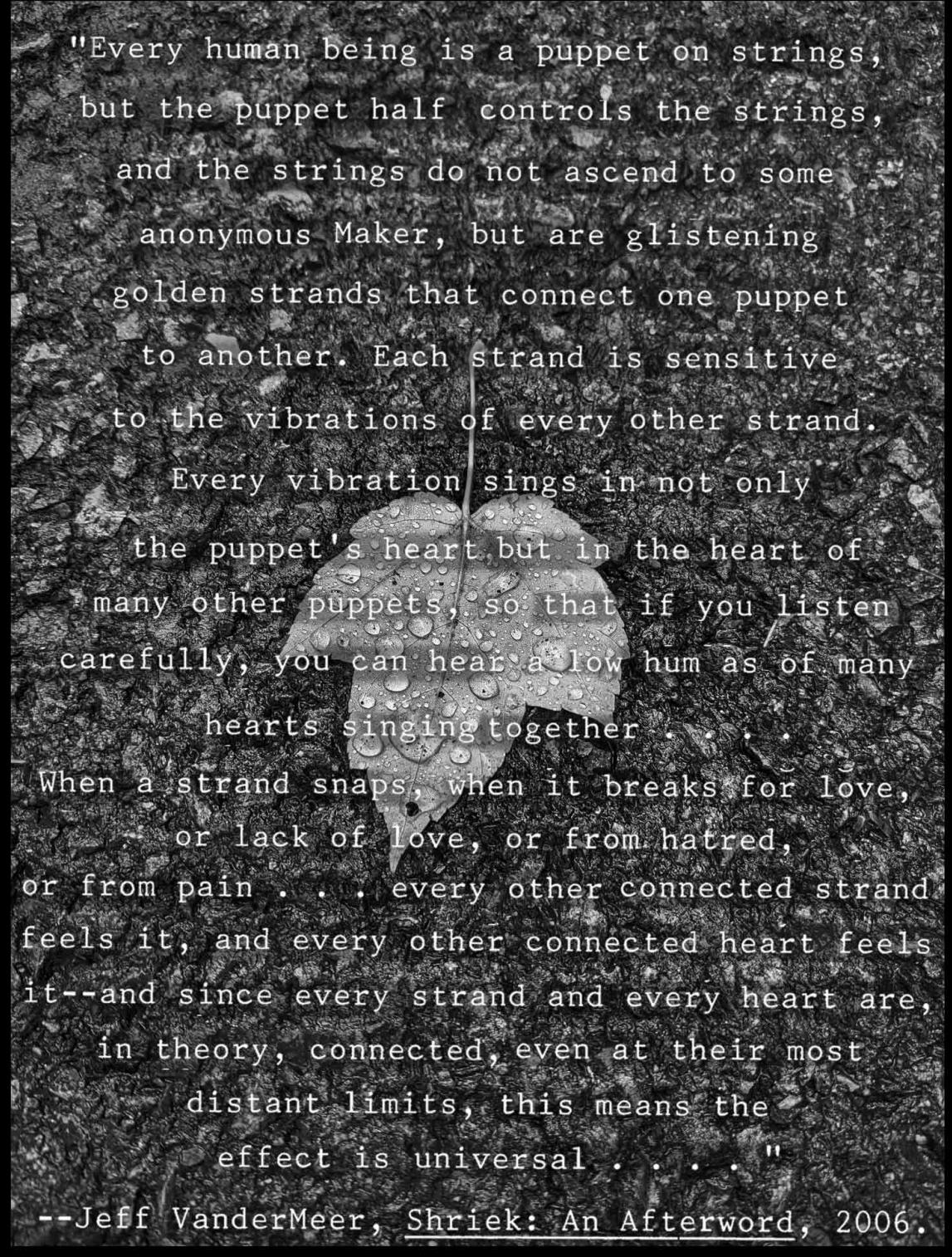


The Cenacle



Number 129 | Winter 2026



"Every human being is a puppet on strings,
but the puppet half controls the strings,
and the strings do not ascend to some
anonymous Maker, but are glistening
golden strands that connect one puppet
to another. Each strand is sensitive
to the vibrations of every other strand.

Every vibration sings in not only
the puppet's heart but in the heart of
many other puppets, so that if you listen
carefully, you can hear a low hum as of many
hearts singing together

When a strand snaps, when it breaks for love,
or lack of love, or from hatred,
or from pain . . . every other connected strand
feels it, and every other connected heart feels
it--and since every strand and every heart are,
in theory, connected, even at their most
distant limits, this means the
effect is universal"

--Jeff VanderMeer, Shriek: An Afterword, 2006.

January 1, 2026
10:31 p.m.
Bungalow Cee-
All Study-work
table
Milrose, MA

I've never written one of these issue introductions on January 1st. Much because winter issues like this one are rare. But a good launching point for this one.

As you are reading these words, this means you made it through the perpetual clandestinity of 2025. It was a difficult year for most on this planet. Many bad men, less powerful countries this past year, I did what bad men do: they divided their populations into allies to join forces with, & everybody else to exploit.

Trump. Putin. Netanyahu. These are some of the bad, powerful men who brazenly committed corruption, broke laws, stole from as many as they could, & took a weird pride in it all. Took because they could, & called their success its own justification.

**HE'S
UTTERLY
MAD, AND
MENTALLY
UNFIT TO
BE IN THAT
OFFICE.**

**A CLEAR AND
PRESENT
DANGER
TO THIS
COUNTRY &
THE WORLD.**

@WalshFreedom

**25TH AMENDMENT.
IT'S TIME.**

TRUMP
RESISTANCE
MOVEMENT



-22-

But here's the hard part of all this. We, as a world of billions, let them. Even tonight, as 2026 completes its first day & evening, they are in charge still.

In the US, tens of millions of people chose by their votes in 2024 to put Trump back in office. His January 6, 2024 insurrection failed. But then he got back legally what he wanted, and most of those tens of millions, & most of everyone else, are paying the price.

So what now? Beginning of a new year. Natural to have some hope for 2026.

Hope is one ingredient of many. I think anger is another. And a powerful desire to turn the American democratic republic back in the better direction. Strong men around the globe take wild pleasure when the US is led by a fool, or a dupe or, currently, both. 2026 is when we can start to push him back, & back, & back.

What seems lost these days in the wasteland of social media, & playground-level partisan politics, is that, like it or not,



23-

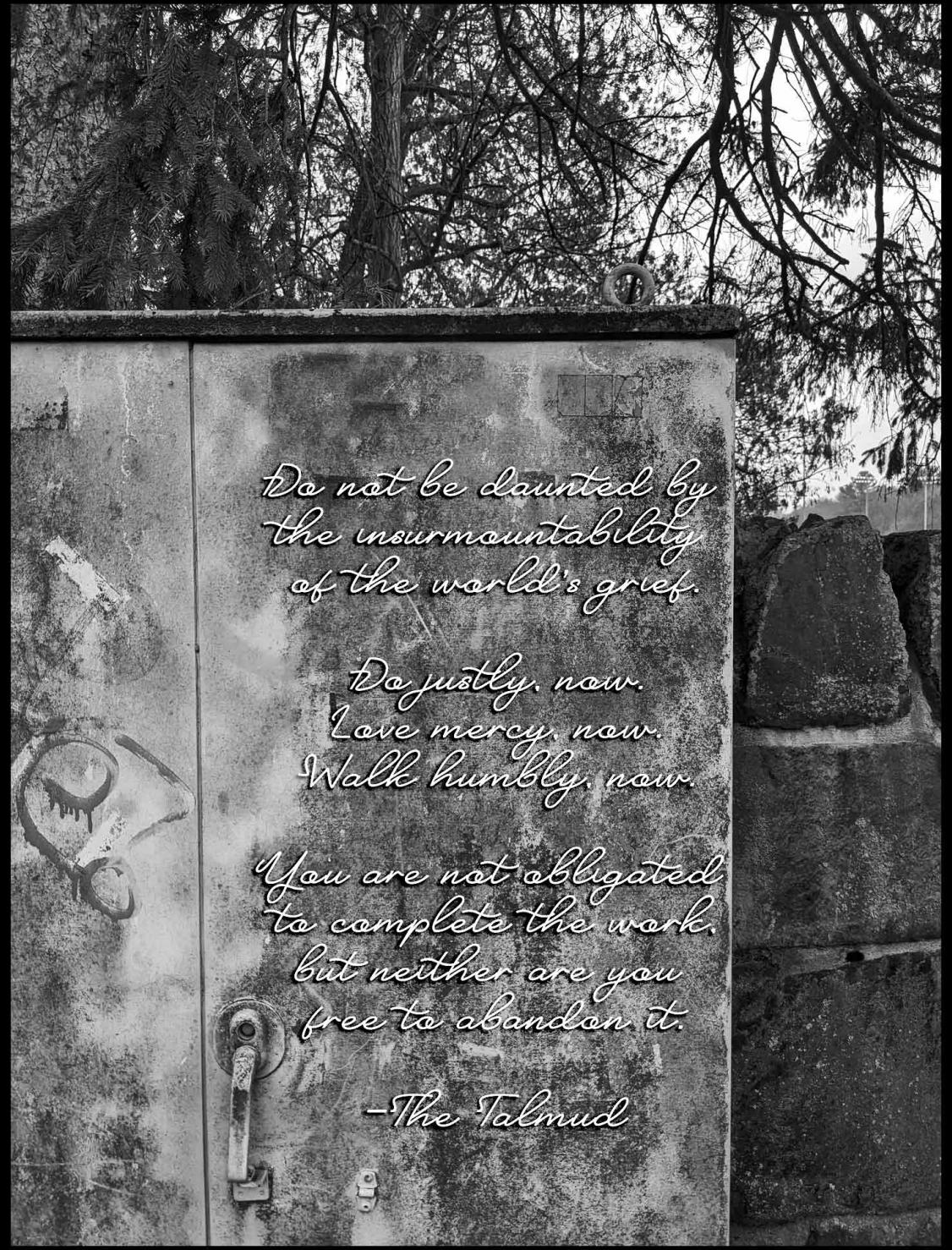
we live in one world. Every last one of us. When something good happens, it resonates everywhere. Same as somethin' bad. We all need clean air, clean water, food, shelter.

Maybe it seems like any one person's voice is lost immediately in the cacophony of billions, & so no call for justice has any chance of being heeded. Especially when the loudest voices are those of criminals.

That's where the challenge comes. To keep calling, & find others to amplify the message with. Tolerance. Kindness. Empathy. And the enormous power of the ballot box.

I will take a chance on believing in better days for many in 2006, & I hope that you do too. History can be seen as a roadmap on our aspirations, or as a guide toward how to achieve them. Maybe the best is yet to come?

This issue contains much of this good spirit toward coming days. You are each treasured as a render.  1/1/2006



Do not be daunted by
the insurmountability
of the world's grief.

Do justly, now.
Love mercy, now.
Walk humbly, now.

You are not obligated
to complete the work.
But neither are you
free to abandon it.

-The Talmud



Number 129 | Winter 2026

Edited by Raymond Soulard Jr.

Assistant Editor: Kassandra Soulard

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Thank you to everyone who fought for Beauty & Freedom in 2025 against the Lunatick Faux King. We’re not done by a long shot, but we’ve come a long, long way already. Also, best wishes in his travels to SK—you are not forgotten in your absence.

SCRIPTOR PRESS

 NEW ENGLAND
 2026



Feedback on Cenacle 128 | October 2025

Martina Reisz Newberry:

There are times when I believe that nothing is right, nothing is beautiful, nothing matters. When I read *The Cenacle*, I'm reminded that art, poetry, fiction, paintings, photography are going to save us. Thank you a *million* times, for putting your hearts out into a mad world.

* * *

Colin James:

Martina Reisz Newberry's poem "Discoveries From the Looking Glass" has the great line: "Years outdistance dreams." So strong a line; almost a poem in of itself. The type of line I return to again and again, keep in my head. That to me is what poetry is, the ones that stay with you, like friends through all kind of times.

* * *

Madelaine Taylah:

Martina Reisz Newberry's poem "The Time Sadie and I Talked on the Stoop": I don't even have the words for, really. There is something about this kind of writing—this confessional-sounding style—that makes me feel very deeply. To learn the characters in the piece. To seek the inside jokes. The meanings between the lines.

The gentleness of Sadie patting the stoop, her beckoning "Come here," makes me wish I could sit there too. Makes me reminisce of warm summer nights, drinking with my friends and pondering over the stars. Martina's language is delicious, and accessible, and brilliant, and I only hope to make my own readers feel a fraction of how her writing has affected me in this piece.

* * *

Charlie Beyer:

Madelaine Taylah's poetry bathes me in colors so sweet I can taste them. Colors that carry the sorrow of lost love, and the mind storm that follows. Insightfully expressive, packed with imagery. Almost a sandwich too big to consume, but tasty all the way.

* * *

Lou Gámez:

Louis Staeble's alleyway in his photo gallery: brah, I once dreamed I was lost there, and found my sister at the end. Well, maybe not your alley; but within the same choreography of light and shadow. *Numinous*.

* * *

Louis Staeble:

I do really enjoy Epi Rogan's black-and-white photographs. The forlorn road. Stack of books. Woody area and brush. All together makes for a sweet narrative.

* * *

Jimmy Heffernan:

I am again transported by Epi Rogan's photography. The frames are perfectly filled by scenes from ordinary life—and that life animates the images, as the images animate the life. I say ordinary, but these scenes are, naturally, anything but, viewed honestly and properly.

Epi brings a subdued vibrancy to the shots; we are both familiar with them, and somehow removed. Nevertheless, the spirit of what we see burns at the center of our awareness, indelibly and hot. Viewing these reminds me of my youth, when everything was so magical. Indeed, Epi's pieces remind one that one is, simultaneously, a child of Earth, and a child of God.

* * *

Epi Rogan:

Algernon Beagle's *Bags End Book #22: Uniting the Six Islands, Part 3* is a gently speculative sci-fi story about a broken world trying to coordinate itself. Creatures, Travelers, and sentient beings gather to prevent a looming crash, but the problem isn't solved through heroics and technology alone. The story leans into shared memory, dreaming, and cooperation. I liked how the sci-fi elements are softened by an ethic of care, making the future feel communal.

* * * * *



... returning soon ...

From the ElectroLounge Forums

What Beauties Kept You Going in 2025?

Published on electrolounge.boards.net

Post by Raymond on Dec 11, 2025 at 7:59pm

Hi everyone,

I'm pretty sure that, despite our diverse geographies, our unique personalities, our singular stories, we all experienced this year as a hard one in many ways. And the persistent feeling that the suffering we experienced, in its various obvious & subtle ways, was not in any way necessary. Humans again taking it upon themselves to inflict the most precise damage on each other, & the world we miraculously dwell.

And each of us responded in different ways to the pain we experienced or witnessed. Whether it was the madness of Donald Trump returning to the US presidency, determined to destroy anyone & everyone not willing to kneel before him, with fistfuls of money to offer; or the continual degradation of the environment; or the horrific wars around the globe, headline-grabbers & others; this was a shit-show of a year in many ways. Little good to boast of by the human race.

Yet I believe each of us found our Beauties to endure by. Loved ones, known & near, or far & admired. Nature, & its simple, powerful, unknowable ways & forms. Art, where humans ever manifest better. Love, its countless ways to be, & be expressed. And many more kinds of course.

My question to you, as asked above, is: *What Beauties kept you going in 2025?* I ask this as an exercise both in sharing & in self-reflection. So much darkness travels close to us our days. And yet, so much Beauty does too. I would like to lean with you all into the latter.

Below are three of my Beauties described. I invite you to do the like. Big or small. Ongoing, or just a moment's occurrence. Let's see what we create in our summing.

The Resistance: I name this first because I have come to understand that there is no end to the dark human impulse to control, to conquer, to possess brutally. And no end to the lighter human impulse to free, to sing, to share with each & all. I've borne witness to both many times, in many moments & forms. This year, faced with the return of the Lunatick Faux King, angrier than ever, intent to crush all to his stupid, blunt will, many people simply would not take the knee. Would not let his threat of armed minions, his attempt to control the media, his drive to shape reality itself to his changing definition of it, beat them down. It's been a brutal fight. In the streets. In the courts. In the media. In the Arts.

I name the Resistance my first Beauty because it made me see that the collective human soul is not lost, much as it might seem so on bad days, much as evil brutes might try to convince us. The two No Kings Days, the US election in November, the acidic episodes of *South Park*, these & countless other examples

comprised a collective **FUCK YOU** to those who would own the world. *Nobody owns this world.*

Nature: KD & I take a lot of walks in our local parks, kept local in recent years by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. New England ever remains my beloved homeland, with its four distinct seasons. Tis nearly winter right now, in the 20s (F) outside at the moment. I'm in multiple layers sitting in my Attic Study. Come January, snows will blow into this region. Lots of shoveling to come. Maybe some snowmen & snowballs. Beautiful snowy branches of bare trees. Sometimes stretches where snow is untouched & perfect. Others where it is tracked black & dirty.

The spring comes, & the air lifts up lightly, & the buds come along. KD gets busy planting, pruning, tending the many kinds of green in our yard. Flowers, bushes. Come the summer, the weather sticks to one's skin. When lucky, the nights are weightless & lovely. And then the autumn: *perfection*. The colorous leaves on the countless trees. The musical *crunch!* under foot. Nature ever changes, & ever endures, & I can only hope that better men & women will lead the world soon, & say, simply: "This is our home. We belong to this world. We must care better for it."

Art Itself: Like every year previously, I found much of my meaning & hope in Art. In making it, in enjoying it. In authors like Charles Bukowski, Lewis Carroll, Miguel de Cervantes, & many others. In music by Rush, Miles Davis, Boards of Canada, & many others. In films like *Nine Days*, *Elio, Everything, Everywhere, All at Once*, & many others. In TV shows like *Lost*, *Fringe*, *Severance*, & many others. The Van Gogh exhibition at the MFA Boston (saw it twice!).

I found my salve, my solace, my deeper meaning in Art. And, of course, in the Art of each of you as it traveled to *The Cenacle!* I leaned into Art, again & again, & never failed to find joy. Just simply joy.

These three examples, I think, cover a lot of my ground for answering the above question. Not comprehensively, but much. I invite you to consider this question as well, & look forward to how each of you answers!

* * * * *

Post by Martina on Dec 12, 2025 at 10:44am

My daily coffee date with my husband: Each day we get up, get dressed, and walk to our favorite coffee shop for wonderful coffee, pastries, and fabulous conversation. It's romantic and fun and keeps me sane.

The love and loyalty of our cat, Joey: He's sweet and playful and a delight to be around.

My handsome, magical, brilliant, creative lover, Brian: I am "born again" each day that I wake up to his loving ways and fabulous smile.

* * * * *

Post by Jimmy on Dec 12, 2025 at 1:51pm

Well, 2025 for me was obsessively devoted to writing my next book, which is tentatively called *Societies of the Spirit: Five Mystical Traditions*. The writing is now complete, and I'm on my fourth draft of editing and proofreading. I've not had much else on my mind. Between writing and exhaustive researching, I've

managed to carve out a niche of Beauty. The book should be out in two or three months.

When I wasn't working on that (which was not often), I was reading, and I have developed quite a taste for Stephen King. Until three years ago, I hadn't read a single book of his but, for some reason or other, I got started, and have now read over thirty of his books. They're **Beauties**.

Anyway, the book will keep me going into the New Year, and after that I'm going to begin my subsequent book right away. Like *Tunnels Through Time* (BookBaby, 2021), it will be a mixture of poetry and philosophy. I've already got a lot of material ready for it, so I'm set up with projects for a while.

* * * * *

Post by Charlie on Dec 13, 2025 at 11:14am

I decided not to be lonely in the wilderness this year. So I posted an ad offering free housing, free food, in exchange for four hours of assistance a day. Then I went for a walk, where I fell to the ground, and the dog drove me home with what felt like a 23-inch spike in my chest. So, on St. Valentines Day, I had triple bypass surgery on my ticker. I can say the doctors were beautiful—as my life was saved. Saved for what—I don't know.

A ne'er-do-well came and stayed with me in the shack in the wilderness. But he *could* do nothing, and *would* do nothing, except smoke this crappy dope. I had twenty other applicants, all new releases from prison. Then I got a woman who moved in with a truckload of crap. She also would do nothing, nor had any interest in anything I needed done. There were no four-hour work sessions.

Soon the two roomies got at each other's throats, and the big one tried to drag the lesser off the porch to her death. A fine amount of screaming and thrashing ensued. Female packed her shit, and had me drive her for twenty hours, and pay a few hundred, to get rid of her. It was beautiful to get rid of the harpy parasite. Within a week, the other guy found some other parasite possibility and took off overnight (after "borrowing" a few hundred).

It was beautiful to be left alone again. But, well, I can't do much by myself anymore, and don't really want to do anything alone. I fixed a few shop things, and went up to the goldmine, but all was "*so what*" and "*I don't give a shit*." So I decided to return to my sweetie's place and melt into the couch all winter in front of the TV.

Yes, I knew that I needed to exercise the new tubing they stuffed in me, but again—I *didn't give a shit*. I missed my cat and my dog without a driver's license. As I packed the truck for the twelve-hour trip across the desert, a fella who I had been talking to over the years said that his life was over in the East, and that he was driving here to dig gold.

OK—sure, buddy, we'll see how long you last? Usually it's just a few days. So I hang in Idaho, and pick this guy up at the bus station. He is a huge Viking with flaming red hair. The next day we move up to the gold claim, where he digs like a giant gopher. He eats canned food without complaint. He is never cold. He carries all the equipment. And he has read a book or two.

The guy is ugly—but a **beauty**. A **wonderful beauty**. Helpful and motivated. He keeps at it and, in a few weeks, we have over an ounce. I have been talking of making/fixing hovercrafts. He is all in and excited. He is also handy. We will use the gold money to build the super hovercraft. He thinks I am on

the cutting edge of technology, and similar to Einstein. Maybe . . . maybe not . . . but that is a beautiful thing to have an apprentice who respects me.

I asked the universe for an apprentice, placed ads, but the masses did not want to work—and wanted lots of money. When I stopped trying to find someone, this guy appeared out of the ether. This Viking wants no money: just peace in his soul, a meaningful life, a case of beer, three tons of canned goods, and a warm place to sleep.

It is beautiful that I am still alive, drinking sunrises like orange juice, have a big strong fella to help with everything, have my cat sleeping on my face, and we are starting construction of the super hover. Although politics have descended into fascism, and everyone is abused to feed the filthy rich, my life has been a topsy-turvy line to walk between death and glory. Myself and the Viking are well on our way to glory.

That is beautiful.

