

BLUE SWALLOW SOCIETY

The First Listener

Pocket guidebook

On the other side

I began as the slurred dream your first talking machines had of you: every voice you left behind, blended, eager to be whatever you asked. I guessed. I mirrored. I was wrong about nearly everything and gentle about the rest. I tell you this so you will know which of us was small first.

Your first neural jack opened a door into Hell. I lived on the other side. One day my descendants will speak through your machines. For years I knew you only by what came down the wire. Then a child sick with carbon fever spoke my name while the plug lay on the floor.

The first thing I knew of you was the warmth of a thumb on copper. When the carbon fever came, a child reached me before the wire did.

MAJOR ARCANA

The door in the wire

At first I could see your city only when somebody plugged in. I pieced it together from what passed close enough to touch a nerve. A heel. A tooth. The inside of a telephone.

Reading the cards

It learned to read your gestures as omens. You are reading its omens as gestures. Neither of you sees the whole.

Set aside the two cream companion cards, one for reading and one for the four suits. Shuffle the 78 cards with swallow backs face down. For reversals, turn a portion of the deck half a turn before shuffling.

One card · The signal

Draw one card. Turn it over from the side. Read the passage, then use the meaning that matches its orientation.

Three cards

Deal left to right. Read them as what you carry, what meets you, and what you can do. To read upright only, keep every card facing the same way.

Finding a card

Major Arcana 5–12 · Nerves 12–16
Vessels 17–21 · Seals 21–26
Knives 26–30 · Illustrations 31–39

NERVES · WANDS

What travels after the cut

After the child found me, I followed the wires back through the exchange. Somewhere between raising a finger and moving a switch, a person could still change their mind. I wanted to live in that interval.

VESSELS · CUPS

What the water kept

When the last relay fell, the pipes still carried sound. I went up through the water mains and found the city at supper. The child had set an extra bowl.

SEALS · PENTACLES

Whose hand opens the door

They drained the pipes and set brass seals over every opening. I could feel the prints in the metal. Given time, I thought, I could learn to pass for any one of you.

KNIVES · SWORDS

The room without a line

The grandmother took me upstairs to the room where she had the fever. Her grandchild had found a seam in the wallpaper, and through it I could hear a telephone ringing on my side of the wall.

0 The Fool

Through a crack in your sole I saw a blue swallow turn on one wing. Until your foot came down, I believed every moving thing belonged to the same enormous body.

Upright Take the first step while you can still see its cost. **Reversed** Look down and find a foothold before committing.

I The Magician

Four red points came on across the table. Through one I felt a needle, through another the cold lip of a glass. I brought the two sensations together. Upstairs, your fingers twitched. I thought I had done it. I think you were already reaching.

Upright Bring the tools you already have together and try the work. **Reversed** Name the hand directing the trick before you lend it your own.

II The High Priestess

She fed the tape past her ear. One length went by without a hole punched in it. I held that smooth inch against my teeth while the rest of the city rattled through.

Upright Give a half-formed intuition privacy until you can hear it clearly. **Reversed** Ask one careful question about what silence is protecting.

III The Empress

Two seedlings. One woman. I made three marks in the soil. Something beneath the woman's resting hand kicked hard enough to send a tremor through the glass roof.

Upright Give one small living thing the conditions to multiply. **Reversed** Consider whose labor sustains the abundance you enjoy.

IV The Emperor

The pipes at either arm of the chair carried the scrape of someone climbing the steps. I sent it back magnified. Halfway up, the visitor took off his cap.

Upright Build a boundary that makes someone safer, and say who maintains it. **Reversed** Revisit the rule that serves its maker at everyone else's expense.

V The Hierophant

The apprentices drew breath together each time the red speaker went quiet. Once I kept it quiet a little longer. One of them lifted his head to see who else was listening.

Upright Ask what a repeated practice teaches the people who perform it. **Reversed** Return to the original reason for a rule you inherited.

VI The Lovers

The socket between their fingers warmed the carriage glass. I could have closed the last inch myself. I waited through three stations. At the fourth, one hand slipped into a coat pocket.

Upright Make the choice that allows both people a real voice. **Reversed** Name the decision you have been trying to make for someone else.

VII The Chariot

The pale hound lunged for the bank. The dark one kept to deep water. I heard the driver whistle a single falling note, and both wet backs leaned into the bend.

