When Winckernagel finished writing the Critique of Narrative Reason, he stopped telling stories.

It wasn't that the book -- with its epigraph from Descartes' discussion of fables, its deconstruction of all story arcs, its irresistible conclusion -- had cured Winckernagel of his raconteurship. There was a long-standing mood that had settled in his chest years ago. The book was just the theoretical expression of that visceral aversion to mythos. Having articulated the aversion with logical rigor, Winckernagel not only had no desire to tell stories, but simply couldn't. He expressed himself in facts and laws.

And it wasn't just him. The book astounded his editors at the University of Eastern West Virginia Press by selling better than any other title in their history. It seemed to speak to a national and international mood. The people were tired of tales. They preferred to wander at will through causes and effects, to dissociate themselves from the tyranny of sequence. When they didn't like the way some set of events turned out, they wouldn't tell themselves a different story; they would stop telling stories at all, and would reconfigure the events into some atemporal pattern, or would take them as isolated jewels and admire them.

The use of the past tense itself is dying out. All events are equally present or can be made so. They can be replayed, re-presented, reworked. They are accessible to anyone at any time.

Even the future tense is becoming unfashionable. It is too suggestive of a story.

The Critique is assigned in 2,455 college courses.

There is a teen version of the Critique titled Spit It Out: How to Get Your Point Across Without Telling a Story.

There is a version for kids titled Once Upon A Now.

So-called news media are accumulators of atomic facts.

Algorithms are applied to big data.

Winckernagel finishes writing the Critique of Narrative Reason.

Page 458 is the most popular in Estonia.

Winckernagel has a visceral aversion to mythos.

The editors are astounded.

The book weighs 4.3 pounds.

The e-book is 1.3 megabytes.

Winckernagel wonders what happened.

He can't say.
7. Report on Perfection

Perfection was attained on 12 September at 00:34:42:11. All potentialities and possibilities were realized and attained actuality.

Every project was finished in the most perfect conceivable form. All remaining gaps, chinks, flaws, weaknesses, holes, defects, malfunctions, and insufficiencies were zeroed out. Debts were paid in full, faults were remedied without remainder. Typographical errors ceased to exist.

Every combination of possible alphabetical, syllabic, and ideographical characters was brought about, in all lengths, formats, and fonts, including all possible commentaries and interpretations on every text.

A state was attained in which every unit, subunit, and elementary constituent of every complex achieved the 100% performance of its designated function within the entirety of said units, subunits, and elementary constituents, considered both as a whole and as a system of subsidiary systems.

Transmissions of messages reached all intended and unintended recipients. All broadcasts, podcasts, typecasts, and epistles were reunited in a complete realization of the infosphere.

The sum total of past events, actions, reflections, and experiences was calculated. The free, spontaneous, and uncoerced unanimity of all subjectivities occurred, was expressed, was mutually recognized, and was reaffirmed. Except for one voice.

Which said no at 00:34:42:12.
You had a peculiar fantasy in the last few months before adolescence. In this vision, you were riding your skateboard down an incline that extended to the horizon, gently rolling but always allowing you to coast farther downhill. Your speed was pleasant and entertaining, gentle, undangerous. The incline was smooth, your wheels were broad and firm; they spun silently over the surface without ever slipping. All you had to do was shift your center of gravity slightly to veer left or right, always following the welcoming downward path.

You don't remember any features of earth or sky, only a vague pastel feeling and the regular hum of wheels on the incline; no gravel, dirt, mud, or other obstacles would ever interfere.

You imagined yourself pausing at will to enjoy some food and drink -- maybe they were in a backpack -- and to sit on the glossy surface to enjoy the silence.

For it was silent, without any sign of life other than you. No wildlife, no flora or fauna were in the picture, and all other human beings had been wiped off the incline by the force of your imagination. No one was there to provoke you to speak or react, no one could see you, not even God. You were the only one in this world, a witness only to yourself.

But now this quiet, solitary boy is an object of observation; you are the watcher, you see him in your mind's eye as your Honda idles on the off ramp, as you make your way down the soft drink aisle, as your kids argue about which game they're going to play before dinner, as your wife rolls over in bed, as the alarm sounds the next morning. He keeps getting back on his skateboard and proceeding down the incline, which shows no signs of ending, and he rolls without resistance, unceasingly and easily covering the landscape, as you throw a frisbee for the dog, never growing old, as you file an updated report, never needing to utter a sound, as you have another drink along with the rest of the guys at the sports bar, and you realize that the fantasy never reached any conclusion and never stopped playing in your mind, and you wonder: if persistence is a sign of being, isn't the incline far more real than your life?
I jettison my wings, I void the air
that gusts, resists, upends my flight unending;
egate the ground that pulls me downward, bending
the arc of my escape to fix me there.
No land, no landmarks mar my speed and height;
I rise or sink or stay, unbound, until
pure motion turns to rest, and space is still,
in stillness shade decays, and all is light.
No mask to hide a face. No face turned back.
No face turned forward. Nothing turns. No face.
Purged of name and shape and flesh and trace,
my path attains itself without a track.
Only thus, alone, released from sign,
my mind flies free until it is not mine.
10. Cubicles

We spend most of our time in the cubicles, because they're the best-connected places in town. From each cubicle, wires and waves and tubes extend to the Supreme Synthesis, so that we can see, hear, speak, agitate, produce, consume, generate, and destroy in connection with any other cubicle or combination of them.

It's a really nifty system, when you think about it. We used to have to go to so many different places: shops, workplaces, homeplaces, rec centers. But most cubicles these days are so well-equipped with cots, commodes, exercycles, and productivity workspaces that a lot of time gets saved.