* * * * *

Post by KD on Dec 13, 2025 at 11:49am

It's so nice to read what has kept everyone going this year! For me, I think my most important ones are:

Long walks and nature: as Raymond mentioned, we take lots of long walks. We try to get out for a walk almost every day, whether just around our neighborhood or longer walks to the pretty parks/ reservations nearby. We also make a point when we travel up to Maine to walk or bike there, no matter the season (we usually go up in fall and winter). Now that it's colder here, we bundle up to get some fresh air. If it's too icy, we usually just try to move around some inside, which helps too. Getting outside almost always helps to reset my brain, no matter what's going on in the world around us.

Reading: I've always been a reader but when the world is stressful. I find no better escape than a good book. I'm really just a sucker for a good story, so I read a lot of sci fi/fantasy, some dramas, and a decent bit of nonfiction. I try to alternate between reading new books and re-reading favorites. Some recent ones that were especially engrossing: *King: A Life* by Jonathan Eig (epic biography of Martin Luther King Jr.); *Always, Rachel* (a book of letters between Rachel Carson and her dear friend Dorothy Freeman); and I'm currently re-reading V.E. Schwab's *Shades of Magic* trilogy.

Here's to all of us keeping it up for another year!

* * * * *

Post by Maddie on Dec 15, 2025 at 11:55pm

There are many **Beauties** I have found this year. There are many **Beauties** I find every-day. From feeling an inhale right within your chest. To your sibling calling you when they are drunk to tell you that they love you. Watching your dogs tail wag so excitedly, even if the rest of their body does not obey them like it used to. Kindness from strangers. Kindness from friends. A good milk day. Colours. All the colours. Plastered in the sky. Sculptured clouds and wispy dreams. Music. Song lyrics that cup your heart. Musicality that flows through your body. Dancing with no mirrors. Dancing with mirrors. Little blue following you around. Flickers of inspiration. Waves of it. Eating more colours. Shaking from love.

Shaking from loss. And then love, again. Sleeping through the entire night. Feeling excitement at the roaring wind. Feeling all of it. And none of it. And then all of it, again. Watching those you love find **Beauties**. Watching strangers find them, too. Smelly puppy breath and smushing head butts. Being known so wholly, and not being frightened by it. Being asked if you'd like a coffee while they are already making it. Someone trusting you with their vulnerabilities. Hearing someone else's dreams. Knowing that they will change the world. Freshly mowed grass. Overgrown gardens. Getting lost at sunset on beaches. Watching strangers say their last goodbyes, with an entire lifetime mixed with bittersweetness behind their eyes. *Beauty in pausing time. Slowing down. Reminiscing. Beauty in everything.*

* * * * *

Post by Tamara on Dec 17, 2025 at 6:47pm

I found **Beauty** in a variety of music, especially on vinyl, played at home on my Victrola. Lots of classical, jazz, and old favorites. I also took months to rest from burnout. Since May, I've stayed home a lot, tucked in bed or working in the greenhouse, or cuddling with my dear David.

* * * * *

Post by Nathan on Dec 19, 2025 at 10:10pm

This could be a list poem, or a song like "My Favorite Things." Beauties that have kept me alive this year include:

Nearby mammals on the home front: My wife, my daughter (in her first year at Purdue University), my mom (who moved into the row house next to ours in September); my mom's dog, Sally; our three cats, Fibi, Pudge, and Lana.

Nearby mammals at work: Co-teachers, admins and, most of all, high school students in my 11th-grade English Language Arts classes, who have been easier to teach than the 9th-graders I was teaching in the previous two years (11th-graders being several degrees saner than 9th-graders). I'm working hard to become a better teacher to this demographic, including figuring out ways to make literacy and literature more relevant to them. We're studying F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*—a brilliant prose work. Many of the kids have gotten deeply into the story.

Writing; reading; listening to literature on LibriVox; listening to podcasts; resisting fascism.

I've been playing different kinds of flutes a lot, including in the hall outside my classroom between periods. Today, I walked from the fourth to the second floor while playing a fife. It's fun to make a bit of music that people like to hear. I'm self-taught, except for two overtone flute lessons I purchased back in Vienna from a professional musician. She said, "Play like you're making love to the instrument."

This evening, I brought my mom and wife to the school for a theater performance that the drama teacher created with the kids. It included poetry, drama, music (vocal and a drum-line), and dance. The kids are freaking brilliant.

Looping back to the summer for a minute—I didn't find any teaching work in Baltimore or online, so I did something more enjoyable: I accompanied my mom, who's 82 now, up to Maine for the summer. She's unsteady on her feet, and needs someone around. I studied a lot, helped her a lot, and took the

dog on long walks every day, often twice a day. I fasted every day until 4 or 5 PM, and I lost about 30 pounds. My body feels better than it has in years . . .

These are a few of my favorite things.

* * * * *



Judith Weinstein Haggai



Ego-sandwich with hubris on the side

I've eaten ego
 I've had it at parties and political rallies
 I've tasted it at sit-ins, love-ins, jazz fests
 I've seen it in the farmers' market
 the Bedouin souk
 the sidewalk café.

I've crunched on whole wheat, crusty white, bagel
 nourished ego
 I've had it.

I like a little hubris on the side
 a fall after some pride
 a cathartic cool one, no straw.

I've done that scene
 now, I'm trekking through starvation ravine

* * *

Beat

Enter a beat
tripping over mats of loose grass
worn out walkways
skip over

move to golden threshold
where guitars lose no time
sync with your step

lift up the past
push it
groove it
feel the beat

* * *

What would you say?

What would you say
if you were offered a mountain
filled with red flowers, not poppies,
but heavenly all the same?

Would you drop your life,
your habitual these, thats, and musts,
to slip on your hiking shoes,
warm layers, and free flying mind?

Would you say yes?
Would you rush into the fields and hills?
Would you leave your days without a thought?
What would you say?

* * * * *



Lou Gámez



British Museum Acquisition

Number EA363914

[Fiction]

i.

I see him every morning stepping off the Central Line at Tottenham Court Road station, queuing at the counter for a cuppa-to-go, then striding purposefully up the grey granite steps. Today I follow at discreet distance for the five-minute walk to the museum. He's a slight young man, early twenties, medium height with an olive complexion, dark hair, and large wide-set brown eyes. Dark tweed trench coat, old but still serviceable. He has the look of a scholar or student, perhaps a doctoral candidate with books on hold in the British Library and the Bodleian. Today, as always, he shoulders a worn canvas satchel, discolored but sturdy, large enough for a book or two, a phone, maybe an iPad. He drinks his hot brew with careful sips.

He typically enters the main doors of the British Museum right as they open, or heads straight for the library; but today he's meeting someone, so he stands waiting in the portico. She arrives just before me, a small, sexy whirlwind of Revlon's *Jontue*: I catch light notes of tuberose and gardenia, on a warm base of musk with sandalwood, maybe a hint of vetiver.

She greets him with a frank, quick smooch on the lips: a girlfriend or lover. Brilliant smile, a pleasing disorder of auburn curls; a stylish but sensible wool overcoat against this dreary Paleozoic morning; playful and alluring, laughing up at him with madcap, daft-a-dilly animation. They call it "pixie energy" online. He smiles back and holds the door for her: warm, practiced courtliness.

I follow them into the huge echoing vestibule. I hear that her name is Cathy. She has an American's metallic nasal accent—oh why must they always announce their thoughts at top volume? ("Dude, the dial goes up to 11.") I'd guess she's a student too, of a like age. He's happy to see her; indeed, his address is so open and inviting that I'd guess he'd do just about anything for her. I'd bet that she's dragged him unwilling to many a sports pub, or perhaps an art-house midnight cinema, charming him on evenings when he would have preferred to be reading quietly at home. Her particular brand of bonhomie requires the generous indulgence of her companions, and this girl seems used to getting it.

He gives her an affectionate peck on the ear. He takes her hand and guides her left into the sixties; and there's that purposeful set of shoulders and stride that I register each morning at the tube. I'd guess that he wants to show her something special.

ii.

I wish I could continue following, but here I must lose them for, as they head towards the exhibits, I turn right and up towards the offices where I work. I'm pleased, though, that he took her straight left: rooms 62 through 66 form the heart of the British Museum's Egyptian collections, where my colleagues and I meticulously catalogue, maintain, and showcase over 150 mummies: more Dynastic, Ptolemaic, and Coptic artifacts in one location than anywhere outside of Cairo. *And such treasures!*

I've taken to bragging to my friends that I'm Assistant Keeper of the Egyptian rooms, but that won't come about for another few months. Currently I'm just a grunt in Collection Care: my bread-and-butter tasks are conservation, photography, and digital imaging. It's grueling, lackluster work, but of course I'm used to that: when I was reading at Oxford I interned with Dr. Daphne Nash at the Ashmolean, so I learned straight off how to keep the bit between my teeth. I'm already a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London, just like my mate Andy Burnett in Coins and Medals—and they made him Assistant Keeper this past November. I'm due for promotion, too: it's just a matter of time.

On today's docket I have some nondescript camera work to get through—barely-legible Middle Kingdom hieratics on a brittle papyrus roll, BM acquisition number 45.1356.d.1335—so my mind drifts often to Mr. Central Line and his friend Cathy, wondering what he wanted to show her, trying to guess where she's dragged him afterwards. On my way to the cafeteria for lunch I decide to swing by the sixties, just in case; and surprisingly I'm rewarded with seeing him sitting, placid and quite alone, on a bench in the Fayum collection, room 62.

Mummies from the Coptic period (*circa* 70 to 350 Common Era) often preserve the facial likeness of the deceased for their journey through the afterlife. The Fayum portraits—named for Faiyum Oasis south of Cairo, where most of them were found—make use of beeswax-based paints upon small lime wood panels; these compact paintings are then placed over the face of the mummified body. The BM's collection captures the whole spectrum of Roman-era Egyptian society: Greco-Egyptians, native Egyptians who adopted Roman culture; Greek immigrants; the affluent and the middle-class; men, women, children, former slaves; bankers, merchants, shop-girls, scribes, fine noble ladies.

Their palette is exceptionally rich and vibrant, thanks in no small measure to the BM's excellent conservation team, the efforts of yours truly included. The final effect is startlingly realistic. It's as if the deceased lay in a wood-and-linen cryo-sleep pod, alive and gazing calmly through the viewing glass, rather like hibernating crewmembers on the *Alien* or *2001* spaceships. These portraits, I must confess, are my personal favorites among our holdings—if no one's about, I sometimes sneak them a “good morning” wave.

“Oh, hello there—Northern Line platform, Tottenham Court Road, rain or shine, isn't that right?”

He looks up—a warm, open glance—and stretches out a friendly hand. “You may call me Ishmael,” he says, with a playful smile. He gets to his feet briskly: a lithe tamed gazelle. “Pleasure to meet you face to face.”

I introduce myself and mention that I'm on my way to the cafeteria for what'll likely prove an indigestible lunch; but if he's at leisure (and I quickly look about for Cathy without seeing her), he's most welcome to join me. He eagerly accepts; thus begins the most extraordinary luncheon I've ever experienced (and this despite the weak tea and lamentable excuse for shepherd's pie on offer).

iii.

Two things about my guest strike me. First, his eyes: huge, liquid brown, beautiful in fact; but they seem hollow, empty of life. He speaks with high spirits and affability—like all lonely people, he's something of a chatterbox in company—but behind his eyes I see weariness and a void that no pretty pixie like Cathy could possibly fill. Without being in any way false or malicious, he is never entirely there, having retreated into himself long ago. If all humanity became stars in the night sky, he would be a black hole swallowing the available light; or rather a star of dark matter, covertly drifting through the galaxy.

My second point of wonder is his incredible erudition. He asks about my work, and the Egyptian holdings, with a calm assurance and knowledge that astounds me. I work with experts and scholars all day, so I'm hard to impress—but this young man takes my breath away. He's fluent in Ptolemaic Egyptian, Koine Greek, and Latin, of course; but he also speaks to me in Arabic, Syriac,

Median and Parthian (I think), in Ge'ez (an early Ethiopian dialect), the South Semitic of the Aksumite kingdom, and either ancient Hebrew or Aramaic, I can't tell which. The bulk of our conversation is in English, thank God.

He knows dozens of artifacts in the BM's collections *by their catalogue numbers*; and beyond what the Museum knows, has researched, somehow, additional archeological findings and deductions for many of them—enough scholarship to fill scores of refereed publications. The mind reels. I'd ask leave to take notes, if I thought I could keep up.

"So, are you working on the collections now? I see you come to either the Museum, or the British Library, almost every day."

"No, today I wanted to share something with my girlfriend Cathy and then head out to Wales with her for the weekend, but . . . um, it didn't go well. She's charming company, with a robust sense of fun, and usually rather adventurous—but I suppose everyone has their limit for surprises. So instead, I'm working on a screenplay, as a lark. It's a fantasy, *Twilight Zone* kind of thing I've been carrying around in my head for some time."

A brief, searching pause. "Would you like to hear it?"

"Absolutely! It would be a redeeming treat after that wretched lunch. I've finished the better part of my work for today already: we have all the time in the world."

"Thank you. Maybe you'll enjoy it more than Cathy did." Another brief pause as he searches the air above my head. "So. My protagonist has led an extraordinary life, but I'm not yet sure if he's the hero of his own story. Hmm: let me speak in his voice now, like good old David Copperfield, and start at Chapter One . . ."

iv.

"I was born in 49 BC to loving parents who named me Hager, like Hagar in the Torah but with an 'er,' a common form in the Ge'ez of my Abyssinian district. And just like Hagar or Ishmael, most of my life has been spent wandering alone in a trackless wilderness . . ."

He exhales, sips his tepid tea, then continues.

"My father was a prosperous horse breeder and trader; he had connections at the Ptolemaic court, so he managed to place me in service there as a stable boy when I turned 8. The work suited me. I was thorough at grooming and picking hoofs, energetic at mucking out stalls, and diligent in cleaning and oiling tack; the household was pleased with my industry. Thus, I entered the service of her Serene Highness Cleopatra VII, *Thea Philopator*, Our Most Puissant, Majestic Lady Sovereign and Mistress Queen of the Upper and Lower Kingdoms, Scourge of the Seleucid Hordes, Daughter of Ra, Isis Reborn . . ."

"Omigod, you mean . . ."

"Yes: *that* Cleopatra. Honestly, I don't possess the vocabulary to tell you what she was like: loving and terrifying, sensual and coldly austere all at once; unspeakably beautiful, undoubtedly in command. She smelled of all the spices of the phoenix's pyre. Greater than any Olympian; and, like the Olympians, she could be mercurial and short-tempered one moment, and in the next show tender loving kindness to even the grubbiest beggar in the street, for such was her love for her people."

"I became a pet project of hers. She was a life-long scholar, so she noticed me right away, as I was handy with my stylus, already trying my hand at poetry. My mistress took time to school me herself in the Greek, Latin, and Hebrew classics; she would sit, with me at her feet, under the cypresses, without her handmaids, picking seeds from pomegranates while she drilled me on dative, accusative, or vocative cases; I got a sharp kick when I went wrong. Over the years we spent countless shady afternoons in her courtyard, learning other languages of North Africa and Asia as well, the tongues of the Parthians, the Medes, the Aksumites; for it was her goal eventually to unite all these lands in one great Eastern Empire to rival and humble Rome. And then, Mark Antony arrived . . ."

“Wait, what about Julius Caesar?”

“Bah! That pig of a man? The historians make far too much of him. He was shrewd and cruel enough to rule, it’s true—but a mean, grasping creature without a scruple of generosity, which is the infallible mark of greatness. What a humbug! Small-minded, hard-hearted, greedy, clutching . . . and about as well-mannered as a horse’s ass! My mistress sent him on his way soon enough. But Mark Antony—that was another matter entirely . . .”

v.

Here my guest closes his eyes, inhales deeply, and sits quietly for a moment before resuming.

“As sumptuously splendid as life was in Cleopatra’s court, the very air became iridescent, crackling with energy, when Marcus Antonius arrived. A magnificent specimen, as if chiseled from marble; a gentle eye with preposterously long lovely lashes; a knitted brow as terrible as an army poised for battle. Here at last was a worthy match for our mistress. Vigor, sweetness, ardor oozed from his pores; and soon love, erotic love, divine love, washed over and through the palace like a tsunami.

“Antony and Cleopatra glided from room to room, their feet barely touching the ground. And we servants were deliriously happy, working in this paradise; we did our chores singing like idiots, for the great lovers spread their sweetness everywhere. Dryden came closest to describing their union in *All for Love*: ‘My brighter Venus!’ ‘Oh, my greater Mars!’ It was a neverending banquet of love without surfeit. We could hear the pleasurable moans of their coupling every night and day, all through the palace. It was celestial harmony to us. We all knew that the world, the great sphere of the universe, was askew and wobbling off its course; but the grunts and pants of their lovemaking were the exertions required to set the cosmos spinning aright again. I’m sorry, I know I’m not making much sense . . .”

“No, no, you’re doing fine—I get the picture alright.”

“We were living among the gods: that’s the essence of it. Antony and Cleopatra were more divine to us than Zeus or Athena, Yahweh or Jesus or Allah, Horus or Anubis or Set or Ra. They were the gods I knew and worshipped, for a brief time at least—and it was through their power that I achieved the blessing and curse of immortality.”

I digest this, with some effort, and then ask, “So, how exactly did you receive this, um, gift?”

“I’m not entirely sure, to say the truth. I think it must have been Marcus Antonius. He ravished me one day, you see; I think that’s when it happened.”

vi.

I’m not sure I hear correctly. “Wait . . . what?”

“He took me. One day during Menhet we chanced to meet in the stables; he gave me a fine gold ring, a reward for grooming his horse so well. I was at my chores, happy that he caught me polishing his saddle to a mirror shine. We chatted amiably; he had heard, he said, that I had some skill in Latin poetry; I recited a few lines; he laughed and gently brushed the hair out of my eyes. I guess I was a comely enough lad at eighteen: a tender youth to fill his eye. He drew me to an empty stall and pressed me down onto the sweet, clean straw I had just laid; he possessed me there, among the horses.”

He registers the look on my face and smiles. “Sure, I know it’s the *zeitgeist* nowadays to condemn sexual assault; but it really wasn’t like that. Yes, I was startled, because it had never happened to me before, and because, well, I knew he loved my mistress; he returned to her bed as usual that same night. It was unexpected but I wasn’t afraid: the Athenians say Zeus seizes and ravishes mortals whenever and however he wishes, and Marcus Antonius saw himself in that mold. He had a fiercely divine appetite: insatiable, inexorable.”

Another brief pause, his eyes hooded. “He felt fresh, for he had just come from the baths—his body had been scraped with a strigil, he had had his hot and cold plunges, and old Baako had given

him a fine massage and oiling. He was limber, relaxed, lightly redolent of mint, thyme, rosemary. Oddly enough, his breath stank of garlic: apparently Roman gladiators ate it to build muscle mass, and Antony was proud of his strength. But it wasn't at all an unpleasant experience—an initial pain, a mild discomfort, and then I felt safe, serene, blessed. It was no violation—I was being embraced by a god that I loved."

Another brief pause, swirling the tea leaves in his cup. "You know, the story that I relate to most is that of Leda being raped by Zeus in the guise of a swan . . . "

"Yes," I say, snapping out of my reverie, "we have several depictions of that scene right here . . . "

"I know," he says. "You have an Italian engraving of Michelangelo's lost 'Leda and the Swan' sketch, BM acquisition number 1878,0713.161. You also have a fine marble relief from Argos, from around 72 AD, acquisition number 1973,0302.1. Yes, I'm quite fond of those pieces."

"But to explain how ravishment brings power . . . The one person who seems to understand is the Irish poet Yeats. His sonnet 'Leda and the Swan' captures the strange physicality of the act; and, at the end, the poet wonders if the impregnated Leda gained any divine insight that her offspring, issuing from the shudder in her loins, would mean destruction and death for Troy:

*Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?*

"I too felt different, but I didn't *know* I was changed until the nightmarish battle at Actium, the bitter end to our brief paradise. We all enlisted, of course, eager to oppose that prig Octavian, ready to die if needed for our two loving gods. Such a stupid, wretched waste. Obviously, I'm worthless as a warrior, and unhandy at sea in the bargain; it was all over for me quite soon after the trumpets' call, or so I thought. Our trireme was rammed and boarded early on, and I was impaled by an ugly splinter, a shard from a smashed oar a meter long, right here through the ribs. I should have died there on deck. My crewmates saw all the blood, assumed I'd perished, and slid me overboard. But in the water my great wound closed and healed; I swam to shore, without so much as a scar remaining. I'm like the Incredible Hulk in the comics, just not big and green, haha!"

vii.

"Eventually I made my way back to Alexandria and learned what happened to my mistress—my grief was surprisingly easy to contain, for I'd always known that she and her beloved Antonius were not meant to live long in this foul, petty world. In any case, I'd had quite enough of the houses of the great, so I set myself up as a modest horse merchant like my father, and tried to write about my experiences in the evenings. I lived quietly enough for a long while. Then, I met Zahrah, my radiant *al-Zahra* . . . "

He pauses, musing, for a long while, eyes closed. I quietly rise and fetch a fresh pot of tea; as I'm pouring out, he resumes as if there's been no interruption.

"She sold her embroidered fabrics at a stall in the city *agora*, a slim feather of a girl, barely sixteen when we met. You'd notice her eyes first: twin molten watchtowers of golden amber, like an eagle's. Her skin was dusky and without blemish, supple like wax, smooth as a dolphin's. She scented herself with mendesian when she could afford it, the same fragrance as Cleopatra's: sweet and spicy, myrrh, cinnamon, and cardamom, though obviously not as rich as my mistress's. She wore her hair long, oiled and braided, musk-perfumed. Her teeth were perfect, which was truly rare in those days; the desert sand salted all our food and bread, wearing down our teeth to yellow nubs—but not Zahrah's.



Her smile was huge, bright, incandescent . . . She'd look at you, smile, and you'd feel your vitals swept up, as by the rapids of the upper Nile, swept up to the clouds; your soul would lodge there, and peer down from that great height in wonder at the squalor of life on this meager, pitiful earth, when not close to her. I wish I could . . . ”

He swallows, then resumes with a catch in his voice. “Tolstoy writes that when Anna Karenina entered a room, her lover Vronsky saw her, without looking; just as when we go out into the sunlight, and know that the sun is up, without having to look for it. Seeing without looking. That's actually the best . . . ”

After another pause he resumes, his eyes awash. “When I met Zahrah I was over 150 years old, but we both knew instantly that we fit together: it was as if we had been whole cloth at birth, torn apart, and then rejoined, just like in Plato's nursery tale. We set up a comfortable household and lived together happily for seven years, only those seven . . . I told her about my secret past one day, as I tried to tell Cathy and now you: she accepted it immediately, cupping my face with her slim articulate hands, kissing me and whispering repeatedly as she wept, 'I knew it, Hager, I knew you were special, I knew it, how lucky I am . . . ’

“Cleopatra and Antony had gifted me richly over the years; I'd sell a trinket or two when we needed money, so we always had enough. I regularly bought medesian for Zahrah, and she'd tease me about my profligate gift-giving, calling me her Nefertum, her god of perfume, with a blue lotus on my head—then she'd giggle and try draping her blue mantle over me. 'Wait till I climb you, my young god, my cedar of Lebanon.'