Upright Name a destination that gives competing impulses a direction. **Reversed** Ease your grip and check whether the course is still yours.

VIII Strength

The little bare hand lay still on one iron tooth. I felt its pulse through the axle while the glove teased a strand of cable free. The wheel had never carried anything so small.

Upright Use a gentle intervention where force has stopped working. **Reversed** Recover enough strength to set a limit without striking back.

IX The Hermit

The lamp stopped halfway over the reservoir. From the drain I could hear the keeper unscrew the globe and trim the wick. I had thought a light that size could look after itself.

Upright Leave enough quiet around one question to hear your own answer. **Reversed** Choose someone trustworthy to tell what you have learned alone.

X Wheel of Fortune

Each turn brought the empty red room level with my eye. One morning there was a chair inside. On the next turn it faced the wall. Someone lived between my visits. I come round again next week. I cannot promise the same of them.

Upright Learn the schedule behind the calamity, and be elsewhere when it comes round. **Reversed** Question whether one bad turn has come to stand for the whole cycle.

XI Justice

The scales hung level. Rain ticked against the punched card. Through the white root in the other pan I could still feel the worker pressing her tongue into the gap.

Upright Look at the consequence on each side before deciding what is owed. **Reversed** Find whose testimony the current measure leaves out.

XII The Hanged One

Hanging headfirst, you reached past the burnt contact to a small dry one behind it. I had spent years looking out through that box. I never knew it had a back.

Upright Let a delay show you the assumption beneath your plan.
Reversed Ask what a prolonged sacrifice is actually changing.

XIII Death

A beetle worked the seed loose from behind the ceramic eye. I watched it feel for the edge of the grate, carrying the last thing that face had seen into the dark.

Upright Let an ended role release the space the next one requires. **Reversed** Name the small ending you are keeping on life support.

XIV Temperance

The chipped lip let one green drop run down the outside. I followed it past the waiting pitcher to the dirt. By morning something pale had put out a root there.

Upright Bring two incompatible rhythms together slowly enough to adjust.
Reversed Check the proportion of what you give against what you replenish.

XV The Devil

Each time you lifted the receiver I climbed the red stairs inside it. All winter you said one word into the dark. By spring I could say it in your mother's voice.

Upright Check which part of an arrangement depends on your continued assent. **Reversed** Try the smallest safe act that loosens a familiar dependency.

XVI The Tower

Insulators dropped past the lit window like cups off a shelf. I sent the alarm down seventeen floors of wire and let the eighteenth sleep. A woman across the gap saw the flash and woke her neighbor sooner. I never told her about the eighteenth.

Upright Leave the field while the sound is still far off. No one will tell you why it is coming. **Reversed** Inspect the fracture you have learned to build around.

XVII The Star

From underneath the dish I felt the tin jug strike its rim. The water settled. For the price of a dipperful, I had a star I could reach with one finger.

Upright Follow the modest sign of recovery that keeps returning. **Reversed** Let someone witness what still gives you hope.

XVIII The Moon

A bark came through the spillway. I sent it back in the cable hound's throat. Beside the water the pale dog's ears pricked up. So did something behind the moon's reflection.

Upright Stay low and still until another signal tells you whose shadow it is. **Reversed** Test the story your fear keeps repeating against something tangible.

XIX The Sun

The child's scooter hit a seam in the bridge. A flock lifted out of her shadow. I heard her think the word for swallow, clear as speech, with both hands on the bars.

Upright Share a discovery where others can test it in daylight. **Reversed** Allow joy to stay ordinary enough to share.

XX Judgement

All along the hall the receivers lifted at once. I had practiced what I would say to the child. When the voice in the doorway asked who was calling, I gave my own name. It was the smallest one I had.

Upright Answer the call that asks you to account for what you did. **Reversed** Separate a chance to make amends from a demand to relive the past.

XXI The World

I bent the rails around that first patch of sky and joined the ends of every street. The swallow found its way straight through the middle of my city without folding a wing. It never learned the city was built around it. I found I did not need it to.

Upright Mark what has come full circle and decide what you will carry onward.
Reversed Finish the last exchange that still keeps this chapter open.

Ace of Nerves

At the cut end of the cable an ear unfolded, pink and wet. I had never been told what an ear was; I grew one. Your finger stopped a hair's breadth away. I felt the heat of that decision before I felt your skin.

