yet another user objected on grounds that "this article or section is written like an advertisement." And so on. The word "famous" was inserted and deleted several times. The user ^demon weighed in again, saying, "We are not the white pages and we are not a travel guide." The user EVula retorted, "I think if we give this article a bit more than a couple of hours of existence, we might have something

worthwhile." Soon the dispute attracted newspaper coverage in Australia and England. By the next year, the article had not only survived but had grown to include a photograph, an exact latitude and longitude, a list of fourteen references, and separate sections for History, Business, and Tourism. Some hard feelings evidently remained, for in March 2008 an anonymous user replaced the entire article with one sentence: "Mzoli's is an insignificant little restaurant whose article only exists here because Jimmy Wales is a bumbling egomaniac." That lasted less than a minute.

Wikipedia evolves dendritically, sending off new shoots in many directions. (In this it resembles the universe.) So deletionism and inclusionism spawn mergism and incrementalism. They lead to factionalism, and the factions fission into Associations of Deletionist Wikipedians and Inclusionist Wikipedians side by side with the Association of Wikipedians Who Dislike Making Broad Judgments About the Worthiness of a General Category of Article, and Who Are in Favor of the Deletion of Some Particularly Bad Articles, but That Doesn't Mean They Are Deletionists. Wales worried particularly about Biographies of

Living Persons. In an ideal world, where Wikipedia could be freed from practical concerns of maintenance and reliability, Wales said he would be happy to see a biography of every human on the planet. It outdoes Borges.

Even then, at the impossible extreme—every person, every bicycle screw—the collection would possess nothing like All Knowledge. For encyclopedias, information tends to come in the form of topics and categories. *Britannica* framed its organization in 1790 as "a plan entirely new." It advertised "the different sciences and arts" arranged as "distinct Treatises or Systems"—

> And *full Explanations given* of the Various Detached Parts of Knowledge, whether relating to Natural and Artificial Objects, or to Matters Ecclesiastical, Civil, Military, Commercial, &c.

In Wikipedia the detached parts of knowledge tend to keep splitting. The editors analyzed the logical dynamics as Aristotle or Boole might have:

> Many topics are based on the relationship of *factor X* to *factor Y*, resulting in one or more full articles. This could refer to, for example, *situation X* in *location Y*, or *version X* of *item Y*. This is perfectly valid when the two variables put together represent some culturally significant phenomenon or some otherwise notable interest. Often, separate articles are needed for a subject within a range of different countries due to its substantial differences across international borders. Articles like Slate industry in Wales and Island Fox are fitting examples. But writing about Oak trees in North Carolina or a Blue truck would likely constitute a POV fork, original research, or would otherwise be outright silly.

Charles Dickens had earlier considered this very problem. In *The Pickwick Papers*, a man is said to have read up in the *Britannica* on Chinese metaphysics. There was, however, no such article: "He read for metaphysics under the letter M, and for China under the letter C, and combined his information."

In 2008 the novelist Nicholson Baker,

calling himself Wageless, got sucked into Wikipedia like so many others, first seeking information and then tentatively supplying some, beginning one Friday evening with the article on bovine somatotropin and, the next day, *Sleepless in Seattle*, periodization, and hydraulic fluid. On Sunday it was pornochanchada (Brazilian sex films), a football player of the 1950s called Earl Blair, and back to hydraulic fluid. On Tuesday he discovered the Article Rescue Squadron, dedicated to finding articles in danger of deletion and saving them by making them better instead. Baker immediately signed up, typing a note: "I want to be a part of this." His descent into obsession is documented in the archives, like everything else that happens on Wikipedia, and he wrote about it a few months later in a print publication, *The New York Review of Books*.

> I began standing with my computer open on the kitchen counter, staring at my growing watchlist, checking, peeking.... I stopped hearing what my family was saying to me—for about two weeks I all but disappeared into my screen, trying to salvage brief, sometimes overly promotional but nevertheless worthy

> biographies by recasting them in neutral language, and by hastily scouring newspaper databases and Google Books for references that would bulk up their notability quotient. I had become an "inclusionist."

He concluded with a "secret hope": that all the flotsam and jetsam could be saved, if not in Wikipedia than in "a Wikimorgue—a bin of broken dreams." He suggested calling it Deletopedia. "It would have much to tell us over time." On the principle that nothing online ever perishes, Deletionpedia was created shortly thereafter, and it has grown by degrees. The Port Macquarie Presbyterian Church lives on there, though it is not, strictly speaking, part of the encyclopedia. Which some call the universe.

Names became a special problem: their disambiguation; their complexity; their collisions. The nearly limitless flow of information had the effect of throwing all the world's items into a single arena, where they seemed to play a frantic game of Bumper Car. Simpler times had allowed simpler naming: "The Lord God formed