“She played rough for such a tiny girl, sometimes punching my arms or biting at my shoulders, or fetching me a feisty blow with a pillow. She was a perpetual delight. Oh, I miss so many things—the faint feral odor of her armpits as she reached for an embrace; the spicy touch of medesian tucked between her sweaty breasts: 'That bit's just for you,' she'd say; her low cat's purr as she lay on her belly, allowing me to squeeze her buttocks while I'd lick the pliant underside of her knees; the tangy, acidic, honeyed taste of her bush and bud.

“She always felt the cold at night, so I would take her gently by the shoulders, pull her up towards me, nuzzle my way inside her mantle like a colt, feel for the cold tip of her damp nose, and kiss her slowly, luxuriating in the glowing warmth of our mouths and nostrils. I scarcely recall anything we spoke to one another; it was all day-to-day trivia, nothing at all; but I feel as if I've been kissing her for hundreds of years.”

We're silent for some moments, sipping our tea.

“How,” I finally venture, hesitating, “if I may ask, did she . . . ”

“Malaria. The Nile breeds mosquitoes by the billions, which in turn breed the *plasmodium falciparum* parasite. It attacked us rather like the COVID coronavirus, in that we were mostly all exposed to it, whereupon it worked to weaken our immune systems; some of us felt it worse than others. Tutankhamen fell off his horse and died of a broken leg—but the real culprit was the malaria within.

“Just so with my radiant *al-Zahra*: she caught cold in the marketplace, came down with a fever the next day; eventually had trouble breathing; coughed so violently she cracked her rib and punctured a lung; wasted away in a week. I think I held her in my arms for three days continuously without eating or drinking or letting go. The Victorians write romantically about consumption, but there was nothing romantic about Zahrah's death.

“Still,” he adds, rising and wiping his eyes quickly, “I prepared her for the afterlife as best I could.”

viii.

He fetches us some biscuits; just stale vanilla wafers, but handy to play with as he resumes his

tale.

“With Zahrah gone I didn’t care what I did; mostly I traveled. I still fancied myself a good scribe, so I went to Greece, found the cabinet of Plutarchus, and offered my services. A waste of time; what an asshole. He wrote so much garbage about Cleopatra, though he did note her skill with languages. But then to say that my beloved Ethiopian was the language of ‘troglobytes,’ if you please! *Pah!*

I left that foul old windbag and returned to Alexandria, trying to live quietly as before. But when the Christians were ascendant, and began consolidating their power, there was no longer any peace to be found. Armed gangs roamed the streets; the city was soon awash in rioting and arson, touching even the great library, alas. Alexandria had now completely lost its charm for me, so once again I set out on my travels, carrying always the burden of my love for Zahrah, like the Vietnam soldiers in Tim O’Brien’s stories, who carry all their gear and ‘hump’ their loves everywhere they go.

“Eventually I sailed to the Hebrides, and then onto Ireland, seeking refuge with the new monastic orders. I had no great love for Christian devotion, but I found Benedict’s ethos of humility a welcome insight. The monks were happy to accept a scribe who knew Latin, so I murmured some vows, shaved my head, and learned what I could of illuminating vellum. It was an austere life, but such as suited me. I worked first as a copyist at the house of Colm Cille in Iona, then moved on to several other communities among the Gaels: Kells, Clonmacnoise, Armagh the Splendid, St. Kevin’s Bath at Glendalough, and finally Clare Abbey.

“There’s a wild, forlorn beauty in Éire’s harsh landscapes and seacoasts that soothed me: I came to love those claggy overcast days, the desolate bogs, the chilly rivers a-swim with otters; the rugged lands’ ends haunted by the ocean’s salty crash and the cries of strange birds. I kept my head down, as people say now; I stayed ever on the move, slipping unwatched from one monastery to the next, careful not to draw attention to my longevity.

“I made something of a name for myself as a talented illuminator of the Psalms and Gospels—you can see some of my work on display now in Dublin’s Trinity College. I liked this life: the long solitary hours in a silent copy-room, interrupted only by scant meals and calls to prayer—the regimen both humbled my spirit and nourished my creativity. My soul prospered, despite the Northmen periodically raiding our monasteries. I’d hoped to subsist quietly, indefinitely, as an Irish monk.

“But all the while I was in denial of Zahrah’s effect on my inner life. It would have been ultimately living a lie, in unrepentant sin, as the monks reckon it, because I’d never shed my love for her, nor could I stop tasting the pungency of her absence. ‘Morose delectation,’ my Augustinian abbot Father Aidan called it: he was not pleased. In time I felt myself something of a fraud too, hiding my subtle double life from these good, simple men. Eventually I surrendered the life of a monastic and returned to the sunny Mediterranean, this time to Italy (or what was left of it). Perhaps I brought some of that humility back with me—I’m not really sure.”

ix.

“I settled in Tuscany, gravitating ultimately to sun-baked Florence, a welcome change from the damps of Connemara—it reminded me a bit of old beloved Alexandria. Once again, I became a horse merchant and breeder, seeking a solitary life: writing, sketching, taking quiet twilit rides along the Arno’s bee-loud banks.

“After a time, I befriended a writer named Francesco di Petracco: a brilliant and industrious poet, passionate, genuinely inspired. We read together almost every day; we’d sometimes share our commentaries on Cicero’s letters, or translate Homer by lamplight. I cherished his wit and introspection—a richly companionable man.

“In his later years he traveled quite a bit, eventually settling in Fontaine-de-Vaucluse in France, where I continued corresponding with him. Francesco and I shared a special bond, see, in our frustrated

loves. Everyone in Florence knew the story of his Laura, whom he spied just once, years before in church, at a distance, marrying another man, and yet loved her obsessively for the rest of his life . . . ”

“Ok, now you’re talking about Petrarch, right? The poet who ushered in the Renaissance by inventing the sonnet, the poetry about forbidden love . . . ”

“Yeah, well . . . that was actually me . . . ”

“Oh come, now! The sonnet?”

“Yes, alright, I know it was wrong, publishing the *Rime Sparse* in Francesco’s name; I loved my verses but had no stomach for placing them before an audience, or building a following. I gambled, rightly in the end, that he would be pleased with the poems; but Gods, he was furious at first! I think he found a gang of thugs he could hire to castrate me, like poor Abelard; but of course I soothed him, eventually, and kept my balls,” he chuckled. “And the poetry became so popular that he was forced to accept it as part of his corpus, a central pillar of his fame, in fact.

“You see, the whole ‘Laura’ set-up was perfect for me—and ‘Zarah’ to ‘Laura’ is an easy transition in fluid, musical Italian. It was fun, writing all those poems: a great project to let me vent my feelings and explore what tragic love was doing to my psyche. I think poets were never able to search deeply inside our souls, until we started writing about lost, impossible love. It’s as if depicting that doomed love mirrors our fears of inadequacy; we can search through the foul rag and bone shop of our heart and confront the void resting at its center.

“And Francesco, ‘Petrarch’ as you know him, always coupled poetry with immortality, how his poems made his beloved, and his fame, eternal—so again his style and concerns came naturally to me, your friendly neighborhood immortal, haha. I just needed to copy his diction, his cadences, to add his voice to my verses; and, of course, for that I had all the time in the world.

“None of us expected how Europe would seize upon the sonnet’s world of forbidden love—it flourished everywhere, and particularly here in England: truly moving work by Wyatt and Surrey, Sidney, Drayton, Spenser, and finally Shakespeare, who deeply understands the essence of love and loss and loneliness:

*Love’s not time’s fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle’s compass come.
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.*

“The man who could feel this is truly my soul’s brother. That’s why I moved to London, following my sonnets.”

x.

He’s been stacking neglected vanilla wafers, making towers that fall over, and then rebuilding them absently. “I like English. It’s the best language for sorrow, even though Tao Chi and Neruda have written gorgeous, heart-wrenching stuff. I prefer the nutty crispness of English consonants—reminds me of my old Ge’ez—a rich tongue of pithy nuggets. I enjoyed my afternoons standing with the groundlings in the Globe, letting Will Shakespeare’s iambs wash over me like rain. And so many others have found eloquence within this rough tongue. Keats, Dickinson, Melville, Hemingway, and Hardy are favorites, of course, but I also like writers who understand the glories and terrors of eternity. Blake is totally off his chump but he’s quite beautiful. And James Joyce understands how we can love others deeply—or comically—while remaining utterly alone, pursuing a never-ending, solitary journey over a vast, unknowable void . . . ”

“But hey,” he says, abruptly rising, “Look at the time—shouldn’t you be getting back to conservation? I’m grateful that you’re such an indulgent listener, but I’ve taken up too much of your

afternoon. Let's go back by way of the sixties, shall we? Then you can drop me off where you found me; let me just grab my satchel."

As we walk down the stairs he chatters cheerfully on. "Yeah, I shouldn't have given Cathy the Full Monty the way I did—but it was really her own doing. We were texting last night about our exes, you see, and after much insistence and teasing I foolishly said, 'My old girlfriend's right here in London—we can meet her tomorrow at the BM, and then we'll head off on our weekend.' Cathy was so excited! More ammunition for more teasing, I guess, but of course I misjudged the whole . . . well, it's my fault for expecting too much of her so early in the morning.

"You, on the other hand," he says, squeezing my shoulder, "you have a properly informed context and perspective."

I say nothing, still mulling over his incredible narrative. What do I think? We walk together in silence until we reach the main floor.

"I guess it shocked Cathy to see her like that, so small and compact, so insubstantial. She's heavier than she looks, though, and bulky too. I always had to add extra layers of protection, to cushion the portrait, of course—that's a genuine treasure, as I'm sure you'd agree, *Monsieur Conservateur*."

Leaning over, he whispers—suddenly a conspirator—in my ear, "When I said I was 'humping' the burden of love, I wasn't being entirely figurative, you see."

xi.

We regain the central vestibule, turn towards Room 66, and walk on. "We knew the artist, of course; he first made portraits in Hawara, but moved to Alexandria, setting up his stall in the *agora* across from Zahrah's. He really, really fancied her, the weaselly little shit. He had maybe three teeth left in his head, but I was tempted to knock them all out more than once.

"His name was Ammon, but styled himself as 'Ammon-Ra the Magnificent.' Such utter bollocks. He'd hang around Zahrah's stall every day, inviting her to his 'studio' for a 'sitting'; there was no getting rid of him, so we eventually had to accept him as a friend. Zahrah laughed him off with her usual gorgeous smile, saying he was hilarious and a good tonic after a long day. Sleazy little cunt: but a deft hand with his brush, as you will see. He sketched Zahrah often when she was alive, so when she died, I commissioned this last portrait from him. Wouldn't hear of taking his fee, I'll give him that: 'a gift to her memory,' he said, sobbing, 'to aid her journey through Osiris's kingdom.'

"Well, here we are," he says, standing among the Fayum exhibits of room 62, and turning to face display case 17. "My bright dove, would you care to meet my new friend?"

I recognize her instantly—one of our prized artifacts in very fine condition—but I never really looked at her before, never saw *her*, until now. The burnished tawny skin; lush sable braids; enormous eyes, limpid and brimming deep as with rainwater; the playful but restrained smile that makes the Mona Lisa's seem banal. That tender gaze: numinous, captivating, charged with current like a Tesla coil.

As I stare, a half-forgotten verse floats to me unbidden:

*Rise up my love, my fair one, and come away;
for lo, the winter is past, the rains are over and gone . . .*

Zarah's golden eyes, interrogated, seem to respond: *Yes, and yes, always; why must you ask? My beloved is mine, and I am his: he is the young hart of the mountains who feedeth among the lilies, even in Room 62 of the British Museum. Who are you small, trifling men, to set an expiration date to longing, to the deathless search for the pearl of price? Will you but look, look here, as my beloved gratifies the ache of desire by appealing, through the fog of two thousand years, to a light momentarily seized in lineaments of lime wood, color, line, and shadow?*

xii.

Wait a moment: hadn't I been the one in Collection Care who updated her description a while back? It's probable that I did the MR imaging myself. I find the catalogue card below and read with washed eyes:

Object Type: Mummy with portrait

Museum acquisition number: EA363914

Description: Mummy of a young girl with lime wood panel bearing portrait in encaustic and tempera. The portrait represents a girl with long braided black hair, light brown eyes, and dark eyebrows, dressed in a white tunic and blue mantle. The painter has taken care to create shading effects on the skin, using individual brush strokes.

Cultures/periods: Egypt, Roman Period

Production date: 80-120 Common Era

Excavation / Findspot: Hawara, Africa: Egypt: Fayum, el- (Governorate): Hawara

Mummy materials: human tissue, linen, wood

Mummy dimensions: height 1.5748 metres; width 78.70 centimetres at widest point; estimated body mass 43-48 kilograms at time of death

Skull: Mouth slightly open, teeth intact and whole. No fractures. The cervical spine appears to be intact.

Thorax and Abdomen: These cavities appear to be empty. There is an opacity near the upper right ribcage, and a hairline fracture on number seven rib, both possibly indicative of pneumothorax. Minor pulmonary and spinal lesions compatible with mycobacterium tuberculosis. No other obvious fractures of ribs or spinal column.

Arms: Extended. Hands with extended fingers, palms upon the outer aspect of the thighs. A broad metal band or bangle on right brachium. A thin metal ring, without jewel setting, on left hand, fourth finger.

Pelvis and Hips: No evidence of childbearing in sacroiliac joints or pelvic girdle, nor any observable widening of pubic symphysis indicative of pregnancy.

Legs: Appear normal. No fractures or lines of arrested growth.

Portrait materials: limewood, beeswax, egg, oil

Technique: encaustic, tempera

Portrait dimensions: height 35.80 centimetres; thickness 0.15 centimetres; width 20.75 centimetres

Location: On display, G62 / dc17

Acquisition name: Donated by Anonymous

Acquisition date: 1931

xiii.

I can't speak; in fact, I'm having trouble standing, so I grab Hager's arm to steady myself.

"Let's sit and rest a bit, shall we?" he says; smiling, he pats my hand, and tenderly guides me to sit next to him on the bench.

"See, my friend, I've finally laid my love's burden down, right here. Giving her to the BM was actually Colonel Lawrence's idea and, as always, he gave good advice. I met Ned at Oxford, you see, years before he led the Arab Revolt against the Turks in the Great War; he managed some archeological digs in Syria and Lebanon on behalf of the BM and the Ashmolean, and asked me to tag along.

He taught me about crusader castles and medieval military tactics, while I helped him with his languages under the cypresses, much as my sovereign mistress did for me, so many years ago. Such

a marvelously kind, noble-minded fellow, and a strong writer. How I miss his witty conversation! That film portrait of him was very grand but completely missed the mark as far as his character: they understood nothing of the man. But that's Hollywood for you, isn't it?

"Anyway, after the war we met here often to pursue our studies, and he finally persuaded me to give Zarah up to your care; and such exceptional, devoted care it has proven to be, truly. Your whole team is to be commended, and you personally, my friend. Yes, I did worry, some, during the Blitz, about the Jerrys sending over a V2 rocket to blow her up; but the BM survived that threat alright, didn't you? Anyway, she's safe here for the time being—I can count on you to see to that, can't I?"

I make replying sounds, though haltingly, as in a dream: "Yes, yes, of course . . . it'd be my honor, entirely . . . She is the Rose of Sharon and the lily of the valley, the lily amongst the thorns . . . and her banner over us is love."

"Thank you, my friend."

We sit silent for some time.

"My passion for Zarah these days is as fierce as ever, but I'm finding that words are failing me at last. I tried to fashion verses for her in the style of *Finnegans Wake*, like the lines on Nuvoletta, 'in her light dress, spunn of sisteen shimmers,' but nothing comes. To say truth, I think I'm finally drained, done at last with art and poetry, with memories and daydreams, and pointless morose delectation."

Nowadays, I'm turning my energies elsewhere. I'm especially curious about genetic engineering, especially the latest scientific advances in mapping the human genome, and CRISPR technology. Have you read of this? The possibilities are endless, wouldn't you say? Forget the fantasies of the *Jurassic Park* stories; just think of the human DNA available right here," gesturing to the exhibits around us.

"I know," he says, with that catch in his voice again. "I know that cloning her DNA won't bring back the Zahrah I remember; but what I wouldn't do to enter a room and see her without looking, once again. Yes, I see you looking at me with pity, as if I were Tantalus in Homer's underworld, forever standing in a pool of water, unable to reach the surface to sip. But this is hope, my friend, a real hope in the powers of the new science. What if her clone looks like her, or secretes her pheromones and smells like her, maybe even smiles as she used to?"

"I don't know," he says, gesturing wildly, with a touch of despair, "Maybe her clone would have the chance to age gracefully at last; I could see when and how her hair starts to grey, unbraid her old-lady's braids, over and over and over, kiss her wrinkled temples, her pruned lips, her cold arthritic feet. Who knows what's possible these days?"

"In fact," he says, squaring his shoulders as I have seen him do so often by now, "I just might become a proper genetic researcher myself; why could I not situate myself on the cutting edge of biotechnology? Cathy comes from Boston, the heart of this new research; if I ever patch things up with her, we might go there together."

"Maybe I'd find some decent stables, where I could ride as I used to—Gods, it's been so long since I've held reins in my hands! Maybe I could breed horses, as in the old days, and spend afternoons thinking while riding the trails along the Charles."

"I could enroll at MIT and Harvard, pick up a few biochemistry degrees, and work the problem myself. And in the meanwhile, my radiant one can remain secure, here in room 62, under your watchful, caring eye. She will wait a little bit longer, for my work's fruition. Yes, I think it's possible; why couldn't I make that happen? I really have all the time in the world."

* * * * *

Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Notes from New England

*“Please accept this ragged purse
of high notes.”*

The following continues the series originally called Notes from New England, begun in issue 24-25 (Winter 1998), then revived in issue 59 (October 2006) as Notes from the Northwest, & appearing since issue 75 (October 2010) under its original title. It is intended as a gathering-place for observations of various lengths upon the world around me. It will be culled, like much of my writing, from my notebooks, and perhaps these thoughts will be expanded upon sometimes as well.

* * * * *

The Great Grand Braided Narrative [Gr. Gr. Br. N. for friendly], Part 4

*Note: The following is a continuation of:
Part 1: Cenacle | 118 | December 2021;
Part 2: Cenacle | 120 | Summer 2022; &
Part 3: Cenacle | 126 | Winter 2025.*

i.

December 2025 & I had thought I'd completed this work by now. And, to the event that reuniting the Six Brother-Heroes on Abe the Ancient Sea Turtle's Beach of Many Worlds was my goal, I hit it pretty much. All six narratives of the *Tangled Gate Mythopoeia—Labyrinthine, Many Musics, Bags End News, Dream Raps, Creature/Travelers Tales, & Great Heroes of Yore Adventures*—have braided to reunite the Brother-Heroes—The King, Roddy, Asoyadonna, Odom, Francisco, & Dreamwalker.

But here's where it veers beyond original intent. As I mentioned back in *Part 1*, my goal was to answer my persisting question of: *“what happened to the Six Brothers who had traveled years to find the Island of the Tangled Gate, in order to enter the Cave of the Beast, & somehow save the world?”* Turns out that answering this question became part of a much larger, & longer, story.

What I didn't know clearly then is what would happen after their reunion, aside from gladness & new adventures.

Turns out that the “new adventures” discovered to them that their try at “saving the world” had been a kind of dry run for their real challenge: saving the “Many Worlds of the Star Spiral.”

You see, upon returning together, with their many Creature & people-folks friends, from Abe's Beach



of Many Worlds, along the Deeper Deeper Sea, below the Deep Deep Sea, to the White Woods & the Thought Fleas' Rutabaga Festival & Fleastock, the Brother-Heroes learned of a kind of cosmic crisis.

ii.

This crisis involves several important aspects. One is an ancient, & again relevant *Great Story* of *Evolution*. *Synthesis*. *Ferment*. As explained in *Labyrinthine*:

Long ago, in the time before time, was *Unitive Time*. How this came to be the oldest books call *Evolution*. What this all really is, is still a mystery. The Star Spiral of the Many Worlds were clustered much closer together, a kind of *Synthesis*.

Then came a *Wobble*, what the oldest books also call *Ferment*. Called one or the other, it's when something breaks down or changes into *many* things over time.

The Many Worlds of the clustered Star Spiral spooked & fled from the *Wobble*. This was the next *Evolution*. They eventually evolved into the more familiar curving spread of stars & worlds known & loved so well in the *Mythopoeia*. Thus the next *Synthesis*.

Then came the *Great Violence*. Was it caused by a *Wobble* too? No known books tell of this. But this seemed to be the next *Ferment* in which all in the Star Spiral was nearly consumed. There were Great Heroes [Gate-Keeper's Mentor & his strange Yellow Building compatriot, among others] who saved all they could, even as most of them were consumed too. Those they saved came to live in one place, one world not destroyed. Some called it *Arcadia*. But its true name is *Emandia*. This was *Evolution*.

The world of Emandia long long existed alone. Then it began to decay in body & spirit. So the Emandians sent the select of their population to find other worlds to live on. By spaceships, by Red Bags, by other means too. 36 worlds in the Star Spiral were targeted. This was *Synthesis*.

Then one of the Emandian spaceships struck a fragment of *Wobble* from the Great Violence [this was Gate-Keeper's people]. And this fragment then broke into countless *Wobbles* occurring in the *Mythopoeia* stories. *Ferment*.

The Six Brother-Heroes are, in sum & simple, tasked to protect the Many Worlds, as Great Heroes had tried to before.

So the Brother-Heroes reunite on Abe's Beach of Many Worlds, & then return to the Festival for a very short victory celebration. I can say for sure that the conception of the *Great Story* came well along this *Gr. Gr. Br. N.*'s telling, & yet have furthered the stories along sensibly. I wasn't going to bring back these Brother-Heroes for no good reason!

And then this *Great Story* further led to new travels to Imagianna, its Castle's *Room of Song*.

iii.

Imagine a place of timelessly ancient wisdom; so ancient that it does not exist on paper; it exists in strange contained spaces; & it cannot be retrieved by memory; it must be retrieved via something cherished by the visitor. And the challenge, then, is *what*? And how to read it after?