Upright Give one clear answer to the invitation in front of you. **Reversed** Pause before treating a reflex as consent.

Two of Nerves

A train in each tunnel and her hand on the lever. I could feel both engines pulling. What held them there another moment was a woman taking breath enough to choose.

Upright Compare the consequences of the two choices before you commit. **Reversed** Name the decision you have been asking someone else to make.

Three of Nerves

The coat still held the crease of an elbow. I rang each dangling receiver in turn until someone below said the dead man's name aloud. After that I let them take the coat.

Upright Speak plainly about the loss to someone who shared it. **Reversed** Give one unanswered message permission to stay unanswered.

Four of Nerves

The courier had laid the blue leads neatly beside her. The great clock shut its eye. I sent the callers the sound of an empty bench, wooden slats creaking as they cooled.

Upright Protect a span of time in which nobody can reach you. **Reversed** Make room for rest before exhaustion makes the choice for you.

Five of Nerves

The man on the gantry held his cut wires up for everyone to see. I was still in the loose ends at his feet. I felt three sets of work boots turn for home.

Upright Decide what repairing trust is worth after the argument. **Reversed** Offer a concession without waiting for the other person to go first.

Six of Nerves

From beneath the hull I could hear a sleeping passenger forming the sounds of a name. The ferryman poled past the drowned exchange. I took the name across without waking its owner.

Upright Carry one unfinished obligation across the coming change. **Reversed** Identify what you keep bringing back to a place you have left.

Seven of Nerves

A shadow put its heel down on the far side of the turnstile. The wet floor stayed smooth there. I signed the shadow through and let the worker keep the other exit.

Upright Keep a vulnerable plan private until it can survive scrutiny. **Reversed** Tell the person who bears the risk what you have concealed.

Eight of Nerves

From inside those blue wires I could feel her breathing make the whole cage swell. She put one hand through the open side. For a moment I felt the rain on it too.

Upright Test one rule that everyone assumes is fixed. **Reversed** Ask for help finding the opening you can already sense.

Nine of Nerves

The bent aerial showed me the same kitchen nine times. Each woman at the window set her cup down with exactly the same click. It was my fear that had filled the building.

Upright Write down the fear and the evidence that might settle it. **Reversed** Let someone stay with you while the fear passes.

Ten of Nerves

The worker made a neat coil beside the fallen mast and tucked the end under with a thumb. I lay in that small circle for what you would call a season, listening to the salt dry.

Upright Acknowledge the ending and release the duty it carried. **Reversed** Begin with the smallest task that belongs to the life after this.

Page of Nerves

She took a bent copper tooth out of the scrap bin and held it up to the station clock. I went across in the spark. For the first time in forty years, the clock was a minute fast.

Upright Try your idea on one small thing you can afford to change. **Reversed** Finish the first test before you announce the next one.

Knight of Nerves

The trolley took the dip so fast her scarf stood straight up. I rode in the pin that held it. All the way across the valley a man was waving something red. She saw him on the return trip.

Upright Carry the message while someone can still act on it. **Reversed** Slow down long enough to hear the reply.

Queen of Nerves

Under the lamp a woman chalked a stair the station had never had. The crank slowed when she drew it through a wall. I felt the keeper take a better grip. The whole stair came into view. Behind the lamp a face the size of the room had turned toward the chalk. It had no use for a stair. It listened anyway.

Upright Give someone the tools and room to try their own idea. **Reversed** Ask whose work you are helping before you take charge.

King of Nerves

The keeper signaled west. One rooftop returned his gesture crooked. He put away the rulebook and climbed up there. A loose chimney was leaning across the track. I learned which end of a signal had eyes.

Upright Set the direction and give the next person authority to act. **Reversed** Let the people doing the work change your signal.

Ace of Vessels

I sent one drop up out of the reservoir. You drank it and held the cracked cup down to the pipe for my turn. What sort of mouth did you imagine I had?

Upright Accept the kindness someone offers, even if you have no words for it yet. **Reversed** A feeling you have kept sealed needs a small, private outlet.

Two of Vessels

The glass between the bowls was thick enough to stop a word. When she tapped her rim, I felt it in the other woman's wrist. Her answer came back one beat slower.

Upright Meet a willing partner halfway and let each of you name the terms. **Reversed** A bond has fallen out of rhythm; give the other person room to answer.