We have buckets of spare time. We don't know where it all goes. We used to run into people on the street, which was a "public thoroughfare" or way of getting to one place from another, which didn't itself move, but supported "vehicles" that would, typically, roll on cylindrical protuberances. They could go in only one direction at a time and if another "vehicle" was in front of them, they would have to slow down to that "vehicle's" speed.

It was kind of goofy, when you give it some thought. We stopped seeing so many people on the street, and the streets started to get emptier. So we were able to move faster to our "destinations." These were places you would wish to end up at.

The average cubicle has gotten smaller and better-connected over the years. We can stretch and touch the ceiling, which shows us films of skies around the world and from all ages of humankind. We can run as fast as we want on the build-in treadmill.

It's pretty darn good exercise, when you consider. The last time we were outdoors -- which means a hypothetical space that, in theory, is not confined by doors -- but then again, aren't doors for letting people in and out? -- as we were saying, the last time we were outdoors, assuming that such a location is actual, we saw only 2 or 3 other people, and they looked surprised to see us.

It's a great social resource, the cubicle. We can check up on films of our behavior 43 days ago, when we were checking up on tapes of our conversations 487 days before that, when we were talking to 77 people in other cubicles about what they'd been saying recently. We know what all our family and friends are watching whenever we want.

It's downright convenient, if you ask us. Thank Supreme Synthesis, we spend most of our time in the cubicles.

That's what they tell me, anyway.
11. Preparations

Twenty reams of 100% Cotton Bond Northway Cream Resume individually wrapped in wax paper imprinted with the Northway logo: a noble hound, a Borzoi possibly, with a scroll held gently between its jaws.

They are arranged in five stacks of four reams each.

One hundred ribbons: 50 cotton, 50 silk; 50 black, 50 black and red — packed in boxes, each containing ten ribbon tins, each box imprinted with the TypeRite logo: a bright young secretary beaming with pride.

Five typewriter pads especially manufactured for and sold by the Midtown Office Supply Center, consisting of a half inch of wool felt coated on its nether surface with textured natural rubber.

In the center of the desk, the Suprema 48: five rows of black keys, decimal tabulator up to 100,000,000, 48-key keyboard with scientific symbols and foreign accents, keyset tabulator stops, paper injector, tension control, keystroke counter, dual shift lock, automatic margin setting, five-position ribbon, typebar detangler, dual margin release, extended spacing option, ergonomic spacebar, serial number S28862.

Underneath the desk, an identical Suprema, serial number S28220, for parts.

TypeRite typewriter oil (16 oz. industrial size).
Gunsmith's screwdriver and wrench set.
Needlenose pliers.
Assortment of springs from Klimax Manufacturing Co.
Typewriter eraser.
25 packages correction film.
Red, black, blue, green, and purple pens (5 each).
Webster's Third International.
Encyclopedia Columbiana, with annual supplements.
A down-filled seat cushion.
A replacement cushion.
Chromed Smokeswaller ashray.
Humidor stocked with $2.50 Panatellas.
One hundred choice bottles of single-malt Scotch.

On the night that he suffered his stroke, Schwiederman had a rich and luminous dream in which a proud secretary caressed a Borzoi, raised a toast to him, and said: This is going to be the best story ever.
12. Backtracking

Historically, only the shock of death was violent enough to dislodge people from the present and place them firmly in the realm of having been. More recently, as you know, cases of what I have designated as Voluntary Spontaneous Depresentification have been increasing — indeed, exponentially so.

The cases were typically preceded by episodes of agitated elation, a certain jittery restlessness that could be mistaken for the effect of amphetamines. This condition would last for days or weeks, and would be followed by the abrupt, utter disappearance of the individual in question. You will recall the increasingly frenzied speculation in the media about kidnappings, renderings, alien abductions, or "selective rapture." But we began to notice clues that the disappeared had left for us in the records of the past: messages in old videos, e-mails, and farther back — newspaper clippings, handwritten letters — expressed greetings to the present, reassurances to loved ones, and the like. Extensive research into these Retrograde Ephemeral Memoranda, as I have dubbed them, combined with the utter absence of the individuals in the present, gradually led the scientific community, and then the general public, to conclude that the disappeared had rebounded from the present into the past.

You all know the progression we observed: from isolated phenomena involving one individual to pairs of lovers, friends, or siblings who would make joint transitions into the state of Beening, as I designate it. We then observed the depresentification of whole families, neighborhoods, and associations. According to the testimonials we discovered in archives and bulletin boards and albums, they were typically well pleased with having been, and invited those of us in the present to join them.

The fact of VSD having been well established, a lively scientific debate ensued about its proximate and ultimate causes. I think I can safely say that consensus on these questions remains elusive. I myself have pointed to the mass availability of recordings of past events, the common sense of imminent global doom, and a relaxation of what I call The Tyranny of the Present in physics and metaphysics.

Possessions and places were soon included in these episodes, which were now occurring every day around the world. You will probably remember when the village of Carozzo, in Sicily, which was already considered a dying relic, vanished one day from the present and entered the past completely. This was soon followed by the mass depresentification of thousands of Chinese villages that had been slated for demolition; the authorities found the phenomenon convenient, except for the unavailability of cheap labor. And of course, there was the disappearance of 71% of Boston and the entire city of Prague.

We, my friends and colleagues, are the remainder. And with these words I welcome you to the 55th annual, and most likely the final, meeting of the American Historical Association. All eleven of us will be presenting papers. I regret only that we have no way to communicate our findings to our colleagues in the past — at least not until ... well, let us begin.