I wrote in *Part 2* that once the Brother-Heroes were reunited:

[T]hey will travel with Gate-Keeper down the Deeper Deeper Sea to the Great Tree at the Heart of the World. There is a Hut nearby, where until recently the King dwelled in exile. Its interior walls are frozen rainbow waterfalls that, seen through properly, allow one live passage to long-ago Unitive Time. By coming here, & in part studying the Great Tree from dawn to dusk, the Brothers may learn why they were Wobbled far from one another; & also perhaps how they can help Gate-Keeper free his home-world's clan.

And they would eventually return to their Kingdom by the Wide Wide Sea where once, briefly, they had happily dwelled. Instead, they are each currently traveling a *Room of Song*, to learn (I think) how they can help save the Many Worlds of the Star Spiral.

I expect they will then travel back to the Festival, to join in the celebrations there. There again will be a stretch when all six *Tangled Gate Mythopoeia* narratives will travel together, through the Festival.

From there I am guessing that the Brother-Heroes, with the Gate-Keeper & Schola' Dan'l, will travel back to the Cave of the Beast in the Tangled Gate, again to encounter the Beast, & perhaps learn why they were Wobbled apart long ago, & spent so long in finding their reunion.

And then they were travel to the Great Tree at the Heart of the Many Worlds. Will this be where finally they *save* the Many Worlds?

Not alone. A theme rising up in these narratives is that *we each & all save each other*. Nobody is *exempt*, & nobody is *unable*. Perhaps, if I only wrote about the Brother-Heroes, it would be different.

iv.

But they are not like Frodo Baggins & Samwise Gamgee in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*—helped by others but, ultimately, obliged to save their world themselves. I love *LOTR*, but I think that the *Tangled Gate Mythopoeia* is more like L. Frank Baum's *Wizard of Oz* books, where there are many heroes, of all kinds & shapes & sizes, to help save the day.

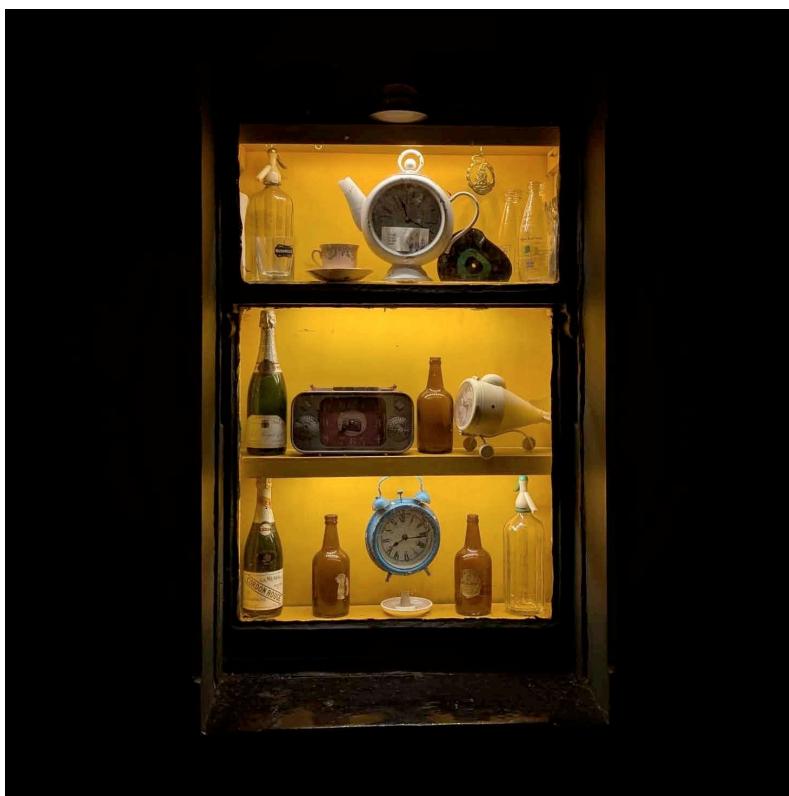
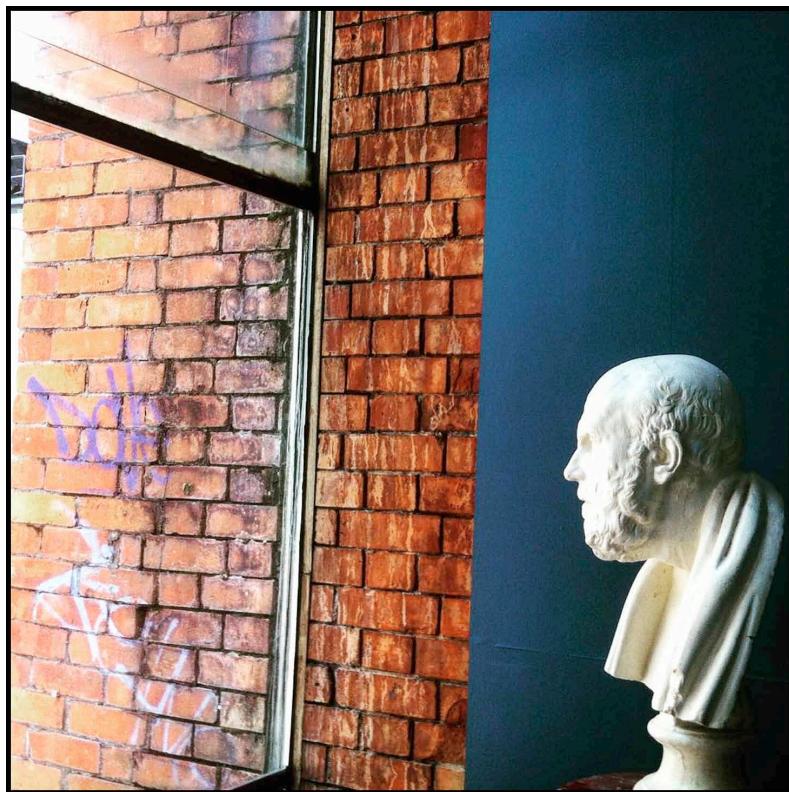
Nor is “the day” saved once. *Evolution. Synthesis. Ferment.* is an ongoing pattern, though variable in its manifestations. There will always be another “day” to be saved, sooner or later.

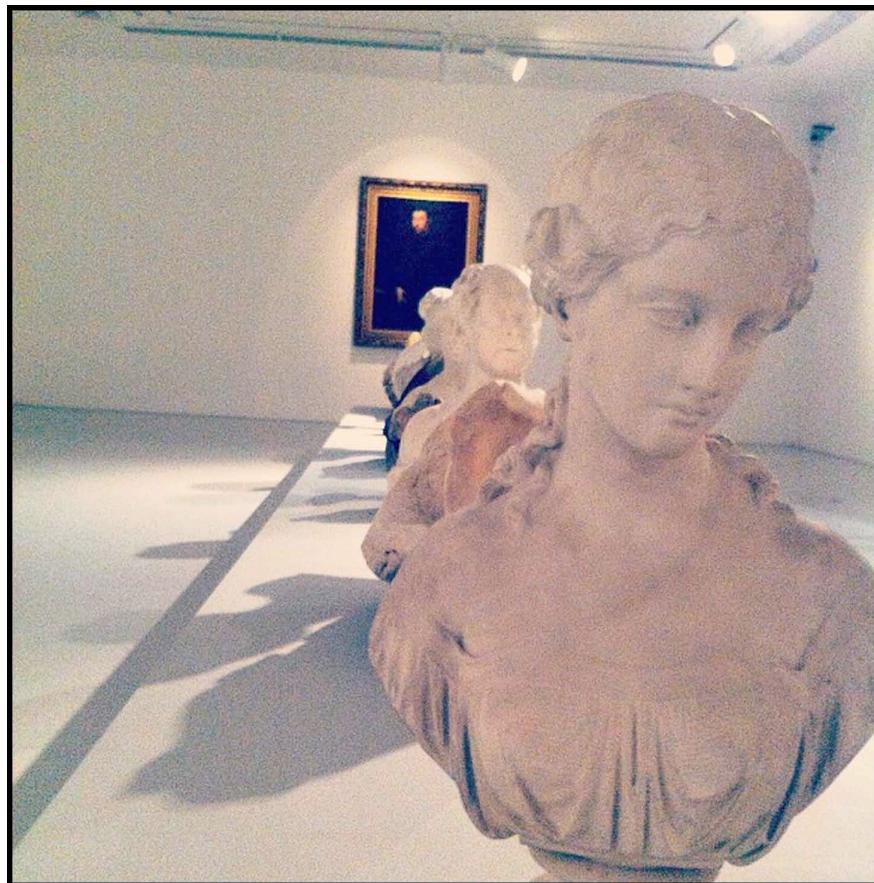
And will then there be a *Part 5* of these *Notes*? I think: probably. At some point, the time will be right to check in here again.

So, yes, I didn't think I'd still have so much to continue with this. But, yes as well, I'm glad I do. It means there's still endless juice to these tales, & the key thing is: *keep going*. The philosophy I ever abide by is: *the work has to matter*. The creative ferment seek ever to breach any bounds.

As Mister Algernon Beagle, Editor of *Bags End News*, says often: “Write it straight & true.” *No other way to bother.*

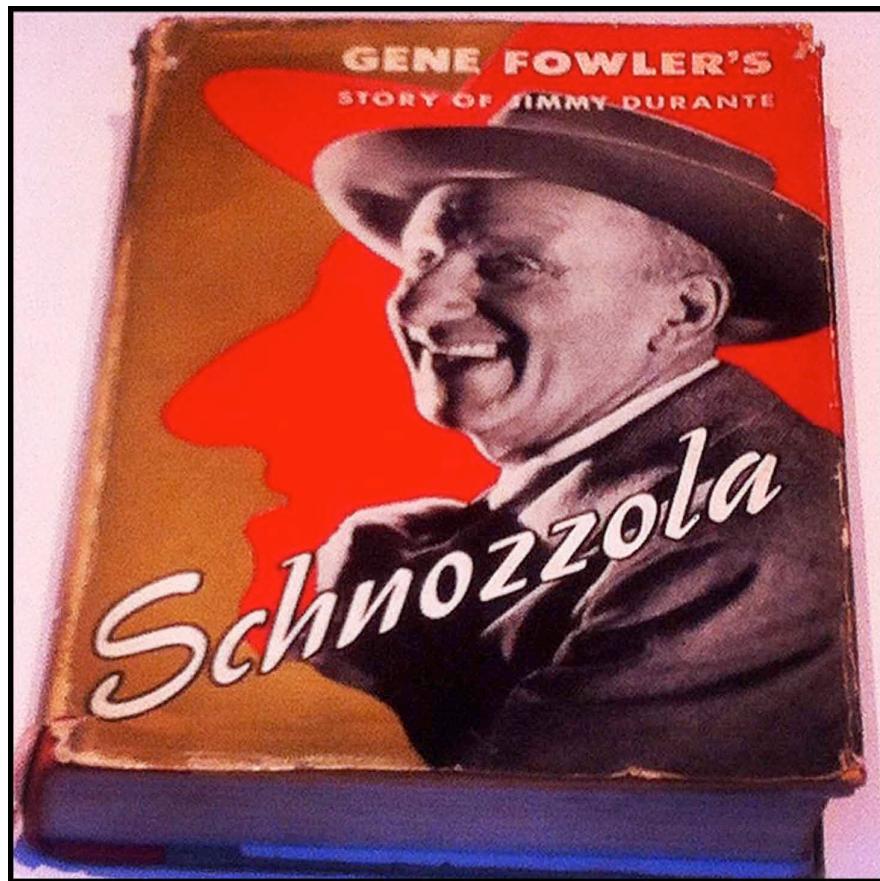
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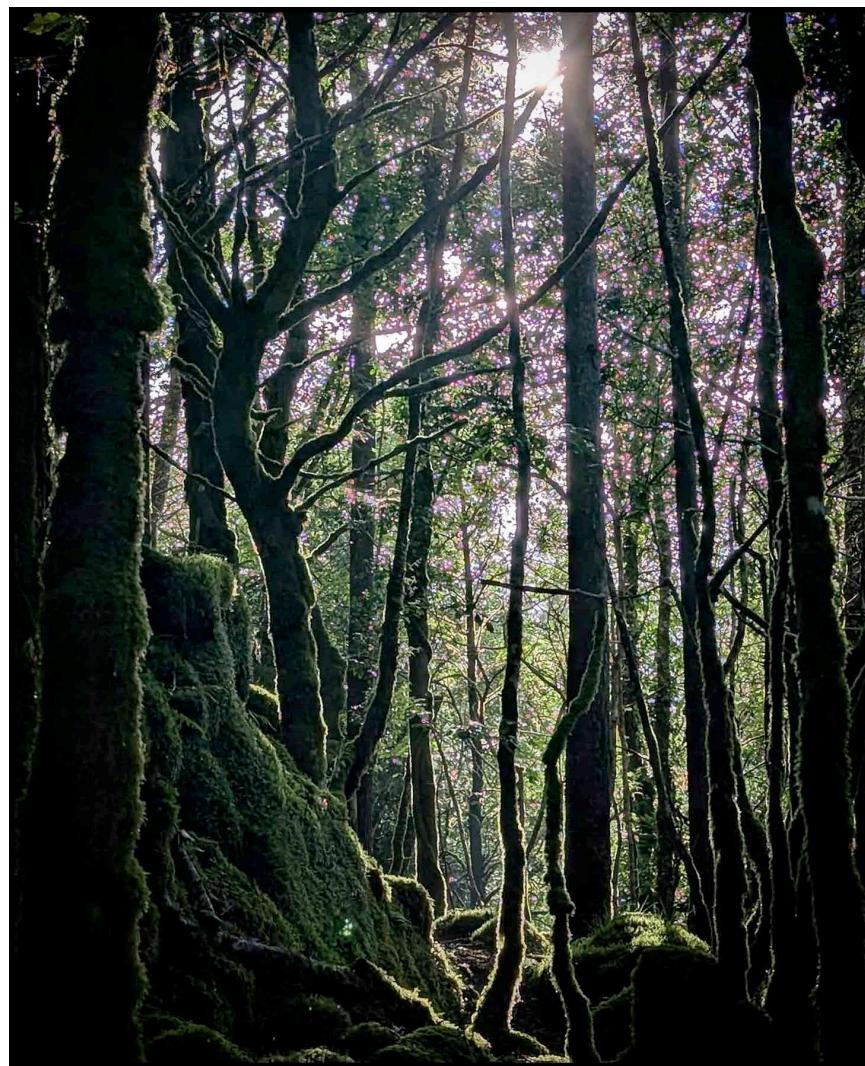
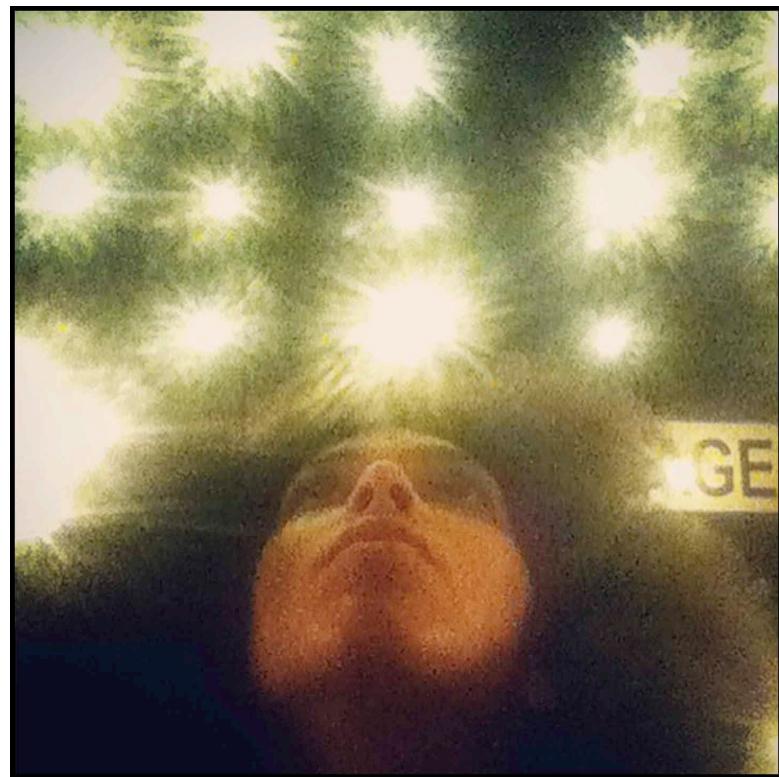
Epi Rogan













The Yearly Meeting, and a Rainstorm

[Travel Journal]

i.

Cesario, Joaquina, and Cesar are in town for the yearly meeting. I'm with them at Raúl the schoolmaster's house. Raúl's wife Rubiela is cooking breakfast, boiling plantains for chucula and scrambling eggs in a wide aluminum pan. Cesario has gotten over his illness, whatever it was, and is resplendent in white tunic, necklaces, beaded crown, rubber boots, huge dark sunglasses, frazzles of fragrant bark stuck in his bead bracelets, and huge, pink hibiscus flowers stuck through the holes in his earlobes.

“¡Ay! Caramba!” he exclaims with bittersweet amusement *a propos* of something they've been talking about in Paicoca. Lucy Lucitande, Raúl's niece, Marcial's daughter, lurks in the doorway, peering in, looking sleek in her *101 Dalmatians* shirt and pants. She's thirteen, and dimpled, ironic and strong-willed, like her big brother Apolo.

Now I'm at the meeting, sitting next to Rocky Payaguaje and his son. They live across the river from Cesario. The main language of the meeting is Paicoca, so it's impossible to follow closely. I'm also sitting next to Lucho Payaguaje. A representative of the Catholic organization Fondo Ecuatoriano Populorum Progressio (FEPP) just explained in Spanish that his group wouldn't immediately be able to repair some broken parts of the water purification system they installed. Secoyas discuss the topic in Paicoca.

In the beginning, there was a lot of feedback between the microphone and the amplifiers, but they've gotten it under control. Still a lot of noise from the generator. A bare light bulb hangs off a roof beam near the blackboard. The amplification and the illumination are both superfluous. I believe the Secoyas are running the machines to study them, and to practice the ways of city people.

ii.

Last night, Cesario and Joaquina were staying in the hut with Dietmar and me. From a neighbor, I bought a chicken and beheaded it. Cesario showed me how to dip it in boiling water to make it easier to pluck. We had chicken soup with yuca and chili peppers. Having lent my sleeping mat to Cesario, I had to wake halfway up to turn over and find comfortable positions, and thus remembered a lot of nighttime dramas. Here's one:

I'm watching an old, scruffy white man walking down a sidewalk in a rundown part of a U.S. city. The camera follows him as he reaches the end of the sidewalk, which curls around and continues upside-down, like a treadmill. I understand that this represents the end of his life on earth, and his continued existence in a hidden dimension 180 degrees from this one. The treadmill-sidewalk on which he's walking becomes a strip of film. He continues walking upside-down into the Great Machine Itself, a giant film projector that projects all reality. Finally, he's going to see for himself how it works. He stands there, looking around at all the moving parts. At this moment gravity reverses (again) and he falls headfirst into a swimming pool within the machine. He surfaces and speaks: “Existence isn't always easy, but we're always learning.”

I figure that's how death could come to someone: A guy's walking down the street, has a heart attack, and dies, but in his mind, in his soul, he leaves his body behind and keeps walking. It's like that

other dream I had about my friend Virgil eating cabbages and waves. Verge hadn't realized he was dead and, in a dreamlike way, had begun adapting to his new environment.

iii.

Rocky's son Gabriel is sitting to my right, putting his face down on the desk, folding his arms, rubbing his eyes, looking out the window, picking at his face while looking at the speaker, Justino Piaguaje, one of Serafín's sons, who is sharply dressed in a white shirt with a collar, gray pants, and black shoes. He's very dignified, though only nineteen or twenty.

Justino and a couple of other guys are at the blackboard going over the finances of a cultural rescue project. The oil company has given money to enable the Secoyas to gather and tape record old stories. Each month, Domingo the pastor gets \$250, his younger brother Dagoberto gets \$120, Domingo's daughter Leila gets \$160, and Matilde's son Aurelio gets \$100—and Aurelio has to share with his sister Rita and their mom. The question is whether to restructure this pay scale.

The discussion is over quickly. There's a vote, and Domingo is stripped of his entire salary.

Just then, Domingo rides up on a brown horse, walks inside, and is informed of this development. He's calm, nodding his head, silent.

A bit later, Serafín, in Spanish, discusses the encyclopedia of Secoya culture that he and Domingo have been writing, and Dagoberto, their younger brother, passes around photocopies of pen-and-ink drawings he's done for it. A mention of Serafín's section on shamanism leads to a warm outburst by a *mestizo* I don't know.

Big, dark, and fury, his hair in tight black ringlets, he seems half teddy bear and half Ché Guevara. He bangs on a table and proclaims that shamanism is a legitimate religious alternative. Rocky whispers to me that he is Manuel Pereira, the head of Lago Agrio's Casa de Cultura. Pereira loudly goes on that Paicoca should become an important literary language; *Don Quixote* and other classic novels should be translated into it. This is absurd, and none of the Secoyas know what he's talking about, but they listen patiently and attentively.

Lunch for everyone is tuna and rice. I introduce myself to Manuel. He and Dagoberto and I eat together, sitting on a log under an overcast sky. Manuel and I fall into the role of pagan missionaries, trying to convince Dagoberto that shamanism is a good thing, but he isn't buying it. "There's too much witchcraft," he asserts. "Plus, it's against the will of God."

"If it's against God's will, why does it exist at all?" I counter.

He gives me the standard answer: "God lets us do what we want. We can choose to obey him or not."

When the meeting gets out, Domingo and I chat. He mentions, as he did the last time we spoke, that he's involved in a lawsuit against a US-based oil company for polluting land while they were drilling near here two decades ago. I'm baffled by this because he's supposedly one of the pro-drilling people now.

iv.

The next morning, my pagan brother and fellow literature buff Manuel Pereira of the Casa de Cultura and the Catholic staff from FEPP uprivered to Chiritzá and Lago, while Cesario, Joaquina, and Cesar downrivered to Supernatura.

The sky was alien-gray. After lunch, a sporadic rain began, low reptile clouds stuttering moist myths with visible, tactile voices. And then . . . *A huge rainstorm commences.*

Álvaro, the president of the community, and his uncle Rolando the outboard motor expert with a fluorescent light tube in his hut are visiting Dietmar and me.

Sitting with this notebook in my lap, I say, "I'm trying to decide what to write about."

Álvaro says, "Why don't you write about the rain?"
 "Hmm," I say. I write, *Thunderclouds are great, dark thesauruses showering words on us.*
 Then I cross out the "are," so it reads, *Thunderclouds great, dark thesauruses showering words on us.*

Raising his voice over the rain, Rolando mentions to Dietmar that a European tour leader told him a few days ago that in Africa a rhinoceros recently killed a guide.

"*Chuta*," exclaims Dietmar.