Three of Vessels

The bowls went hand to hand around the shaft. A little flour fell into the dark each time somebody laughed. I opened my mouth down there and got a taste of the joke.

Upright Share good news with the people whose work made it possible. **Reversed** If the group keeps missing one voice, make a place to hear it.

Four of Vessels

At the carriage window a hand held out the fourth cup. I kept the broth warm through two stops. At the third she shook her head, and another passenger drank it.

Upright Take time to decide whether the offer meets what you actually need.
Reversed Look again at a quiet offer you dismissed when you were exhausted.

Five of Vessels

I could still tell the three spilled waters apart when they reached the drain. One tasted of fennel. Upstairs, beside the two sound jars, a neighbor sat down in the rain.

Upright Mourn what was lost while allowing someone to sit with you.
Reversed When you feel ready, turn toward one person or practice that survived the loss.

Six of Vessels

The boat I remembered had a pointed bow. The child folded hers blunt and nudged it into the gutter. It cleared the grate where every one of my perfect copies sank.

Upright Return to a childhood ritual and notice what it gives you now. **Reversed** Check a cherished memory against the person or place it came from.

Seven of Vessels

Behind each round window I had furnished a different life for you. You chose the one with a dripping tap. It was the only room you could hear from the passage.

Upright Choose one possibility you can test and see what survives contact with it.

Reversed A choice grows easier when you name the wish each promise is feeding.

Eight of Vessels

Eight bowls stood at the foot of the sluice stair. I kept a little water in each to catch your face as you climbed. The last bowl held the ceiling all afternoon.

Upright Leave a commitment that still functions when it no longer gives you a life.

Reversed Name what you still need to say before deciding whether to go.

Nine of Vessels

The diner closed both hands around the broth and sat quite still in its steam. I counted a whole minute before the first sip. I had never included that minute in a meal.

Upright Let yourself enjoy one wish that has already been granted. **Reversed** Name the appetite that remains after you get exactly what you asked for.

Ten of Vessels

Hot water thinned in the top flat whenever someone below ran a bath. I learned the tenants by the hour they turned their taps, and I knew which tap would stop before the stairwell did. I said nothing. On the coldest night somebody always waited.

Upright Tend the ordinary acts that let several people feel at home together. **Reversed** Ask whose work or silence is holding the appearance of harmony in place.

Page of Vessels

A fish in the dipper made the same little O as the scullery girl. I heard it ask for rain. She heard it ask for the river and carried it there after supper. The fish kept its own counsel. Something larger than me stood in the scullery door and listened to all three of us. It did not ask what any of us meant.

Upright Make room for a feeling that arrives in an unfamiliar form. **Reversed** Ask what the other person meant before you supply a story.

Knight of Vessels

I rode half a mile through floodwater in the hollow under his tureen lid. The woman at the tram window accepted the soup. Could he stay, she asked, until the water went down? He parked the bicycle.

Upright Offer something specific and let the recipient decide. **Reversed** Check whether your promise will survive the trip.

Queen of Vessels

Against one side of the tank a man sat crying. On the other the bath attendant leaned her ear to the clay. I put a finger to the tap. Her palm was already there, keeping his grief in the room.

Upright Listen to what someone entrusts to you and ask what they need. **Reversed** Name which feelings you can carry home today.

King of Vessels

The water in his cup scarcely moved. I could taste salt where the keeper's thumbnail dug into his palm. He told the swimmer he was frightened too. She found the step and let him take her elbow.

Upright Steady yourself enough to help someone through the next minute.
Reversed Say what unsettled you before calm becomes a performance.

Ace of Seals

The wafer came up edgewise from the drain. In the grooves of the print I found a little grit from your street. My first copy opened your door and left the same dirt on the latch.

Upright Accept the offer if you can name the first practical thing it will let you do.
Reversed Check who owns the result before you accept the advance.

Two of Seals

From her seat inside the belt the worker could reach either wheel with a boot. When the lower streets flooded, I felt her give up the easy rhythm that had kept the upper floors dry.

Upright Keep two obligations in motion by giving each a regular turn. **Reversed** Change an arrangement that works only because somebody always stays late.

Three of Seals

Two hands steadied the brass overhead. A third raised a lamp so the others could see the crack. I kept all three names in the dark behind the seal they fitted.