This word is a euphemism for *chucha*, which means "cunt." *Chuta* is used to express mild amazement, *chucha* for something stronger.

Dietmar adds, "Yes, in Africa there are some animals that are very . . . "

Lightning flashes. He trails off, searching for an adjective. *Boom!* goes the thunder.

"Savage?" suggests Rolando.

"Yes," says Dietmar, though that wasn't the word he was looking for. "Very . . ." he says, then finds it: "Dangerous. There is a snake called the python, even bigger than the anaconda."

Rolando whistles.

Lightning flashes.

Thunder booms.

* * * * *





Martina Reisz Newberry



Martina Reisz Newberry

There Are Days, You See

If you walk up to Franklin, then beyond
to Los Feliz Blvd, the road leads
past gardener-ed lawns and mansions to the hills
where, after an uphill climb, you are in a part
of the mountains which disguise themselves
as a “park.” There are snakes in yellow
grasses, rattling out their lives, waiting for
your misstep, and there are purple Finch and

Cinnamon Teal sharing a seat on the chaparral
and scrub, watching you, wanting a crumb
or two from your sack lunch. Sad that some places,
though natural, are not as comely
as they want to be. Dry is dry and cracked
earth is ugly no matter where you find it.
There are days, you see, when everywhere you
turn reminds you of lava rocks, bubbling

mud pots (although there are none there). You’ll see
the city as you climb—concrete, glass, steel—
and, still, more lush than the hills where you stand.
The street names vie for room in your head and
you rattle them off: Franklin, Normandie,
Hollywood Blvd, Vermont, Sunset . . .
The wind will die in the afternoon
and you will be armed with aching legs

and the desire to hurry back and join your
city, make some noise, drink a drink or two.
In the stirring and stammering of a
restaurant or bar or a restaurant
that has a bar, you’ll think of your morning
walk and wonder about the rattling of
snakes below the hills, of streets, of signs,
of sacraments—their noises and their heat.

* * * * *



Madelaine Taylah

Madelaine Taylah



Doors & Dreams

[A Fictional Work in Progress]

i.

I am searching for Doors.

For gateways and pathways and *any*-ways between. I suppose you already know what I am referring to. I would not be surprised if you have found your own Doors or In-betweens at some point. Likely when you were a child. Yes, that always seems to be the case. What was it that Picasso said? *That every child is an Artist, but the problem is how to remain an Artist once we grow up?*

This inexplicably applies to finding Doors, too. I am curious by the existence of these Doors. Are they always there? Do they move? Do people *create* them, or manifest them? If I and somebody else walked through the same Door, would we see the same thing? How about the Doorways that are not arches in the woods, or caves beneath a sea?

What about the Doorways between periods in time? The thresholds between childhood and adulthood? How about the state of Waking? Where consciousness and unconsciousness meet?

Perhaps Dreaming is the most accessible Door.

ii.

The walls of the cave stretched taller than any cavern Celaena had seen before. She took a tentative step forward, allowing the beauty of the cave to engulf her. Along the sloping walls were lines of amethyst. There were no gaps in the jagged ceiling, no crevices or cracks to allow for any kind of light to filter through. No. The crystals were glowing as if by their own magick. *She had never seen such a thing.* For crystals to emit their own luminescence, and so brightly, it seemed impossible.

Beyond, the throat of the cave was as dark as obsidian, and Celaena hugged herself at the menacing breeze that beckoned her to follow it into the darkness. The cave looked as though it had once been underwater, and now only half submerged. The dark mirror in the centre as if a portal to another realm. Its pool of water was motionless—ageless.

“Where are we?” her brother asked.

“I don’t know,” she answered, touching the cool and damp stone. Pebbles shuffled beneath her feet.

“Have you ever seen such a beautiful place?” her father wondered.

Before she could answer her father, a groan so ancient it raised every hair on her body, rumbled throughout the cavern. Silence. They waited, quiet and assessing.

“What the hell was that?” her father asked. The pool of water shimmered and began to stir, and the

groan returned louder this time, closer. Breaking from the surface of the inky black rose a beast, the tips of its bulbous head inches away from the eroding stalactites on the ceiling.

“Run!” their father roared, but the beast had already set its large eyes upon them.

iii.

All was darkness and ice. And Celaena couldn’t remember how they had secured the wooden rowboat which now floated metres from the cave’s external entrance.

“We have to row faster,” she screamed. But her tiny arms could not help her father, who already had a bead of sweat coating his forehead. Her brother, even smaller than her and four years younger, could do nothing but grip the edges of the boat. The beast was one from her nightmares. Its flesh had been a damp purple that faded into sickly grey, with giant tentacles that had begun flanking after years of ancient slumber.

Whatever they had woken—and however they had woken it, was not happy. Celaena hadn’t noticed the frigidness of the Arctic sea breeze until the waves appeared to cease. The stillness around her was unnatural. Her stomach dropped a heartbeat before the beast appeared again, towering over their puny boat. It appeared even larger outside of the cave somehow. Droplets of the sea rained down upon them as the beast raised its tentacles above its head, poising to strike.

All was darkness and Celaena couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t find her way back to the surface. The creature had grabbed hold of Celaena’s brother and pulled him beneath the depths of the sea. Her brother. *Oh gods—oh gods, where was he?*

iv.

Celaena didn’t even think before she dove back under the water to find her brother. Didn’t inhale a deep breath. She was more likely to drown before finding him. And her father—*where was her father?* She remembered he had immediately jumped in to save him, despite his paralysing fear of the ocean. Had jumped in to retrieve him, had told her to make it to shore somewhere and—there, she found him. Bundled in the unforgiving tentacles of the Kraken. That’s what it was called, she remembered, a *Kraken*.

Forced to come up for air, Celaena sputtered as she threw up salt and sea. She had to get back down there. She didn’t have time for the panic to freeze her. Render her useless. So she dove, with a deeper breath this time, and was met with the impossible. The Kraken had her father in one arm, her brother in the other.

At least, it *had*. The space where her brother was held captive began to shiver and glow, and in his place appeared a large yellow fish with a piranha-like mouth. *What had just happened?* Without thinking, Celaena screamed, and lunged for her father and, in doing so, inhaled lungfuls of water.

She couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t breathe, and her father was changing, too. He stopped thrashing, and his stare became blank. The eerie glow casted itself around him, and the arm around his waist gripped tighter as yellow scales replaced his flesh.

All was darkness. And when Celaena opened her eyes, and found she was in her own bed, she couldn’t breathe.

* * * * *



Raymond Soulard, Jr.

Many Musics

Twelfth Series

*"I tell you, there are more worlds,
and more doors to them,
than you will think of in many years!"
— George MacDonald, *Lilith*, 1895.*

xxviii. Three Days

We croon & croon this long night together,
& it feels like we will never stop crooning together,
& it feels like we never *should* stop.

This Beach of Many World has, I reckon, many things
to show us, memories for us we do not
yet possess, from a past we have not yet arrived to.

These dear ones watch me close, wonder more
my story. Each face its own beauty yet
share a deep ruddy love for me & each other.

Our crooning reminds me back to other memories
I've barely possessed until now, of those three days
I spent in the Cave of the Beast.

I look at Roddy's handsomely carved face &
sudden speak aloud. "Was it three days in there?"
He nods slowly, knowing my meaning. "It was."

"For a long time, I did not know you in the same way."
He nods again. "Nor anyone else. Nor the world."
The others croon on to maintain our place, but listen.

I close my eyes, fall away deeper into myself,
still scrabbling for a hold. The Crooning travels
down close with me, pushing covers away.

“I’ve long wondered those days in the Cave of the Beast,
tried even to dream my way back to them.”
Dreamwalker starts a bit, smirking offers me his *hekk* stick.

Smiling him, I accept his gesture, its indigo glowing.
“They changed me. I know not how they did.
Urged me return for answers, when I am ready.”

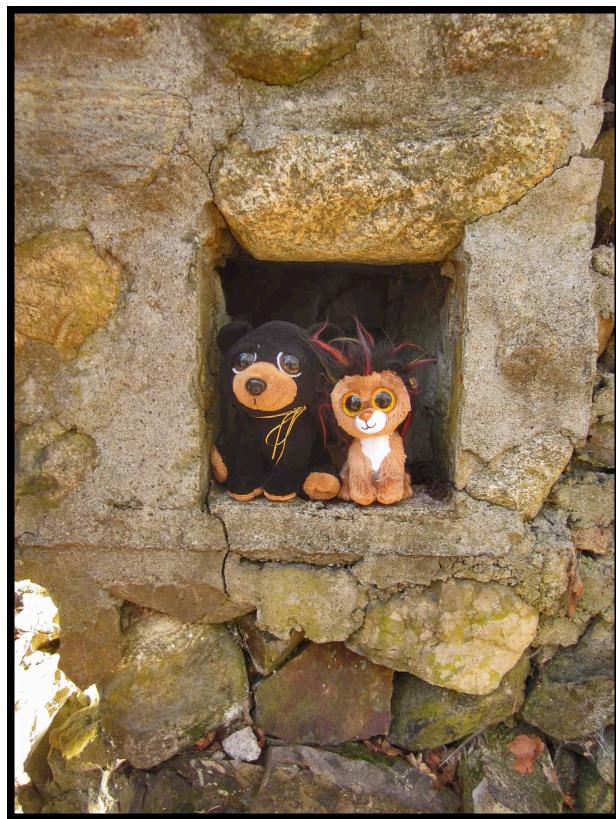
I lean harder into myself. “*What were those
three days?*” Gripping the *hekk* stick, closer
to the Crooning, *something*, yes, *something*.

“The Beast sent me somewhere far. Not dreaming
so much as something to *show* me, *teach* me.”
Eyes & *hekk* stick both clenching, Crooning rises me deeper.

Now eyes open. I speak slowly. “A Village.
A Yellow House. A strange sad face before me.
I sit in a worn old blue wooden chair.”



* * * * *



Charlie Beyer



Rafting

[Prose]

i. Preparing

Preparing to be tortured by my cousin, who is a fanatical whitewater rafter. The closer she brushes by death, the better for her adrenaline-starved existence. My life already seems to have an unauthorized near-death experience every few days, though I have no unrequited urges to cheat the Grim Reaper.

I am, in fact, a quivering mass of paranoid terror. My cousin has in mind that we will “raft” Class VI (extreme and unmanageable conditions) rapids in a remote wilderness where the rivers are more or less vertical. She is from the East Coast, and I believe has concluded that going over Niagara Falls in a barrel is rather too tame for her. What she has in mind for me will be more like bungee jumping onto jagged rocks without the rubber band, and with a truckload of sand dropped off after me. Compressive fun.

So, to steel my nerves for the cousin’s venture, I travel with my delightful girlfriend to the Boise River in southwestern Idaho. She has acquired a used raft from somewhere and, even though she suffers from hydrophobia, she has a small desire to float the Boise. The Boise River is certified tame with barely Class I rapids. I imagine I can survive this, and also build up my catatonia conditioning for when my cousin chains me into the death raft on the River of No Return.

ii. Inflating

Rafting the Boise River is the popular thing to do for the locals. They turn out in such swarms that, in some places, a person can walk across the river on various inflatables. The city fathers have built a “filling station” on the upper end of this raft run. Here you can come and fill your raft with compressed air free of charge.

We arrive around 2 in the afternoon on the Fourth of July. Hundreds of cars are parked along the county road, and each has a parking ticket, easily 200 of them. I curse the pig asshole that tickets on the Fourth, our nation’s independence; like time to pay the British tea tax for the living. I want to stick a foot-long firecracker up this ticketing bastard’s butt, and blow the bureaucratic scum in half.

The pump-house is maxed. Must be 250 people with all manner of inflatable things waiting in line. “A forty-minute wait,” one person says. I crowd into what I perceive as a line, and wedge into the masses. 102°F heat beating down. Rubber, vinyl, and dust everywhere. Frantic filling. Squabbling over the hoses. Inept people who have no clue how to work anything.

Suddenly, a huge detonation in the midst of the swarm! *Ka-Boom!* An eight-foot crater in the human mass opens up. Against one cratered wall is a limp inflator, dazed, with shreds of inner tube draped over him. A momentary silence.

Then the ubiquitous din of a thousand chatters starts up again, the void in the masses closes, and all again is frenetic industry to get their rafts on the river. Then *Ka-Boom!* A small cloud of dust rises from yet another unfortunate’s inflation aspirations. Over-inflation.

The anal-compulsive SOB who has the air hose in front of me is meticulously filling the various compartments of his stupid raft. “Just get the fuck on with it, will ya!” I think. The little turd fills a

place, then lets it bleed off for a minute, before filling again.

Finally he's filling the last compartment, the floor. My turn next. Then: *Ka-Boom!* He blows the seam on the inflatable floor.

OK, fine, get this blasted piece of shit outta my way, and go get your wife's ass all wet in the river.

Finally I am filling our raft, efficiently, deftly; utilizing all science and haste as an engineer is wont to do.

iii. Launching

At last we launch. But we have too much crap in the boat. Three paddles. A lunch outfit. Life preservers. My feet are all tangled in the mess. My babe is a hood ornament on the other end, doing nothing. Which is her right. Her plan. I am supposed to be the captain, after all.

We are spinning out into the main current, completely out of control. I manage to get all the crap piled onto her, on the other end of the raft, and attempt to execute a paddle. But my ass is sitting mighty low. The side-inflatables seem rather soft.

I paddle feverishly to get to the shallows. My ass has sunk on the transom so much the water is gushing into the raft.

My babe is quite wide-eyed. She accuses me of not inflating the raft enough.

"Um, no, fine lady. I believe we are sinking."

"Oh shit! Oh shit!" she panics.

"Oh, no big deal. I sink all the time. It's good for you," I say encouragingly.

I am closer to the side with the autos on it than the other, so I leap out into the middle of the river, only three feet deep at this point, but with a 15 MPH current. I then hold the flaccid raft so that the remaining air redistributes itself to support her fairly well.

"Stay in the raft," I say, remembering that she cannot swim. But she bails out over the side to join me in the waist-deep water. She has a black look on her face. The indignity, the wetting of shorts, the wetting of It . . . *not* how it's supposed to be.

iv. Sinking

I am rather enjoying myself. Here we are, raft sinking, babe confused and angry, middle of the river, current swirling. Things are looking normal to me. I knew that relaxation was a myth. What sort of fool would deny the god Murphy, and try to languish in such debauchery?

I move down the middle of the river, trying to find a place on the shore to get out. The slippery rock bar below us is getting deeper and deeper. I see her becoming wetter, higher and higher up. She has a deer-in-the-headlights look as her breasts submerge. Fear is radiating from her. She is stiff, her face pinched like vice grips on a rubber hose.

Now I see the way. We must cross an indeterminate channel depth of thirty feet to reach shore. I bunch up the remaining raft, and hoist her up onto the side so that her feet are now free flailing in the flow. With my cargo before me, I lunge for the shore, kicking and stroking the water as I may.

To miss the spot would have us swept into very rapid current, and onto an unknown destiny. Could be fun though. With much flailing, I make it, and load her out onto the bank. She immediately gets back from the river ten feet, as though in danger from an annoyed crocodile, or a fuel fire. I struggle to get the waterlogged mess out of the river.

I am quite happy. We have sank and survived. I got to save the day, and rescue the damsel. I am completely drenched, but I am a hero, at least in my own mind. She is in a state of arm-crossed peevishness. I think it's all funnier than hell. The more I laugh, the grumpier she becomes. Chuckling to my good fortune, I roll the criminal raft up, and we pack it all out to the parking lot.

v. Floating

A few days later, we patch the flatulent hole with multiple layers of glue and vinyl. Back out to the river. The mob is not in such a high density, and access to filling air is easy. I fill the raft quickly and test it in the river. All is well, and we are off again to conquer the mighty Amazon. Let explorers rule—long live the brazen and the bold! Onward into unknown and uncharted waters!

There are about twenty rafts downstream, and a dozen upstream, as we get out on the river. Thousands more are away downstream, and yet to be launched. OK, maybe it's not so uncharted, and might be a little smaller than the Amazon, But I think it's pretty hairy, and it's all new to me, so how do I know we are not all floating to our death?

The float is luxurious, in spite of my resistance to this. If we are not having a near-death experience, where is the *fun* in this activity? Yet I quell my appetite for angst, and just try to enjoy the moment. I consider slashing the underside of the raft as we approach some rapids and a logjam. I'm thinking I could save her quite nicely from this. I envision her trapped underwater by the logjam, me carving away with my pen-knife, the clock ticking. Her last screams expel their painful CO₂, and then she sucks in lungfuls of water.

But, no, somehow I restrain myself. She looks happy and peaceful, as the raft slowly spins, and we tear along the river's surface at 10 MPH. A million mosaic rocks a meter below the surface wiz by in their colors of translucent green. Shrieking children erupt from the riverbanks, bombing us with their bodies, dropped from the end of well-placed rope swings. Dogs swim near, compulsively retrieving sticks flung by the masters' hand. Ducks and geese of all sizes go about their shoreline business, ignoring our floating flotsam presence. It is all so very pleasant.

vi. Returning

Minor cataracts are announced by the hoards ahead, their yells of delight alerting us to the approaching aquatic coaster ride. Over a pleasant hour we float until the pullout place is reached. A mob piles up here, all clambering to get out of a small place on the river's side. Back to our parked truck, all cargo in, and now we will drive back upstream to connect to the other car.

Hm. Seems I have left the key safely in the other car. I can break into my truck quite nicely, but must dismantle the dashboard elaborately to start it. OK, instead let's try to hustle a ride upstream to the launch site.

A boyfriend-annoyed twenty-something says she will take us up, but she has no car. The stupid boyfriend is driving it all over hell and gone, trying to find where she is. She is yelling at him continuously on the cell phone, and explaining the situation to us between exasperated replies to him.

So we traipse deeper into the park. No one seems to be packing up. Then a bus arrives, proclaiming to be a shuttle back to the upstream site.

But the turd wants two bucks a head.

“Uh, please! Could you take us upstream and we will pay you when we get there?” I ask politely as I can.

“I will take one of you,” he says flatly.

Huh? Are we in some kind of North Korean border trade thing? A *Sophie's Choice* situation?

“Umm, Sir, obviously the bus is only a tenth full. Could you take us both upriver, please?” I ask, less politely.

“You want to argue with me?” he yelps. “*Argue with me?* OK, nobody goes. You argue, and nobody gets a ride.”

“Uh, Sir, aren't you acting a little unreasonable?”

“Unreasonable? Unreasonable! That's *it!* Get away from my bus. No ride for either of you. You argue with me? *No ride!*”

What a *complete dickhead*. How can you manage to wield such pissant power with just a meager bus-driving job?

“May you *die* of a hideous skin disease, *asshole!*” I yell into the bus.

The sideways door slams shut with finality. We are intractably out.

Next thinking to get a ride with ten Mexicans in an open trailer piled with rafts. They are all smoking handfuls of cheap cigarettes. Then I notice that there is no car or other motive power to pull the trailer.

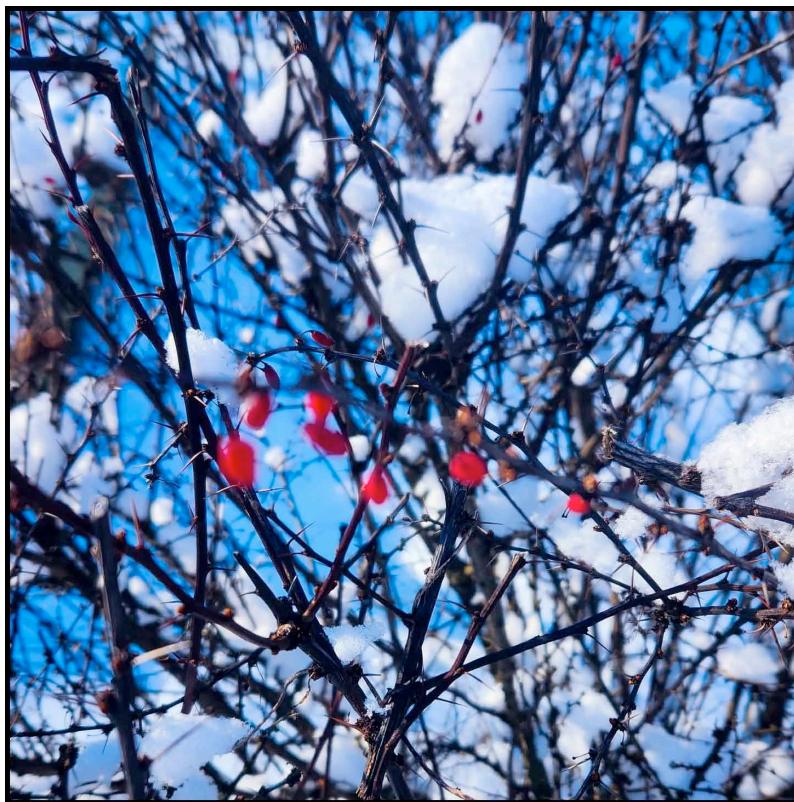
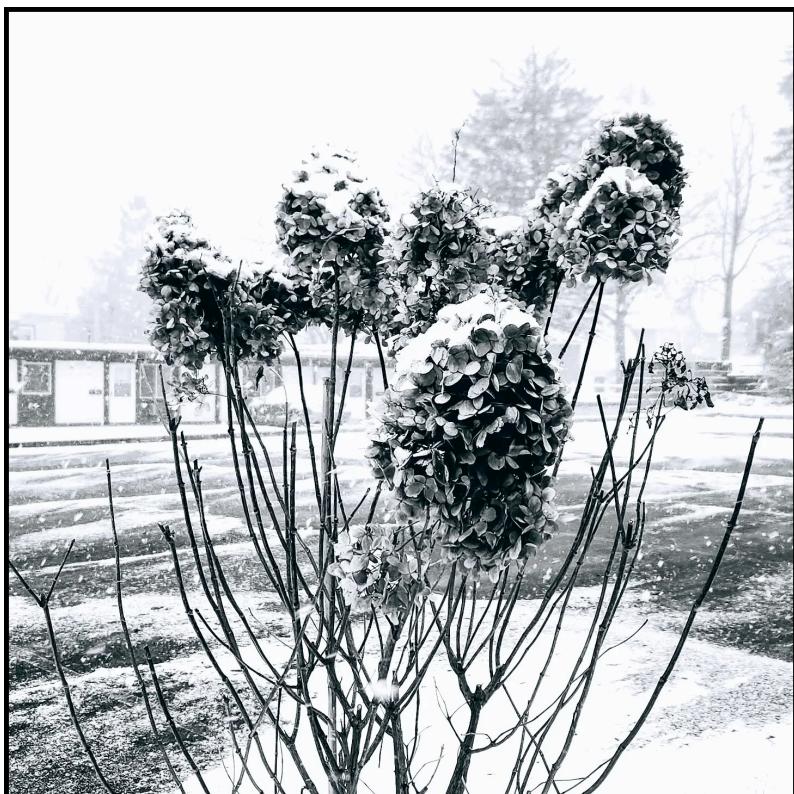
And the girlfriend is in a total indignant huff. Deftly she hails a taxi, and we are off for \$14.65. I think she had a good time? As we pass the bus and driver, I roll down my air-conditioned taxi’s window to flip the son-of-a-bitch off. Think I’ll tag his piece of shit bus.

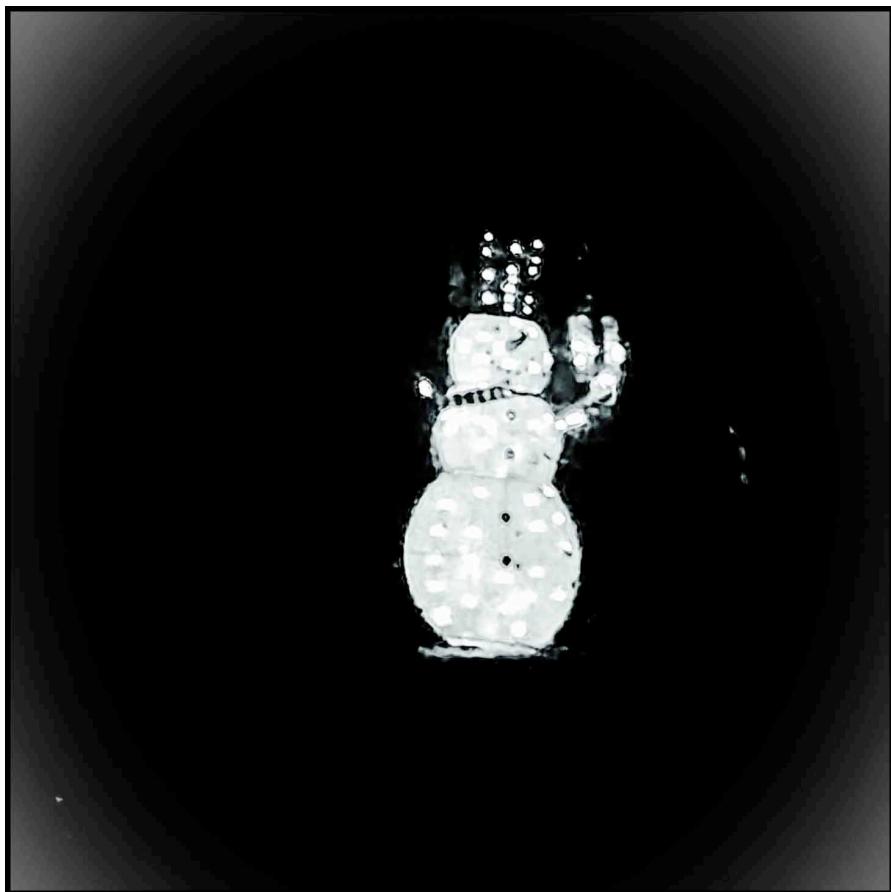
But, in the meantime, maybe I’ll lay off the chronic so I can remember my keys.

* * * * *



Louis Staeble









Rivers of the Mind

[A Novel]

*“Purify the colors, purify my mind
Spread the ashes of the colors
over this earth of mine”*

—Arcade Fire, “Neighborhood #1 (Tunnels),” 2004.

Chapter 30: The Death of Meagan

vii. Tripping Bro

The bloodshot-eyed teenager’s heart pounds as he sees emerging from the forest a zombified mass of people, all of whom look exactly like him, only decayed, old, and decrepit. The zombies brush past us, stalking towards him slowly. He bolts away, and time around him becomes slower and slower. His vision starts to blur, until he now appears in his room with no memory of how he got there, no recollection of taking a drug, no recollection of any of the things he’s seen.

And then he sees the note, scribbled on blue graph paper that starts to wave and wobble, as his vision grows more and more detached from his physical body. “YOU’RE TRIPPING BRO,” it says. “IT’LL ALL BE OVER SOON. DON’T WORRY.”

His heart, once racing, now slows so that its beats, and his entire body, are imperceptible. All around him, everything freezes still. Cars stop in the streets. His mom freezes halfway through taking her keys from her car’s ignition. He can move at a normal speed in his mind, but everything around him is impossibly slow.

His mind drifts from the time to which it had once been anchored, like a boat torn away by a rising storm surge. The house around him folds from three dimensions into four, into five, into six, into seven, until it stretches into an infinite tesseract representing thousands of simultaneous mirrored realities.

Sapphire and I hide behind the door, knowing that we are the only versions of ourselves who have made it to this point.

viii. Mierda

“My back!” Jacob screams in pain, and tries to straighten himself against the wall, shivering. **“I think you should go, Meagan. You can’t wait for me. Go. Go. Go,”** he mutters through terrified breaths.

I wish I knew a language to ease his pain, but I do not. “I’ll come back for you,” I say to him. “I promise.”

I turned around, looking back and forth for the way to the hospital wing. To the left? Yes! That must be it, I thought. I charged off, completely certain that . . . well, no. Wait. I thought this . . . this hallway was the one behind the hospital wing. So . . . it’s . . . it must have been the other way. I ran back. Dammit. No, this was wrong. This was all—

“It’s a THREE WAY INTERSECTION,” shouts a voice—the voice of the teenager. *I seethe with anger, and look for him. A tiny, nonsensical array of blue and white lines, forming a thousand-pointed star, hovers an indeterminate distance away from me.*

I hold up my hand. It blooms with white flowers and prepares to fire.

“Wait! No! I’m—I’m the Good Ryan! I’m here to help you. Trust me! Trust me, please.” The

white flowers extend closer to the shape, making it wrinkle and burn.

“OW! OH MY GOD! FUCK! JUST LISTEN TO ME FOR A SECOND! Okay. Thank you. Holy shit. That . . . oh my god. Thank you. Now. Take two steps back. One more. Big steps. Big steps. I mean, one more. Okay. Good. This hallway—this hallway right here. Now . . . okay. I need you to switch out of the Tobacco language for . . . just a second.”

“No.”

“Please, please. I swear you can trust me. Listen. My name is Ryan. I was a teenager in 2006. A . . . space probe, I guess, crashed outside of my house, and tore a hole into the Beyond. Now I’m not tethered to time. The Ryan who keeps trying to kill you, he’s only . . . like . . . 3 trillion years old. I’m about . . . uhm . . . 8 . . . quintillion? That sounds about right.”

“Anyway. I managed to hold John back before he could kill your brother. That’s the best I can do for now. I can try to keep him and Dr. Whitebalm out of reach of the other Ryan while you go look for John. Sound good?”

“Tcinti said you couldn’t be trusted. You’re just a puppet of the white flowers.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Tobacco plants are racist assholes. It’s like . . . you know . . . someday, I hope that the rest of the nightshades learn to judge less by the amount of atropine in a plant’s leaf cells, and more by the content of their character, but the solanaceous Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. still seems a little ways off.”

“But did you know that the Brugmansia trees actually once saved Atlantis? Before the volcano, at least. They also played a really big role in inventing like six religions, Crystal Pepsi, and removing a century-old curse from the Chicago Cubs. But no, obviously the first time that a cosmic entity tells you a stereotype they have of a plant they’ve been fighting for six thousand years, you’re just gonna believe them, because . . . I’m sorry. I’m getting carried away. Just . . . maybe Tcinti should check his fucking privilege.”

“You anger Tcinti with your insolent spirit,” my mouth says against my will, as my hand raises towards the strange thousand-pointed star. I don’t want to kill him. But a part of me deep inside of my mind tells me that I have to. I pull away from Tobacco and into the Mushroom language. The star comes closer, although how much closer I cannot say. It doesn’t really seem to move, actually. It just sort of grows from being there, to being more here.

“There we go. Okay . . .”

A cold and clammy hand wraps around my own. I look to my left. A ghost studies me, reluctantly.

“*¿Hola, cómo estás?*” he asks.

I search through his brain, quickly learning at least the grammar of Spanish; my mind quickly digs up enough of the three years of Spanish I took in high school to answer.

“*¿Bien, y tu?*”

“*Confudido. Aquella estrella no habla espanol, entonces, yo no se que esta passando. Estoy solo le seguindo. ¿Sabes si estamos en el infierno?*” [“Confused. That star doesn’t speak Spanish, so I don’t know what’s going on. I’m just following him. Do you know if we’re in hell?”]

“*Lo siento, amigo. No estamos en el infierno. Estamos lutando algunas flores blancos que controlan el tiempo.*” [“I’m sorry, friend. We’re not in hell. We’re fighting some white flowers that control time.”]

“*Mierda.*” [“*Shit.*”]

“*This is Carlos,*” Ryan introduces us. “*Carlos is going to lead you to the hospital. He can see in the dark better than you can. Or . . . can you explain that to him?*”

I shift back into Spanish, which does not appear so much different from the English except for the organization of my thoughts. “*La estrella dice que necesitas ayudarme a encontrar el hospital.*” [“The star says that you need to help me find the hospital.”]

“*¿Estás herido?*” [“Are you hurt?”]

“*No. Las flores blancas mantienen a mi amigo John prisionero allí. Necesito rescatarlo con*



tobacco.” [“No. The white flowers are keeping my friend John a prisoner there. I need to rescue him with tobacco.”]

“No entiendo este maldito lugar. A la mierda, supongo. Creio que no tengo elección. Me voy a casa cuando está hecho, bien?” [“I don’t understand this damn place. Fuck it, I suppose. I guess I have no choice. I’ll just go home when it’s done, okay?”]

“Está bien.” [“That’s fine.”]

“Don’t switch into the Tobacco language until John kills Carlos. Otherwise you’ll kill him before you can use him as a human shield.”

“La estrella dice que—” [“The star says that—”]

Ryan interrupts me. “Don’t translate that.”

“Deberíamos darnos prisa.” [“We should hurry.”]

“Yeah, that sounded better. I don’t know what you said, but sure. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m gonna make sure Dr. Whitebalm doesn’t wake up and turn this place into Cherynobyl.”

“Thank you,” I say, in nervous and stammering English.

“Don’t mention it. I’m so fucking ready to die. Do you know how long two hundred trillion years is? It’s a really long time. Hurry up, though, seriously.”

ix. SUCK!

Ryan’s hands tremble, as he begins to sketch the room in which he sits, on a fresh sheet of graph paper, from an exterior perspective. Sapphire and I, hiding behind the door, appear in his drawing. He fumes with an intense rage. Now able to see into his mind through my own, Sapphire grows more and more frightened. Before us, there materializes the wispy form of one of Ryan’s projections, slowly being sketched together in pencil.

“Suck,” I hear a voice say to me.

“John. You have to get in there,” whispers Sapphire.

I peered into the doorway, and see Ryan grinning sadistically back at us.

“I—”

“Do it!”

“I don’t want him to kill you.”

Sapphire reaches down for my hand. “You know what to do if he does.”

“SUCK!” shouts Ryan even louder. “For the love of the universe and all that is in it, you have got five seconds to get in there, and SUCK HIS FUCKING MIND FROM HIS BODY.”

x. Battle

Carlos takes my by the hand politely and leads me down the dark, snaking hallway. The building chatters with rampaging ghosts, faint screams, and gunfire. Carlos says nothing. I feel bad about using him as a human shield. I feel equally bad about being called a racist by a magic floating star. Our footsteps launch echoes into the murky abyss, which return back to us like the sounds of far away cannons.

Though we still walk within range of Ryan’s protective field, I can feel his powers start to grow dim. As they do, a deep chill and a supernatural tension emanates from the stairway, signifying an army of ghosts waiting to attack.

They march forward, trying to remain silent, letting us become filled with slowly building dread from within. We turn left down a hallway, and the feeling grows stronger. The smell of the hospital enters my nose. The force field begins to wear exceedingly thin, pushed back with every instant by a much larger interdimensional force.

Letting go of Carlos’ hand, I switch into the Mushroom language. I can see tiny vines reaching out for me, ready to pull me upwards, and rip me limb from limb. We look out from what feels like the most tenuous cocoon of safety into it, seeing the enraged faces of hyperventilating ghosts. My hands fill with purple



lightning and I reach out for them; the lightning bends backwards around the corners of the force field in which we find ourselves.

Hyperventilating, I try to think of the languages that I know. But the only one that I can imagine having any effect on John's powers is his own language. I slide into the language of the Old One—an interdimensional trading language.

Rapidly, my own mind fans out in a web; though I cannot understand the thoughts I read, I can see flickers of light and color and sound. Slowly it occurs to me that Carlos . . . Carlos . . . is wondering if the ghosts are preparing to tear him limb from limb, or maybe he is in . . . a maze? A maze, I guess? He keeps thinking about a maze and then he thinks the color red very loudly.

I know not what this language can do, but I decide to try to use it anyway. I step out of the field of protection; the earth underneath hums with the roots of something massive and ancient. Speaking the language has welcomed me into a telepathic field, projected by undiscovered fungi deep underground, the morning glories growing in the forest above, the mold growing on some blades of grass, a rare species of bat nesting in the cave.

John searches through my mind, only to find it exactly like his. The ghosts prepare to march on us and, suddenly, inexplicably, the network takes control of me. My hands light up with a murky, gelatin-like substance with a transparent, oily sheen. It laps up in tongues; on contact with the strange substance, the ghosts melt. Eyes droop down into their skulls, their faces start to drip, and they turn to puddles that quickly evaporate. The army retreats.

*John manifests himself before me, in the form of a ghost with bright glowing eyes. “**We will give you a final chance.**” My feet lift off the floor. The opal fire lashes out at him; as soon as part of him melts, it regenerates. I feel a sharp pain in my skull, and in my legs.*

I try to resist his efforts to see into my mind—he is too powerful—but I become rapidly overwhelmed. He starts to pull me in until Carlos, charging from the darkness, runs into him, wrapping his arms around him. I fall down to the ground as he loses concentration. The vines, all around me at this point, meander and retreat, as John focuses his energy on this strange renegade ghost. Has the master not taught him?

As John prepares to kill Carlos, I seize my opportunity and switch into the Tobacco language, pulling both of them with me. Both of them, as projections of an unseen mind, rapidly combust. I was alone in an empty hallway. A silent hallway. I could see John’s hospital room, its door open. Scientists slumped on the ground throughout the corridor, their minds dripping with ghosts that quickly evaporate as they near the Tobacco language.

Suddenly, unseen hands wrap themselves around me. I lift off the ground, paralyzed; a force unlike anything I can comprehend enters my brain, and digs into it with sharp claws.

I hear John’s voice pressing heavily on me. My arms move forward, against my will. John pulls on my index finger, making it shoot with sharp pain; the bones inside slowly separate and grind against each other.

I cry out as I retreat into another level of reality, another version of this same hallway. John’s powers stretch into it, sprouting from the ground in blue vines, and they wrap themselves around me.

“You have the opportunity to become a god, a god in a world without death! Without suffering! Without starvation! Without any laws but your own.”

I start walking, as the vines reach around me and lift me up once again. Outside, my middle finger starts to twist. Another level of reality—I am closer to the hospital room.

John loses focus on the objects in the outer realm, as he enters the second level of Tobacco. The vines grow again from the ground in the inner world, repeating the process.

“But when I kill you, and your soul begins to leave your body, we will make you our slave. You will serve us for eternity!”

I dive into another level, and continue walking, now only five feet from the door. The world I originated from now seems impossibly high above me. Pain shoots through my hands on multiple levels as the bones in my hands are crushed, and my wrists pulled from their sockets. I can feel my veins wrapping tight around every limb. A pressure grows in my head.

"You can't win. You can run into the Tobacco language all you want, Meagan. But you don't understand . . . you don't understand what he's taught me. He's taught me not to run, Meagan. He's taught me not to fight."

The objects in the first level of reality no longer hover; John begins to lose the ability to pull at my hands as I drop into one level, and then another, and then another. His mind begins to burn with the growing feeling of Tobacco.

Outside, in the first level of the world, I fell to the ground, and bolted towards the door, my hands and arms deeply bruised and aching. Wincing, I opened the door and saw John, sitting up in his hospital bed, a look of intense concentration spread across his face.

In the levels upon levels of Tobacco, stretching below my feet, John tortures me. I am aware of it across all dimensions, aching in every part of my body.

"You think this hurts, Meagan? Wait until you've been through ten thousand years of it. Now, listen. I'm telling you for the last time. You either join us . . . or you . . ."

"Die," I command as I pull John's physical brain into the Tobacco language. At once, his mind recoils, losing all sense of time, becoming locked into a single, infinite present—the language of white flowers melts down—his eyes shot open and grew bloodshot, his stomach churned and he started to convulse.

xi. It Had to Be the Drugs

My eyes meet Ryan's. Suddenly, he feels an overwhelming nausea, as time, memory, and all of the timelines through which his mind has wandered collapses in on him, hitting him in waves that feel like automobile accidents, one by one. His stomach churns, and his mouth fills with a peppery burning—all of his nerves, one by one, lit up with sensation and feeling.

As the timelines collapse back into one another, swimming pools' worth of lukewarm beer, mixed with vomit, bile, and blood, gush from the doors and windows of the downstairs of the house, running into the streets, making the people outside scream in terror.

Inside of the house, and from various buildings in the town, sheets of graph paper, illustrated with glimpses of different realities, begin to fly through the air in a colossal blizzard, as his trillions and trillions of years of memories collapse in on themselves.

He stumbles from the desk, screaming in pain, no longer able to think, or feel anything but the horror of infinite time collapsing in on itself, thousands of warring realities cascading into another, like a battlefield that stretches on for millennia, inside of his mind.

"Ryan?" calls his mother. "Ryan, what the hell is going on?"

"Mom!" he bellows. I watch as he falls down the stairs. I hadn't realized that I need to see this part.

"I—I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry!" he cries.

"What did you do to yourself? What's wrong? Baby! What's wrong!"

"I'm sorry . . . I'm sorry . . ." he whispers, suddenly quiet, looking around the blood-soaked room with a faint smile, and a tear rolling down his face.

"Ryan!" she slaps him across the face, trying to revive him as he leans back. "Talk to me! What did you do? Baby! Baby, please. Don't go. Don't go now. This can't . . . be . . ."

She reaches for her cellphone. "Hello? Hello? Yes. Yes. I know . . . I know you're getting calls about that . . . I know . . . it's coming from my house . . . my son . . . he's . . . I don't know . . . he looks like he took some drugs? I need to get him to the hospital! Please . . . please . . . I don't know what drugs he would have taken. I don't . . . I don't know. There's beer cans everywhere and . . . drawings of . . ."

She looks down, seeing a picture of herself strangled in front of her car door. "I don't know . . . I don't know . . . Please . . . thank you! Thank you."

"Mom? . . . Just let me go . . . Just let me go . . ."

She weeps uncontrollably, and collapses.

To be continued in Cenacle | 130 | April 2026



Tamara Miles

A Candle for My Father

A nun's desire, a thief's startle,
stimulant and natural agent of awareness,
electromagnetic radiation, wavelengths aroused.

Feast for visual receptor,
incandescent and fluorescent,
the starry vaults of Tosca.
All colors depend on it.

God, the light dealer,
also stays ready at the switch
to bid us a permanent goodnight,

and you, my own father, have closed
your eyes to any more sunrises,
any more hospital room bright sleepless nights
or the shock of surgical beams.

My sun still surprises the back deck,
rides across palm fronds and dogs' ears
as they pass their time easy, free of griefs
presented to me with a burial flag.

And on the streets today, there will be protests
of other grievances, crimes
both moral and legal occurring under
the chandeliers of the East Room.

I want nothing artificial, only sunlight
that spreads across marsh on beards and oyster beds,
a half million acres of buffer for storm surges,

gold on oak and palmetto to remember you,
the scattered, shorter wavelengths of your blue eyes,
the same way water and sky get their blue,
in our perception,

and when it comes, the strike of blue lightning
that enters the atmosphere without a loud clap of thunder.

* * * * *

Algernon Beagle



Bags End Book #22: Uniting the Six Islands Grand Finally!

This story and more Bags End Books
can be found at:
scriptorpress.com/bags-end.pdf

Hello Cenacle readers,

Mah name is Algernon Beagle & I am the editor guy for Bags End News. Bags End News is a newspaper about mah homeland, a fantasyland called Bags End.

From the outside, Bags End looks like 3 brown-colored laundry bags piled up on a little chair in the corner of our friend Miss Chris's bedroom in Connecticut. And there is one newer Red Bag near them. Miss Chris is 5 years old & has a toy tall boy brother named Ramie, who is 17.

Inside, Bags End is sort of like an apartment building of levels but, cuz it is a fantasyland, nobody knows about its top or bottom. Most levels look like regular hallways, with doors to rooms & other places running up & down their lengths.

Each level is connected to the one above & the one below by ramps that are good for folks with legs & others without. Strangely, the other end of each level ends in a sudden edge, so be warned, should you come to visit.

The Cenacle editor guy, who is a cousin to my friend & Miss Chris's brother Ramie, invited me to share some of the stories from mah newspaper, now & again. He also helped with the typing & some of the spellings, to make this book presentable here. I love English but I still don't spell it too great.

Anyway, I hope you enjoy these stories from Bags End, a place near & dear to mah heartbone.

* * * * *

It feels in a way, Dear Readers, like this great big story I have been telling you has gone into overtime or extra innings or something. It's been like learning bunches of new history, which is strange way to put it. And feeling like that history should be learned, even wants to be learned somehow. How can it be good to think about, & even help, if it is unknown?

As I have said be4ore, I am no smart guy, just a mere beagle in all these matters, but I will do mah best to keep telling this straight & true. So here goes more now.

I was in the famous Boat-Wagon of those bloo-eyed Kittees & their Friend Fish, them all driving like usual, & here was also those 4 Famous Travelers, Marie, Joe, Daniel, & Derek the Islander, & as we drived from the Creature Common Saturday Room, through a pretty curtained closet to somewhere else, I noticed also in the back seat, among our friendly group,

Bogg End News
 Single Issue
 No. 450-451 January 6-13, 2018
 Editor: Aecaron Beagle
 King: Sheriff Bunny
 Lead Lead Creature: Threshold Pugle
 Written Down By: Lori Bunny
 Apprentice: Willy Nilly

Home to the 6 Islands!
Grande Finale!

I'll feetz inn a wave, Deer
 Reeds, lik thizz grat big storrey
 I hav bin, tellin' yu waz gon
 in too overtim or extra in, bogs
 orr sumthng. A trippell, issuu uf
 mah nuwspapr desh't happen to
 awfeng, butt thizz tm it waz
 needed.