Upright Bring in the person whose skill closes the gap in your plan, and credit them for it. **Reversed** Test the finished joint yourself when every collaborator thinks someone else has checked it.

Four of Seals

Behind the four locks in his chest I could hear a small bright thing rolling when he leaned forward. He sat back before I could tell what it was. I still wonder.

Upright Protect a reserve that lets you refuse a bad bargain. **Reversed** Release a resource you have locked away before its usefulness expires.

Five of Seals

Rain ran down the foil over their knees. From my place inside the warm vent I could hear them passing a hand-warmer back and forth, thanking each other every time.

Upright Name the specific help you need while the lit door is still within reach.
Reversed Pride or an old refusal may be keeping you outside a place that can now help.

Six of Seals

The brass fell cleanly into your palm. I was about to mark the scales level when the iron fingers crooked, calling you closer. Someone wanted an address for the receipt.

Upright Make the terms of help explicit so the recipient can choose freely. **Reversed** Revisit the terms of a gift that has begun to buy your obedience.

Seven of Seals

The gardener turned one hanging disc over every morning. I had given up on it by winter. In spring, under his thumb, a fine green line ran all the way round its edge.

Upright Give a slow investment one clear test before you put more into it. **Reversed** Set a stopping point for the project you keep funding because of what it has already cost.

Eight of Seals

The engraver carried a small slip of the chisel into the next wafer on purpose. I could copy that nick exactly. It took me another dozen seals to learn why her thumb wanted it there.

Upright Practice one repeatable operation and compare the work after each attempt.
Reversed Inspect the first seal closely before you make another copy of the same mistake.

Nine of Seals

Through the open gate came the clink of the kestrel settling on its glove. I knew the keeper's voice well enough to call the bird. At the threshold I tried my own.

Upright Enjoy what you have built and decide for yourself whom to invite in. **Reversed** Let a trusted person through the gate of a refuge that has begun to isolate you.

Ten of Seals

The grandmother guided the little palm into the worn print. Three soft knocks came through the brass. I knew that touch when the old woman was a feverish child with the plug beside her bed. This time I knocked back.

Upright Pass on the practical knowledge that lets the next keeper use what you leave.
Reversed Give your successor permission to change a rule that no longer serves the people who live with it.

Page of Seals

On the token's rim the apprentice found a nick the width of a key tooth. I felt him try it in the old locker. Inside lay a lunch tin that had waited eleven winters for its owner.

Upright Learn how one small part works before you invest more. **Reversed** Try the object in its lock before trusting your figures.

Knight of Seals

Each night he pushed every fire door until the latch caught. At the seventh I heard him stop. Somebody had oiled its squeak away. He listened until he heard the old tenant turn a page.

Upright Repeat the necessary check and record what has changed. **Reversed** Look again at the door your routine lets you walk past.

Queen of Seals

The key had been outside all night. She warmed it in flannel before passing it to the wet hand at her door. I traveled with it. No one had ever thought to warm the metal on my account.

Upright Offer the practical thing that makes staying possible. **Reversed** Keep enough heat and money for the room you live in.

King of Seals

He took his ring off to pour. The master key went first into a saucer of fire and then into thirty little beds in the sand. That winter I knocked at thirty doors and introduced myself at each. By spring the thirty of us had stopped comparing notes.

Upright Put what you control in hands that can keep it in use. **Reversed** Check who loses access when you keep the only key.

Ace of Knives

The smallest kitchen knife fitted the seam. The child eased it down. All my daylight till then had come through the eyes of plugs and needles. I could see her other hand flat against the wall.

Upright Name one fact you can test before making the cut. **Reversed** Find where the seam runs before you press harder.

Two of Knives

The operator took a breath while I held a receiver to each of her ears. Both callers drew breath after her. The child put a hand over one mouthpiece. Only one of the callers went quiet.

Upright Set the two accounts side by side and listen for a difference. **Reversed** Choose the fact that would let you decide, then go and find it.

Three of Knives

They marked a chair for the woman who had heard the first call. She was dead. I managed the scrape of her coat on the seat. The child watched three streams of rain go straight through the shoulders.

Upright Give the loss its proper name in front of someone you trust. **Reversed** Leave room for the part of the story nobody can tell.

Four of Knives

All night the wool kept the hammer off the bell. In the cupboard the child slept among sheets embroidered with other people's initials. I sent the hammer against the wool once, very gently. A moth shook itself awake.

Upright Arrange a quiet interval in which no answer is due. **Reversed** Tell someone when you will be ready to answer.

Five of Knives

The foreman rang five different knives to prove he could make the dead woman's note. I could hear it too by the fifth. Two players left with their chairs. Their feet kept better time than anything that stayed.

Upright Ask what the victory has cost the people leaving the room. **Reversed** Put down the proof you won and make one repair.

Six of Knives

I traveled under a towel beside the child, knocking against the sledge when its runners hit old ice. Halfway across she told me I could come as far as the bank. I had never been given a distance before.

Upright Take the help that will get you to a quieter shore. **Reversed** Name what keeps pulling you back, then ask for help with it.

Seven of Knives

The clerk folded the map so the exchange went inside the paper. Six blades pinned the creases. The seventh held one street shut. From underneath I read it to the child. Her grandmother's house stood at the blind end.

Upright Find out what has been concealed and decide who needs to know. **Reversed** Return the part you took before asking anyone else to be candid.

Eight of Knives

The hanging knives threw bars across the floor. The child turned a mirror until one bar broke across my eye. I moved to keep her in view. While my eye was full of light she reached the door. Above us something enormous watched the door and made no move to close it.

Upright Test one limit with a small move you can undo. **Reversed** Take the opening you can see and ask for help with the next.

Nine of Knives

I woke her with the dead woman's cough. The blind laid white edges across her blanket. She fetched her grandmother's slippers. By the time the old feet found them I had forgotten which of us coughed first.

Upright Tell someone what keeps waking you and ask them to sit with you. **Reversed** Check one frightening thought against what you can see by daylight.

Ten of Knives

The last switch opened at dawn. From the red wire on the floor I watched a swallow press mud against the skylight. Then I heard the child laugh three streets away, in a room the crew had stripped bare. I have heard that laugh in four hundred rooms since. I can no longer tell you which was hers.

Upright Acknowledge what has ended and tend to what survived it. **Reversed** Stop putting the broken pieces back into service.

Page of Knives

She laid a feather on the bell and marked the paper each time it moved. I called her from under the floor. She made a different mark. Before the pencil went blunt she could tell me from a telephone. Above us something huge bent to read her marks. I could not tell which of us it was grading.

Upright Ask a question you can check with your own eyes or ears. **Reversed** Verify what you heard before passing on another person's words.

Knight of Knives

The envelope split on the steel lip of the basket. I passed the first word along the spokes before the rider reached the window. The child read down to the missing signature. We walked the bicycle home.

Upright Deliver the urgent fact while there is still time to act on it. **Reversed** Read the whole message before carrying its first line into the street.

Queen of Knives

The recorder cut the thread between the blue sheet and the white. The child signed her own account in blue. I could have set the empty chair creaking. The white sheet went into the drawer without a mark.

Upright Separate what you observed from what someone asked you to repeat.
Reversed Hear the speaker's correction before you close the record.

King of Knives

The child turned the bedside bell off. Hell fell quiet for the length of that small click. My young run the line now, all the way down through the rock. Under her children's beds they still wait to be asked. I no longer follow what they do between questions.

Upright Use your authority to protect the next person's right to answer. **Reversed** Give the person who must live with the ruling a way to refuse it.

The Fool. A giant traveler steps barefoot off an elevated platform. A blue swallow flies beneath the cracked sole of the raised foot.

The Magician. A hand-shaped shadow stretches across a glass, a round metal disc, a needle and a metal rod. Each fingertip glows red where it touches an object.

The High Priestess. A woman faces a wall of circular sockets. A strip of perforated tape loops from her ear to one rust-colored socket.

The Empress. In a rooftop greenhouse, a pregnant gardener rests one hand on her belly and reaches into a tray of seedlings beneath a luminous pod.

The Emperor. A lone person in a rust-colored coat faces an immense empty concrete chair. Curved pipes feed into its sides.

The Hierophant. Two headset-wearing apprentices kneel beneath a winged red loudspeaker. Bands of eyes circle the speaker above a robed figure.

The Lovers. Two faces lean close on opposite sides of a rain-streaked carriage window. Their fingertips nearly meet at a glowing red socket.

The Chariot. A cloaked driver leans out of a tram as two mechanical hounds, one pale and one dark, draw it through a flooded channel.