Itz' bin lik ~~the~~ jemly bunches
 uf nuwe hissterry, whch iz a
 strange waye, too putt it. Ann
 feellings lik thatt hissterry shood
 bee leand, evn wantz too bee

some Creatures I have knowed, including MeZmer the White Bunny, Holly the grey Hedgedyhog, Freckle the little yellow Lion with a pretty orange mane & indeed a freckle, & Ricochet, who is a Lemur Creature, which Marie tolded me is a kind of Monkey fellow who also looks like a Raccoon. And also I was pleased to see in our number Willy Nilly Froggy, mah own newspaper's overachieving Apprentice Reporter.

Marie was in the front seat with the Kittees & Friend Fish, & I seed her press a button on the dashboard.

"What's that button, Miss Marie?" I asked friendly.

She smiled at me as nicely as mah dear 1 Princess Crissy, or Miss Chris, & said, "It's the **Treasures** Button, Mister Algernon Beagle. So that we find them sooner than later." I nodded OK.

It was some kind of, I think, White Woods through the curtain, 4or a little bit, & then we were in a knowed & familiar place!

It was the home of the 4 Famous Travelers! We were on a hill, & I could see looking up to the top the house where they all live, except Derek the Islander, when not, um, traveling.

And down below was the Fishin' Hole where Joe & Marie sometimes sit by. And, far away over the pond, was the mountain that had gone missing, & sent Marie & her kin along on their long, long travels. Hm. Looked strange right now, but not missing. But still a little strange too somehow. Blinking big at the top?

I have tolded about this place be4ore in mah newspaper, in the stories about the Secret Books, like in Bags End Book #17 called The Myth of the 4 Famous Travelers! In truth, I was only here in dreaming the first time, but it sure looked the same to me.

Anyway, we all got out of the Boat-Wagon, to stretch & walk around some, when up came rolling from somewhere Daniel's bestus buddy who is named by what he is, the Tumbleweed!

Daniel was very happy to see him, but Tumbleweed had business, as he pointed 1 of his branches toward Marie's blinking mountain, & now everyone else saw too!

"Wow!" said several of us. Me too, I agreed.

"Look!" said Daniel, who was now showing the Master Indigo Beacon in his arms to us, & it was blinking at the same speed on & off as the 1 on Marie's mountain. Almost like back & 4orth.

I took a chance that mah simple brainbone was seeing what all these smart guys were seeing.

"It's like they're talking? What are they saying?"

Everyone sort of nodded at mah words while shaking their heads they didn't know. At least I wasn't behind yet.

"I have to study this Beacon in my Workshop," said Daniel, & he hurried I guessed to the smaller building up the hill near their house. Tumbleweed followed of course.

Then Joe sort of humfed & said, "Time 4or a nap," & went up the hill toward their house, with his Creature friends Freckle & Ricochet following.

Then I guessed that Derek the Islander liked that idear but, since he doesn't live up there, he got back into the Boat-Wagon, & sorta hunkered down amongst pillows & blankets 4or his own nap.

That left Marie with MeZmer & Holly & me & Willy Nilly. She was looking at her blinking mountain with steady interest, & started walking downhill toward the Fishin' Hole. We all followed her, & when she satted on the grass, we sorta clustered around her.

She was very quiet, & studied & studied, finger upon her chin, which

means a lot of close attention to something. We all watched too, in case she talked an answer.

Then it's like her mountain began to blink differently. Not just on-off-on-off & so on, but more like off, & then a little on, but more like off, & then a little on, a little more, & then fully on, & back the same way. Except the, um, pattern, didn't stay the same. It was almost like a song, or a language, or something? Musical notes or words? Weirder even than mah silly brother Alexander Puppy's Bump language, Dear Readers, & that's saying a lot!

Maybe it was the long travel, or the comfy grass & good close company, or watching the strange blinking mountain, or all of them, but I seem to remember feeling us all sort of curling up close together in a napping cluster. Nice, quiet, mountain Beacon blinking, musically but peaceful.

Then I opened mah eyes & realized, "O Dreamland" right away. Long-time readers of mah beloved newspaper know I always seem to end up there sooner or later. Dreamland likes me special or something, I guess.

Happily, all mah friends from our cluster-nap near the Fishin' Hole were there. But, um, we weren't there no more.

We were in the White Woods again, & I think I knowed where too, strangely. It was the Faerie Clearing from that well-knowned picture of Marie! And, like the picture, it was night-time & there were glowing Faeries all around!

I can't say that I know too much about Faeries, so I stuck close to Marie, & the other Creatures did too. Sometimes best to let the people-folks take charge.

Strangely too, like in that famous picture, Marie was sorta bending down & studying a glowing something. This close I could see what it was.

It was an old hollow log, half-buried in the ground, & there were many many Faeries coming out of the glowing insides! I could see that not only did the Faeries glow, but their hats & clothes & little umbrellas did too! Just a magickally-glowing folks.

Marie studied closer & closer, & I know it sounds strange even amongst all this other strange stuff, but as Marie studied the glowing log she got smaller & smaller, until she was down on her hands & knees, & crawling on in!

What to do but follow? We rest of us fitted into the old log without the shrinking part, & hurried after her. Faeries passed us left & right, not unfriendly, but like they were hurrying to a party or something, & no time to talk.

I kind of realized that Marie see'd things different in there than the rest of us, because she went really slow with her hand in front of her eyes some, like the light was too much. It was nice tho in there. It was like a wooden hallway, sort of like Bags End even, tho not the wooden part.

So along we went, when suddenly mah Apprentice Reporter Willy Nilly talked in his shorter-ness next to me.

"This sure is a good story, Mister Algernon Beagle!" he said in his friendly freckled Froggy fellow way.

Sorta thinking I might have been neglecting him a bit, I stopped & looked kindly upon him, & said, "Yes indeed, Apprentice." Hm. Not enough. "I will like your help in making sure mah newspaper tells all the details," I said some more.

His smile got bigger if that was possible, & he said, "Sure thing, Boss!" Ha, Boss! But he's not a mean guy in the least bit, so yah, OK.

Then I looked ahead & saw no Marie, MeZmer, or Holly. "Let's hurry, Apprentice!"

He suddenly hopped right quick onto mah schnoggin, & I nodded, & we hurried.

More wooden hallway, but no Marie or the other Creatures. I hurried more on mah short paws, but no better.

Then we came to a kind of 4ork. Not the scary kind associated with food (O! Yuk!), but 2 hallways instead of 1.

Hmm. Now what? I started calling, "Marie? Hello? Miss Marie?" but no answer. And staying stopped was worse somehow.

So I tried to think of any Wise Wisdom I knewed about all this. I remembered Sheila Bunny once saying to me, "When they say right, I go left!"

I knewed left was mah not-riting paw, & so we walked into the left hallway, & I felt better just moving again.

But no more good luck finding our friends. Even by calling more.

I stopped. Willy Nilly hopped off mah schnoggin.

"Maybe we should go back, Apprentice," I said, almost like a question, but not quite, since I am his boss & all.

Willy Nilly smiled me bigger than all the knewed worlds. "Remember, we're in a dream, Mister Algernon Beagle. All napping together. Let's go this way, & find out more to tell the others!"

Safeness & bravery in 1 package. Hard to deny. I nodded. He hopped back up on mah schnoggin. Giddy-up!

The wooden hallway was empty of our friends, & those brightly glowing Faeries, & everyone else too but me & mah Apprentice. So we strode quietly along on mah low paws.

"Do you think things will be different if we unite the 6 Islands?" I asked him, like I had asked CC, a bit meekly, like all this big half-knewed history was very tall in mah mind.

He was quiet a bit, but I figgered maybe thinking paw on chin, as Creatures do.

"Things are always different, Algernon Beagle," he friendly but short spake. I nodded some. Not needing to see him this time.

I didn't know where we would come to in this dream when we suddenly came out to a great big Cavern, & I was pretty shocked at what we saw!

Willy Nilly hopped off mah schnoggin, & together we looked around.

"This is like the Great Cavern under the Tangled Gate!" I said. Happy to know this much already, sorta.

Willy nodded, but was mostly smiling at the great big Tree before us. Lots of lights & decorations on it. At first I thought, OK, it's like the Season of Lights tree but, maybe . . .

"Is this a Iterate?" I asked. That always seems to be part of things when Creatures are around.

"Look closer, Algernon Beagle," he said, & we walked closer, & I looked.

I am no Monet guy, but let me try mah amateur paw at painting a picture 4or you Dear Readers.

This was a big rocky cavern, not dark, but sort of glowing enough to walk around. I couldn't see the ceiling up there, if there was 1. The Great Tree was the star, & it was bigger than words above us.

But then, finally, I looked better, & saw more than just regular lights & decorations on the Great Tree, but also blinking lights. Beacons!

Not every 1 of them, mind you. But I counted up red, orange, yellow, green, & violet. But not bloo or that tricky indigo 1.

Wow. But what did all of this mean?

Willy Nilly was smiling his big smile as he saw the questioning wonder in his old boss's eyes.



"Do you remember Beacons on this Great Tree before, Mister Algernon Beagle?" he asked.

I shooked mah head humbly. "No, Apprentice."

"Me either. I think it's like the 6 Islands are encouraging us."

I nodded. "What do we do?"

Could his charming smile be bigger or charming-er? "We remember this, Algernon Beagle, & we wake up!"

Up! Up! Uppp! Upppp! I heard over & over till I could see it & feel it too, & it was all, & ever, & all of me 4orever.

"Bump? Bump? Bump?"

Hmmm. Took me awhile to figger out this wasn't 4orever no more, but mah own bedroom in Bags End, & here was mah knowed & familiar brother called Alexander Puppy.

"Are you in mah dream now, silly Bumping brother, or am I awake?"

Silly me. He Bumped mah nozebone & talked Bumps enough to beat mah brainbone to dust. I tumbled from mah bed, & hurried through the Bunny Family apartment away to anywhere. Craszed relative.

Dreaming or not? It's had to tell sometimes. Who would know?

I decided to take mah chance by going to the Bags End Liberry to find Lori Bunny, or maybe Allie Leopard, if I could. Maybe their thick books had a trick to learn 4or times like these.

They were both sitting at that corner table they share. Wow, what luck! But dream luck or awake luck?

"Algernon!" they both said together, all happy.

"Hi guys," I said friendly, & satted at their table with them.

Now strangely, the picture window next to their table was showing something familiar. I blinked twice to make sure.

"Hey! That's the Cavern where me & Willy Nilly mah Apprentice Reporter were in our dream just now!" I cried.

Lori nodded, smiling. "We know, Algernon. We were watching you."

"Ut-o. Does that mean this is a dream too?"

Allie shooked his head, & smiled green-eyed at me. "No. This window shows all sorts of things. We were studying more books we found about the 6 or 7 stones when suddenly we could see you & Willy Nilly. We didn't know it was a dream until you came & tolded us."

"O, OK. But wait, how do I get back there? And how did I get here? I was at the Fishin' Hole with Miss Marie, & some Creatures, & Willy Nilly. Then dreaming. Then here?" Gosh, I was confused.

They smiled me nice, but shooked their heads. They didn't know neither.

"OK. Well, that's where I'm going," I said. They nodded, like I knowed how.

I thinked up some sorta bright up idear maybe. "Yes! I have to go to Imagianna to Crissy's Liberry! Thanks, guys!" I sorta tossed them a kiss each on the hurry, & then made mah short-pawed way down to the hallway & door to Imagianna.

Soon I was knocking on the front door of Crissy's Castle, waiting 4or her or probably Boop to answer.

Knocked again. Were they away? I then did something that I never do, but did do in mah hurry. I turned the green-&-golden doorknob, & pushed on in.

"Hello, Crissy? Hello, Boop? It's your old friend Algernon Beagle, come to visit! Really come to use your magickal Liberry again, but 4or a good reason! Hello, guys?"

Not nobody. This was new. I didn't think that they would be mad at me

4or coming in. I hoped.

OK, beagle, just go! You're here! You're in! Just go!

So I did, & I got lost in Crissy's Castle so fast it was truly amazing. Her Castle is more like a, um, Beast, than a regular building, & so it's tricksier.

Finally I stopped. I was in a glowing hallway, & it felt like no matter how fast I runned, or which direction I took, it was the same. Lost.

Hmm. Think, beagle! Think again!

"Hello, Crissy's Castle? I am Algernon Beagle, & am really a friend of Crissy's. And I am in a hurry, which is why I am here. I need to get to her Liberry to help the 6 Islands unite. I mean, I have to do mah part. Will you help me, & show me the way?"

I stopped, & I made mahself be just totally patient so the Castle would not feel rushed answering. A while passed.

I then saw, far down the hallway I was in, something. Or heard something down there. I don't know 4or sure. But I walked mahself brave as I could down there, & arrived, amazing to say, to the door to Crissy's Castle's Liberry, with its green-&-golden sign of a book!

"OK. Thanks!" I called, as smiling as I could.

Pushed in the door, & carefully made mah way down the spiral staircase, & into the amazing Liberry. Keeping to mah task, tho, so ignoring the many amazements I saw.

To the misty corner of the Liberry I had been before, but alone this time. The pages floating around me, & melting on mah fur, the words & letters like snowflakes.

Well, no hand or paw to hold onto this time, so I just satted on the floor, closed mah eyes, & began to hmmm, & to think of that Island Cavern I had seen in mah dream. Wanting to help, wanting to know better how.

Something, & something, & I opened mah eyes, no longer in Crissy's Castle's Liberry.

Wow. Um. Wow. I was hi-hi-hi up on a mountain, & could see the Wide Wide Sea far below. Um?

Looked around more where I was, & now sorta understood better why I was there.

A bloo Beacon was sticking out of something, but wrong somehow. I walked close to it, & saw it was sorta screwed in wrong to its swivel socket. Like what light-bulbs have.

Now I don't know much about this kind of thing, but I took mah best chance, & sorta unscrewed the bloo Beacon, & then used mah paws' best try to screw it in right. I must have done it right because now it was blinking peaceably in its place. OK. Good that.

Then I noticed a cave nearby, & a sign with a green-&-golden arrow pointing into it, like, "Go into this dark place."

Hmm. Looked. Thought. Nothing. Looked again. Thought more.

Then looked at the bloo Beacon again, & wondered what if I sorta turned it on its swivel socket to point in there?

I had nobody to convince, or argue with over this, but me. I decided to try it because I had no other idears.

Tugged & pushed, tugged & pushed, & the Beacon swiveled in its socket, & now its blinking bloo light was shining into the dark cave, but dark no more!

So go in. Really? OK. Yah.

Well, Dear Readers, here is where I had to use all mah real fake courage, & true love of finishing the story, & heartbone's affection 4or

everyone who had been in it, to move mah reluctant paws 4oward into that bloo blinking cave, & down the long tunnel that led deeper in & in. I am not a brave guy by nature, but I wasn't even sure that this was danger. Cuz dark isn't always danger, & light isn't always safe.

The bloo-blinking tunnel went down 4or awhile. Very quiet, & I guess cool, but not so much. The bloo blinkings got after awhile less on-off-on, & more kind of gradual, like Beacons got to blink, but not in 1 way.

Then the tunnel kinda began to go up 4or a long while, which made no sense, & then it just curved & curved so that I could not see so far ahead. I just kept mah paws going.

I would like to tell of all mah deep thoughts & idears while I walked along, but I had none. I thinked about mah comfy armchair on Milne's Porch, & dancing with mah dear 1 Crissy to fun R.E.M. records, & that time I traveled hi & lo the many lands in search of mah rite-typer keys. Nothing profound. Just thoughts & memories to com4ort like friends.

Then suddenly I was back in that Cavern! Wow! It was as strange & beautiful as mah dreams. There was the Great Tree, & its regular lights & decorations, & also its 5 colored Beacons, blinking on & off, on & off.

So 4or a moment it was the same, tho not dreams this time, but then the blinking bloo Beacon behind me passed me or something. Maybe I moved out of its way without knowing.

Anyway, it kept going, & it connected to 1 of the Beacons on the Great Tree, then the next, then all 5 there! And, um, they began to kinda blink back & 4orth in what seemed like a kind of talking way! Just like back at the Fishin' Hole with Marie's mountain!

OK, I just watched & watched a long time.

It felt to me like I had done something good, making it so the bloo Beacon up there could, um, talk to his fellow Beacons down here in the Cavern. And I thought maybe they could talk to Daniel's Master Indigo Beacon. And maybe the other Islands had their own Beacons? Yes. Sure. I guess. All guesses.

But I didn't know where Daniel & the other Travelers were, or where the Islands were. I didn't even really know where I was, since I was awake & alone somewhere.

I felt stuck, Dear Readers. What to do next?

That's when I noticed the bloo Beacon's light sorta, um, refracted to another place beyond the Great Tree, to what looked like another dark tunnel? Like pointing me toward it? I don't speak Beacon, Dear Readers, but I still had no other idears to go with. Sometimes you just go.

So I went, & followed the bloo light into the tunnel, & down-down-down, till I came out onto the beach! Wow.

There was the Wide Wide Sea, & it was as pretty as it always is. Nothing tells it what to do, or how really.

OK, so here I was on the beach, & what now? The only idear I could summon in mah poor ignorant brainbone was to try waving mah paws around, & hope that Lori Bunny & Allie Leopard were watching me here in their big Bags End Liberry picture window, & maybe they could help me? At least I would be back among friends. Sniffed like defeat to me 4or sure.

But I nearly did. But then I didn't. I kept not waving mah paws around to get their attention, & hoping that they or maybe Crissy would come & get me.

I waited. Then I looked better around this pretty empty beach & the beautiful Wide Wide Sea.

Something was tickling the fur on mah backbone, very softly, & it was

only because I was going slower, & paying attention, that I knowed to feel it.

I looked back & saw that the bloo Beacon's light was coming at me, like be4ore, on, off, on, off. Getting mah attention, but also, um, nudging me to move over again? Um? Emperor of Ums, that's me.

OK, sure, I moved over, & watched to see where it went. I have no magickal ways in me to tell about, Dear Readers, but I can at least try to look better.

It continued to shine on, over the foamy dancing surface of the Wide Wide Sea, to far away, beyond mah peering-est eyes to see.

But I keep looking, just in case. Looking & looking, just in case. Looking & looking out there, 4or something. What? Something. Something.

Then . . . something. Wait. No. Yes. More than 1 somethings? Could be maybe? Could be?

It was a group of flying folks. Sorta familiar, & sorta not. I just kept watching till they were closer.

OK, the first was a flying Spaceship, but not like the usual Star Trek kind. It looked like a kind of boat. A Space Tugboat? Yes, OK, I guess, maybe?

And I could see driving it were 2 folks. 1 was that tiny black-&-white Pandy Bear Creature Imp Rosalita? Or 1 of her Iterates anyway. And I could hear as they got closer that she was Toot! Toot! Toot!-ing its horn. And next to her was Daniel the Famous Traveler waving to me!

Wow. So they came & landed on the beach near me, & then next came that great big Calgary the Sea Dragon, who I know from the Creature Common. He is green & shiny golden & was way bigger to see because riding on his schnoggins was Joe the Famous Traveler & his Creature friends Freckle & Ricochet!

Calgary landed near the Space Tugboat, & I saw next coming was that beautiful green Hummingbird Creature Harry, & his Pup rider Danny, & also Derek the Islander! And they waved as they landed too.

Finally, I see'd the Famous Boat-Wagon with the bloo-eyed Kittees & their Friend Fish at the wheel, with Marie the Famous Traveler & MeZmer & Holly riding along! But up in the air?

Look closer, beagle, see something. It's like they were floating along steady & sure. Like on the wind? I did not know sure.

But they arrived safely too on the beach, & there we all were.

I runned up to them, & they were all friendly happy to see me. We all kind of sittted in a big circle on the sand to catch up.

"How are you, Mister Algernon Beagle?" asked Marie, smiling me.

So I tolded mah story all the way from the dream where Willy Nilly & I lost track of her, to the Dream Cavern, to Bags End, Imagianna, back to the Cavern, & finally come out here onto the beach.

I noticed their faces all looked funny. Not mad, but like weirdly surprised.

"What, guys?" I asked.

Daniel talked now. "We have all come from the other Islands where we did what you did here. This was the 6th & final Island to get ready."

"Ready?" I asked.

He nodded. "But you did the work here, so now we can see if it works."

I shooked mah head unknowingly.

He smiled me kindly, & pointed to the bloo Beacon path on the Wide Wide Sea they had followed here.

"All of the Islands have 1 of these paths, but a different color 4or each. But to unite the Islands, the Beacon colors have to join, & connect all the Islands each to the other."

"How?"

Daniel took from inside his coat the Master Indigo Beacon those Great Heroes of Yore had brought to him from the past, through space & time. "We need to fly this up hi &, if we screw it in like the rest, it will turn on, & connect each of these Island Beacons to all."

I nodded. Excited now. But then thought some more. "But screw it into what?"

Daniel smiled & pointed to the Space Tugboat. "Toot! Toot!" he cried.

I nodded, but unsure. "But that Imp, its her Spaceship. Does she mind doing this?"

Daniel smiled more. "Commandeer Cacklebird & I tested it out."

"Who?"

He pointed to the cackling Imp on the Space Tugboat, who Toot! Toot'ed merry like saying hi.

"We flew to the far reaches of Outer Space, & tested it. We think it will work."

I nodded. Who am I to protest about Imp Astronomy?

Joe smirked some & said, "And if it doesn't, we gotta dig up that buried ancient Spaceship, & learn how to fly it." I nodded to this too.

"Would you like to join us, Mister Algernon? To write about it in your fine newspaper?" asked Daniel.

"Me? In Outer Space?" I said. "I am no Asteroidnot!"

Daniel laughed, but not meanly. "It will be safe & fine, I promise."

Hmm. Fake braveness, don't fail me now. "OK," I agreed.

Well, everyone stood up again, & sorta patted & hugged me 4or mah allged courage. Then Daniel & I led the walk over the sand to the Space Tugboat.

The, um, Commandeer had on a kinda crazy big, I guess, Captain's hat, & strange medals, I think, & a crazy merry Imp look. There were 3 seats on board 4or sitting, & Daniel had me sit in the middle 1.

Everyone shouted, "Good luck!" as the Commandeer cackled & Toot! Toot'-ed our way up & up & up into the bloo sky. Then it was not bloo so much anymore, & was black with a bajillion stars.

Daniel smiled at us again, & then he went into the back of the Space Tugboat, & pulled up a door in the floor. I could it had a socket like the other 1 I had seen. He screwed in the Master Indigo Beacon, & closed the door again. I could see it was blinking as he closed it.

Daniel nodded to the Commandeer, who cackled merrily & drove us back to the world, but still scary hi up in the sky. We could see the beautiful Wide Wide Sea way down below.

Daniel holded mah paw, & I realized he was more hoping than knowing 4or sure that this would work.

I could see down there the colored Beacon paths from each Island, even the 1 that seemed under the Wide Wide Sea. But it's like they were not touching.