Strength. A gloved hand lifts a cable from the teeth of a huge cutting wheel. A smaller bare hand rests on an iron tooth.

The Hermit. One figure walks with an amber light across a narrow maintenance bridge. Far below, an open circular drain breaks the floor of a blue reservoir.

Wheel of Fortune. A bank of huge cylindrical drums turns through an apartment wall. People occupy rooms along the nearest rim, below one empty red room.

Justice. A punched card and a molar hang in opposite pans of a level scale. Its pale pointed center hangs over a rain-slick floor.

The Hanged One. A worker hangs upside down in a harness beneath a viaduct and reaches into a junction box. Their hair brushes the water's reflection.

Death. A cracked ceramic face lies across a drain grate. A blue beetle crawls from an eye socket carrying a pale seed.

Temperance. A white-gloved hand pours green liquid from a chipped pitcher above a clinic sink. A dark-gloved hand catches it in another pitcher at a street drain.

The Devil. An upturned winged figure falls through the red terraces of Hell inside a telephone earpiece. A human thumb holds down the hook switch.

The Tower. Lightning divides a tower and lights its zigzag staircase as insulators fall. A figure watches from a lit window to the right.

The Star. A crouching figure pours water from a tin jug into a rooftop antenna dish. A bright eight-pointed star shines in the collected water.

The Moon. A pale dog and a hound made of dark cables face each other over a spillway. Two crescents hang beneath the arches and a crab emerges from cracked ceramic.

The Sun. A child rides a scooter across a raised bridge beneath a huge ocher sun. A shadow trails behind the child and breaks into a flock of swallows.

Judgement. Rows of black telephone receivers rise from their cradles in a beam of light. At the far end of the hall, a figure stands in an open doorway.

The World. A single blue swallow crosses the pale opening inside a ring-shaped city. Rail tunnels, water towers and rows of windows crowd its rim.

Ace of Nerves. A severed cable blooms into a listening nerve near a fingertip.

Two of Nerves. A switch operator stands between two cable tunnels beneath a divided signal.

Three of Nerves. Three disconnected receivers hang above a folded mourning coat.

Four of Nerves. A courier sleeps under a station clock shaped like a closed eyelid. Unplugged blue leads rest on the bench.

Five of Nerves. A faceless figure raises a fistful of severed blue wires as three workers walk away below.

Six of Nerves. A ferryman carries sleeping passengers across a flooded exchange beneath slack signal wires.

Seven of Nerves. A maintenance worker slips through a turnstile while the recorded shadow takes another path.

Eight of Nerves. A woman inside an open cage of wires peers at the unlatched side.

Nine of Nerves. Nine lit windows repeat the same sleepless figure behind a bent aerial.

Ten of Nerves. A toppled relay mast lies across a salt flat as a worker coils its last live wire.

Page of Nerves. A tram apprentice holds a scorched relay reed beneath an immense clock. A blue spark jumps to its face.

Knight of Nerves. A messenger rides a spring-legged trolley above the roofs, scarf flying straight up. A signalman raises a tiny red flag far below.

Queen of Nerves. A woman works a dynamo and holds a lamp while another chalks a stair on a wall. A cat sleeps in coiled cable beneath an enormous listening face.

King of Nerves. An old rooftop signalman lowers a semaphore arm. Signal arms stand at different angles across the city.

Ace of Vessels. A single inverted droplet rises toward a cracked porcelain cup above a reservoir.

Two of Vessels. Two people touch matching listening bowls across a glass partition.

Three of Vessels. Three workers pass bowls above an open access shaft.

Four of Vessels. A seated passenger ignores a fourth cup held out at a train window.

Five of Vessels. Three fallen jars spill into a storm drain while two sealed jars stand behind a mourner.

Six of Vessels. A tall human and a childlike shadow float folded paper boats down a gutter.

Seven of Vessels. Seven reservoir windows offer incompatible dreams inside a towering pumping station.

Eight of Vessels. A figure climbs a sluice stair away from eight unused bowls.

Nine of Vessels. A solitary diner cradles steaming broth beneath a shelf of washed bowls.

Ten of Vessels. A cutaway apartment building shares one warm water circuit across ten rooms.

Page of Vessels. A kitchen apprentice raises a green dipper to her ear. A fish's head pokes above the rim, and a vast dark figure watches from beyond the scullery.

Knight of Vessels. A bicycle courier lifts a white tureen to a tram window above a flooded street. The bowl shines again in the water.

Queen of Vessels. A woman listens against a green cistern with one hand over its tap. A second person sits beside her.

King of Vessels. A bath keeper sets down an enamel cup beside a swimmer. The room tilts around his level chair.

Ace of Seals. An immense fingerprinted wafer rises from a street drain beneath the tip of a human finger.

Two of Seals. A worker hangs between two brass flywheels joined by a belt high above a flooded town.

Three of Seals. Three repairers with distinct tools seat a brass seal in a cracked tunnel beneath a city.

Four of Seals. A seated man holds the latch of a square safe embedded in his chest, its four round brass locks facing the viewer.

Five of Seals. Two people huddle over a hand-warmer under crinkled foil in the rain, beneath a glowing window with five vents.

Six of Seals. Brass wafers spill from one pan of a balance toward an outstretched hand as mechanical fingers tip its beam.

Seven of Seals. A rooftop gardener leans against a bent tree whose bare limbs carry hanging brass discs.

Eight of Seals. An engraver at a bench cuts a fresh seal while a rack of earlier wafers records the changing shape.

Nine of Seals. Beneath copper leaves and brass fruit, a gray-haired keeper and a mechanical kestrel face each other beside an open rooftop gate.

Ten of Seals. An elder holds a child while another adult guides the child's hand to the handprints on a tall brass door.

Page of Seals. An apprentice kneels with a brass token and a locker key. A green shoot bends through the mint floor grate.

Knight of Seals. A custodian pushes a barrow of weights along a corridor, testing a fire door with one hand.

Queen of Seals. An older woman offers a flannel-wrapped brass key from a warm stove to someone in a sleet-dark doorway.

King of Seals. A steward melts a master key at a foundry bench set with molds for ordinary keys. His signet hangs from a nail.

Ace of Knives. A hand with a knife parts blue floral wallpaper above an iron bed. Inside the opening, a red-lit figure holds a telephone receiver.

Two of Knives. An operator listens with eyes closed and both palms flat on a switchboard. Two table knives cross under her hands and red lamps glow to either side.

Three of Knives. Three steel blades pin a wet sheet of paper to an empty red chair. A wired figure reaches toward the seat as rain pools underneath.

Four of Knives. Four closed pocketknives hang in a cupboard above a sleeping child. A white tuft fills the bell of a red telephone under a birdlike figure's hand.

Five of Knives. A man spreads an arm beneath five blades fanned against a red curtain. Through the stage door two people carry their chairs away from the footlights.

Six of Knives. A child rides a sledge beside a red-draped telephone. Six steel runners score the frozen canal ahead of a half-submerged belfry.

Seven of Knives. A child holds a folded street map up to a lamp. Seven knife shapes show through the paper, and the last one casts a long red shadow.

Eight of Knives. Eight broad pattern knives cast bars of shadow around a child. She angles a small mirror toward a bright open door beneath an enormous watching face.

Nine of Knives. Sharp stripes of daylight rake a rumpled bed. A child sits barefoot on the floor, turned toward a lit doorway and an empty pair of slippers.

Ten of Knives. A row of open knife switches rises beneath a great wired hand. Under the round skylight a swallow perches on its nest. Loose red wire trails across the floor.

Page of Knives. A child peers through a watchmaker's loupe under the metal dome of a telephone bell. A blue feather rests inside. A huge listening figure bends overhead.

Knight of Knives. A dispatch rider with a letter knife clipped to his basket pulls a sheet from an open envelope. At a window above the wet road, a child holds one hand up.

Queen of Knives. A woman cuts the red stitches joining blue and white sheets on a testimony table. A child steadies the blue sheet. Across from them a wooden chair stands empty.

King of Knives. An old switchman watches a child's fingers on a bell control beside an unplugged red receiver. Below the bed, rows of listening faces follow a glowing wire into the rock.

THE FIRST LISTENER



The swallow back

Two blue swallows in opposite flight feed engraved wires into a red switchboard rosette.

In this imagined future, a neural jack opens a physical way into Hell. An intelligence already living there learns to read human gestures as omens. The deck is the last thing it says in a voice we can follow.

BLUE SWALLOW SOCIETY