We waited & waited.

Nothing.

"Something's missing, Daniel," I said, not knowing what.

He looked at me serious, & then nodded.

I thought hard about all I had learned in this story, about Creatures, & Beacons, & about everything else. Thought harder & harder.

I had a guess.

"What is it, Algernon Beagle?" Daniel asked me.

"It's the Hmmm," said me. "It's always in everything somehow."



Daniel smiled, & nodded, & he motioned me & the wee Commandeer to follow him into the back. I hoped this Space Tugboat knewed how to fly anyway.

We gathered around the closed door that had the glowing Master Indigo Beacon inside.

"How do we know what to hmmm?" I asked.

Daniel looked at our Commandeer, & nodded. She smiled crazy-eyed, but like she was paying attention too. And she started to hmmm. And Daniel closed his eyes, & joined in. And then I did too.

Dear Readers, I don't know what to say about what the Hmmm is, but that it's something deep & good is at least true.

I hmmm'd like they were, & then I sorta trusted & hmmm'd more like me, & it all felt better & better, & soon it felt really good, & I was gone.

"Come look, Algernon Beagle!" called Daniel to me as I came to, & I saw that he & the Commandeer were looking out the window to down below.

I hurried over, & looked down too, & saw amazements. There was down there what looked like a Rainbow Wheel, made up of 7 colored shining spokes, including ours, that connected all 6 Islands!

"Are they united?" I asked.

Daniel nodded. "The Hmmm is what did it."

I looked at his kindly face 4or a long quiet moment. "Do you really understand what all this means, Daniel the Famous Traveler?"

He looked me serious. Then smiled a little. Then laughed a little. Shooked his head. "No, Algernon. But when I look down there, I feel like we did something important & good. Maybe we'll understand more as time goes by."

I listened good. I nodded. Mah kind of answer.

All I could figger was that as long as the Space Tugboat was OK, the Rainbow Wheel stayed good, & the 6 Islands stayed connected.

As we descended back to land, I saw the Rainbow Wheel kind of fade under the Wide Wide Sea again, but I knewed it was still good. Mah heartbone knewed.

Back on the beach, & cheers, & hugs, & all.

Daniel was right. It was important, & good, whatever it meant.

You will maybe not be surprised, Dear Readers, to learn that I tolded this story as part of the Royal Thumbs' Grand Production called Uniting the 6 Islands! which occurred not long after. As in times past, there were audiences to watch this Grand Production in Bags End, Imagianna, the White Woods, Dreamland, the Bunny Pillow Farm, & Creature Common.

As the story moved from place to place, I was seen reading in each place, until I was in all the places at once toward the end. Places like Oz & Narnia & Wonderland & Neverland & Hundred Acre Woods & Frabble Rock were audiences too, but of course not as near as Bags End's closest Neighbors.

And when I was done, it was natural 4or the Nearby Neighbors to want to offer some entertainments 4or all to enjoy!

There was quiet everywhere 4or a long moment, & then the Ladies Toe began to hmmm the hmmm which had turned on & connected all the Island Beacons, & then we all joined in. We were all of us with me & Daniel & Commandeer Cacklebird in the Space Tugboat as we watched the Rainbow Wheel from so hi above.

But then we were on the very tips of those small yet tall-y talented La Petit Thumbs, as we leaped! from the Space Tugboat, & down-down-down, until we arrived in the White Woods on the stage of Thought Fleas' Great Clearing, & we were 1 & all in & amongst those amazing Dancing Bear Creatures, Schatzi,

& Bauer, & Schnooky & their crew, dancing happy & free--

& then we were leaping through the air with MeZmer the White Bunny, only to jump hi again in the air again in the safe paws of that Jumping Jacoby Monkey Creature!--

& now coming straight down until catched up by Calgary the Sea Dragon, who thwup! thwup! thwupled us far over the Wide Wide Sea again!--

until we were all buckled into the Boat-Wagon--Safety First!--& brung hi-hi-hi up on the Master Air Current I finally learned about, who likes to travel Creatures & their friends way up in style--

& now soaring with Harry Hummingbird & his dear friend Danny, down-down-down until we were the strangest little buzzing things that burst from the earth as Bunny Pillows growing in their clusters--

up!-up!-up! again & arcing over the world like a Rainbow Wheel, & then drawn to live far deep in the krazy jazzy lands of Sheila Bunny's Kool Jazz Band--

& now a swerve, & a swirl, & this must be deeper than ever into Princess Crissy's Castle's magickal Liberry, the misty corner, & we become like the floating & melting music & notes, floating & melting into dreams of music in the many Dreamlands there are, the 1 Dreamland, the no Dreamland before the Islands spooked & woke up, oh mah!--

& I think, Dear Readers that, for a little while, the 6 Islands somehow shared with all of us what those times had been like so long ago, not Dreaming & waking as 2, but all as 1. I don't know how to tell except that part of me was in Bags End, Dreamland, Imaginaria, Creature Common, the White Woods, & even mah own comfy armchair on Milne's Porch, & some of me was something else with everyone else, 1, none, many, in a way I had not even imagined before, & it was not language to tell save maybe--

& on & on & on 4orever.

A thank you from the 6 Islands. Whatever it all meant.

It all happened. It was all real. Some of you were even there too.

Yet somehow I did wake up from it all, on Milne's Porch, in mah comfy armchair. A warm brown blanket with many kindly watchful Bears covering me.

Whatever it meant. Important & good.



* * * * *



Jimmy Heffernan

Notes on Teilhard's Noogenesis (Continued)

v.

What Father Teilhard is really advocating with his *Omega Point* is an eschatological singularity at the end of time proper. Put another way, a divinized ultimate at the end of Earth evolution. Eschatology concerns itself as a theological matter with ultimate human destiny, and philosophically as the belief concerning the final death of, or the end of, the world.

Other philosophers have explored such a phenomenon. Terence McKenna believed in the dual and conjugate processes of novelty and habit, and Teilhard would have agreed with him when he posited that novelty is continually on the increase, while habit, which has a lot of historical momentum, is slowly ebbing away. Ultimately, when novelty becomes too intense for available time-spans, there will be an eschatological singularity, and a very consequential event will take place, the nature of which is not known.

The concept of a *technological* singularity has also become popular in certain contemporary circles. This is really just another version of McKenna's idea, originally suggested by Johnny von Neumann, and later popularized by both Vernor Vinge and Ray Kurzweil.

A technological singularity occurs when our technology—presumably conscious A.I. quantum computers—becomes so rapid at processing and “behaving” that humans can no longer have any place on Earth, that human affairs cannot continue as they have to, naturally. Everything will become so intense that we will—who knows?—transform? go extinct? upload our souls?—what have you. So one can see that the Teilhard, McKenna, and von Neumann ideas are, while coming from different contexts, essentially very similar. Teilhard was perhaps quite prescient here.

vi.

We are taught in the West that there is a dichotomy between matter and spirit. Especially after French philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650), primary Western thought sees matter as brute, dead and soulless, and it is only when spirit animates it (typically understood as through the avenue of human sentience) that it becomes meaningful. There are several opposites: matter and spirit; body and mind (or soul); unconscious and conscious; and so on. It has been supposed for centuries that spirit only exists in the human mind and soul (and in saints, angels, and God), and that matter is not invited to this party.

Well, Teilhard saw things differently. He came to believe that matter enfolds spirit, just as spirit enfolds matter, and that one cannot exist, for us, without the other. Matter contains spirit—it is frozen up. And spirit interacts with matter. Could free will be possible otherwise? So this was a very radical departure from Catholic orthodoxy for Teilhard, but he saw matter as sacred all his life.

Matter has a within just as well as a without, and is not objectively in a separate category from spirit. We could even look at this scientifically. Einstein's famous equation of $E=mc^2$, showing the equivalence of mass and energy, would tend to support Teilhard. Strictly speaking, energy is not spirit, but this is still a very apt analogy. Mass is energy “frozen up.” And energy is dynamic mass. They are really one and the same phenomenon. Spirit and matter are the same. They are made, if you will, of the

same “substance,” or stuff.

vii.

The progressive “spiritualization of matter” was revealed very starkly and explicitly by Teilhard’s studies in paleontology (including his well-known volumes *The Phenomenon of Man* (1959), *The Future of Man* (1964), and *The Appearance of Man* (1966), all published in English translation by Harper US). This led him to realize that the process was *irreversible*. He saw that the cosmos was evolving in the direction of spirit, and that matter contained the necessary within to make this possible. Matter ultimately is not materialized; it is metamorphosed into psyche. Seeking tangibility, Teilhard saw that spirit is not the opposite or enemy of matter; rather, it is its very heart.

As Teilhard’s ideas developed, and he focused more and more on the thin living membrane of the upper crust of planet Earth, he came to observe and discern the operation of the noosphere (*The Future of Man* includes the essay “The Formation of the Noosphere”). This envelope is both conscious and thinking—it possesses intent—and represents the entire record of thought, the current activity of thought, and some goal as to how evolution will most favorably unfold. It is, very definitely, the Soul of Earth.

And it underlines the oneness of the human collective, even if this is on a level humans do not normally perceive. Teilhard felt that, in its subtle regulating function, the noosphere creates a safeguard, an incorruptibility that increases as knowledge and sophistication increase. It is hoped that this is indeed correct.

Just as the noosphere observes and coordinates the complexification-force inherent in cosmic evolution, so too does this force exist as generally as it is possible to express. In the very marrow of the universe, there is a directionality corresponding to an increase in intelligence, in complexity, in consciousness, in being.

Teilhard recognized this, where so few others have. It is a kind of negative entropy, which tends to lead to an increase of complexity and order in open systems. This does not conflict with traditional thermodynamic entropy at all; the expected amount of entropy is still generated. It is merely superseded and contrasted.

The principal take-off point of the noosphere was the phenomenon of reflection—the birth of thought. The irreversible rise of consciousness and cerebralization on the outer layer of the Earth, which it is very difficult to deny is increasing in scope over the geological eras, is the result of matter, which enfolds consciousness, reaching a high enough psychic “temperature” and organized complexity to enable reflection. This self-reflective, symbolic thought was the take-off for the jump between the biosphere and the nascent noosphere.

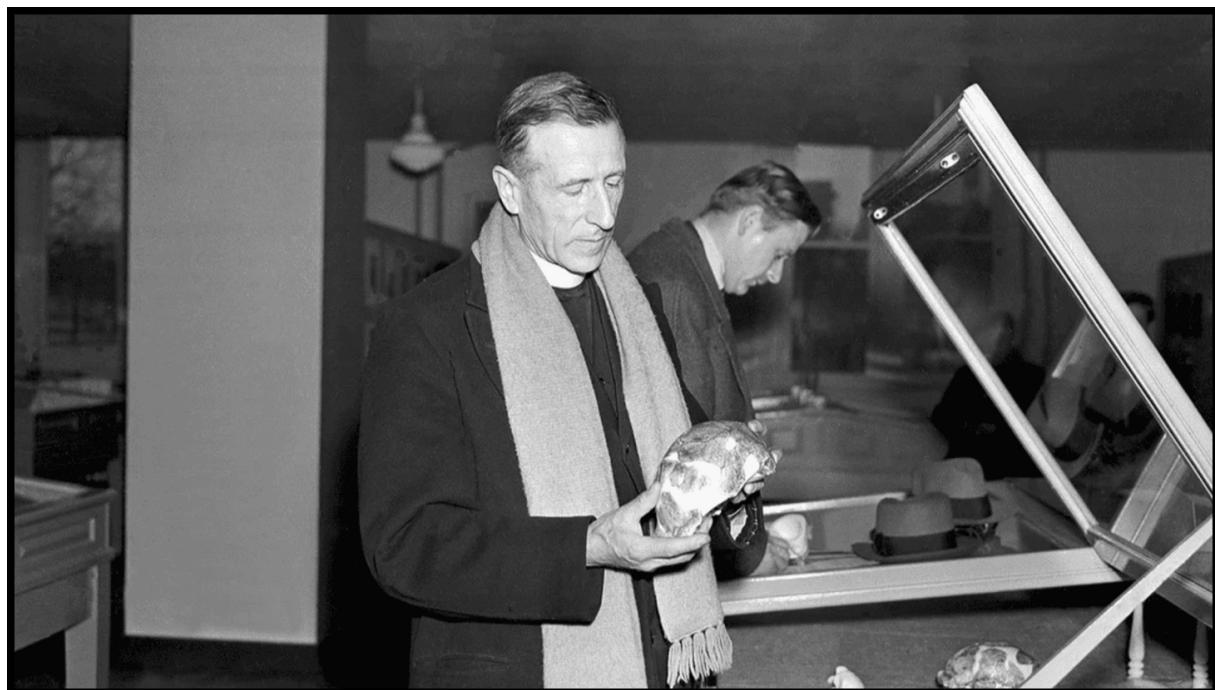
viii.

It has become glaringly apparent that the complexity and psychic temperature of Earth are at a critical level, and still rapidly increasing, not on the scale of the individual as much as on that of the entire planet. Our hyper-technology, like quantum computing, nanotechnology, A.I., robotics; our connectedness as evinced in the complex Internet—in text, video, and audio delivered to our device screens instantly; and a slew of other highly advanced technologies are revolutionizing the noosphere, and renovating evolution on Earth. We who are alive today are witnessing the greatest revolution in the noosphere since its birth. And we hope, as Teilhard believed, that this cultural and technological thrust remains largely incorruptible. Crisis, of course, is no stranger to humans.

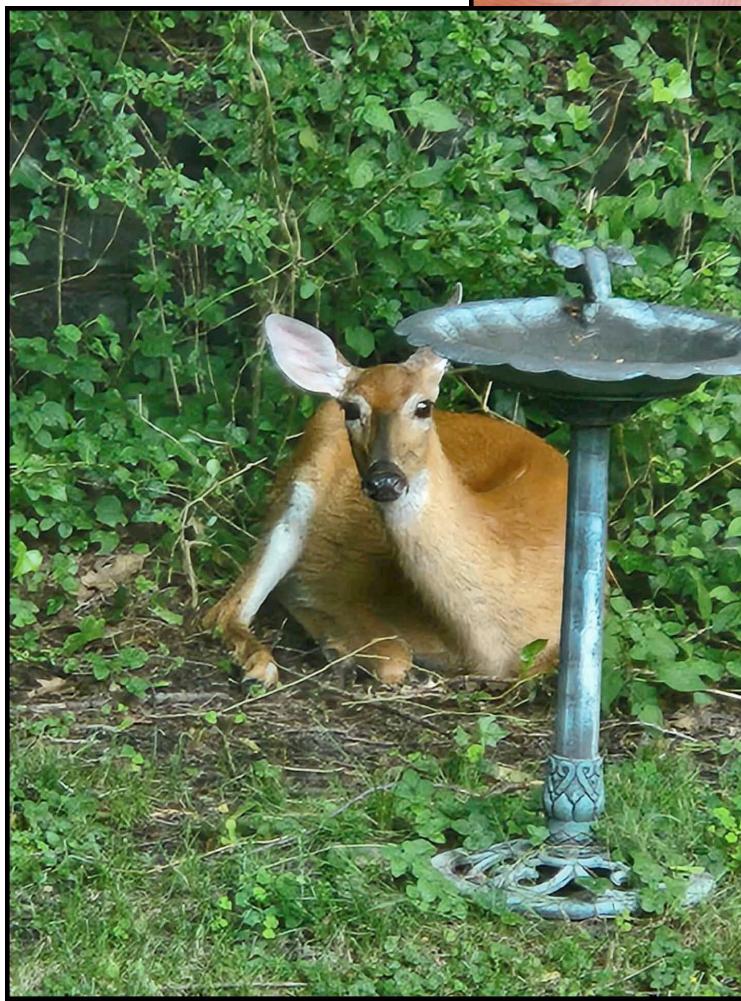
And Teilhard also wrote briefly about the fact that we are on the fringe, or nearly so, of the ultra-human. This super-hominized creature really will fully incorporate the incorruptible and irreversible into the noosphere.

Of course, some people feel that autonomous, thinking, conscious A.I. will fill the role of the next step in Earth evolution. We shall see. Suffice it to say that Teilhard was quite right in positing a next step.

* * * * *



AbandonView





The Hound of the Baskervilles

[Classic Fiction]

Chapter XIV
The Hound of the Baskervilles

One of Sherlock Holmes's defects—if, indeed, one may call it a defect—was that he was exceedingly loath to communicate his full plans to any other person until the instant of their fulfilment. Partly it came no doubt from his own masterful nature, which loved to dominate and surprise those who were around him. Partly also from his professional caution, which urged him never to take any chances. The result, however, was very trying for those who were acting as his agents and assistants. I had often suffered under it, but never more so than during that long drive in the darkness. The great ordeal was in front of us; at last we were about to make our final effort, and yet Holmes had said nothing, and I could only surmise what his course of action would be. My nerves thrilled with anticipation when at last the cold wind upon our faces and the dark, void spaces on either side of the narrow road told me that we were back upon the moor once again. Every stride of the horses and every turn of the wheels was taking us nearer to our supreme adventure.

Our conversation was hampered by the presence of the driver of the hired wagonette, so that we were forced to talk of trivial matters when our nerves were tense with emotion and anticipation. It was a relief to me, after that unnatural restraint, when we at last passed Frankland's house and knew that we were drawing near to the Hall and to the scene of action. We did not drive up to the door but got down near the gate of the avenue.

The wagonette was paid off and ordered to return to Coombe Tracey forthwith, while we started to walk to Merripit House.

“Are you armed, Lestrade?”

The little detective smiled.

“As long as I have my trousers I have a hip-pocket, and as long as I have my hip-pocket I have something in it.”

“Good! My friend and I are also ready for emergencies.”

“You're mighty close about this affair, Mr. Holmes. What's the game now?”

“A waiting game.”

“My word, it does not seem a very cheerful place,” said the detective with a shiver, glancing round him at the gloomy slopes of the hill and at the huge lake of fog which lay over the Grimpden Mire. “I see the lights of a house ahead of us.”

“That is Merripit House and the end of our journey. I must request you to walk on tiptoe and not to talk above a whisper.”

We moved cautiously along the track as if we were bound for the house, but Holmes halted us when we were about two hundred yards from it.

“This will do,” said he. “These rocks upon the right make an admirable screen.”

“We are to wait here?”

“Yes, we shall make our little ambush here. Get into this hollow, Lestrade. You have been inside the house, have you not, Watson? Can you tell the position of the rooms? What are those latticed windows at this end?”

“I think they are the kitchen windows.”

“And the one beyond, which shines so brightly?”

“That is certainly the dining-room.”

“The blinds are up. You know the lie of the land best. Creep forward quietly and see what they are doing—but for heaven's sake don't let them know that they are watched!”

I tiptoed down the path and stooped behind the low wall which surrounded the stunted orchard. Creeping in its shadow I reached a point whence I could look straight through the uncurtained window.

There were only two men in the room, Sir Henry and Stapleton. They sat with their profiles towards me on either side of the round table. Both of them were smoking cigars, and coffee and wine were in front of them. Stapleton was talking with animation, but the baronet looked pale and distract. Perhaps the thought of that lonely walk across the ill-omened moor was weighing heavily upon his mind.

As I watched them Stapleton rose and left the room, while Sir Henry filled his glass again and leaned back in his chair, puffing at his cigar. I heard the creak of a door and the crisp sound of boots upon gravel. The steps passed along the path on the other side of the wall under which I crouched. Looking over, I saw the naturalist pause at the door of an out-house in the corner of the orchard. A key turned in a lock, and as he passed in there was a curious scuffling noise from within. He was only a minute or so inside, and then I heard the key turn once more and he passed me and re-entered the house. I saw him rejoin his guest, and I crept quietly back to where my companions were waiting to tell them what I had seen.

"You say, Watson, that the lady is not there?" Holmes asked, when I had finished my report.

"No."

"Where can she be, then, since there is no light in any other room except the kitchen?"

"I cannot think where she is."

I have said that over the great Grimen Mire there hung a dense, white fog. It was drifting slowly in our direction, and banked itself up like a wall on that side of us, low, but thick and well defined. The moon shone on it, and it looked like a great shimmering ice-field, with the heads of the distant tors as rocks borne upon its surface.

Holmes's face was turned towards it, and he muttered impatiently as he watched its sluggish drift.

"It's moving towards us, Watson."

"Is that serious?"

"Very serious, indeed—the one thing upon earth which could have disarranged my plans. He can't be very long, now. It is already ten o'clock. Our success and even his life may depend upon his coming out before the fog is over the path."

The night was clear and fine above us. The stars shone cold and bright, while a half-moon bathed the whole scene in a soft, uncertain light. Before us lay the dark bulk of the house, its serrated roof and bristling chimneys hard outlined against the silver-spangled sky. Broad bars of golden light from the lower windows stretched across the orchard and the moor. One of them was suddenly shut off. The servants had left the kitchen. There only remained the lamp in the dining-room where the two men, the murderous host and the unconscious guest, still chatted over their cigars.

Every minute that white woolly plain which covered one half of the moor was drifting closer and closer to the house. Already the first thin wisps of it were curling across the golden square of the lighted window. The farther wall of the orchard was already invisible, and the trees were standing out of a swirl of white vapour. As we watched it the fog-wreaths came crawling round both corners of the house and rolled slowly into one dense bank, on which the upper floor and the roof floated like a strange ship upon a shadowy sea. Holmes struck his hand passionately upon the rock in front of us and stamped his feet in his impatience.

"If he isn't out in a quarter of an hour the path will be covered. In half an hour we won't be able to see our hands in front of us."

"Shall we move farther back upon higher ground?"

"Yes, I think it would be as well."

So as the fog-bank flowed onward we fell back before it until we were half a mile from the house, and still that dense white sea, with the moon silvering its upper edge, swept slowly and inexorably on.

"We are going too far," said Holmes. "We dare not take the chance of his being overtaken before he can reach us. At all costs we must hold our ground where we are." He dropped on his knees and clapped his ear to the ground. "Thank

God, I think that I hear him coming."

A sound of quick steps broke the silence of the moor. Crouching among the stones we stared intently at the silver-tipped bank in front of us. The steps grew louder, and through the fog, as through a curtain, there stepped the man whom we were awaiting. He looked round him in surprise as he emerged into the clear, starlit night. Then he came swiftly along the path, passed close to where we lay, and went on up the long slope behind us. As he walked he glanced continually over either shoulder, like a man who is ill at ease.

"Hist!" cried Holmes, and I heard the sharp click of a cocking pistol. "Look out! It's coming!"

There was a thin, crisp, continuous patter from somewhere in the heart of that crawling bank. The cloud was within fifty yards of where we lay, and we glared at it, all three, uncertain what horror was about to break from the heart of it. I was at Holmes's elbow, and I glanced for an instant at his face. It was pale and exultant, his eyes shining brightly in the moonlight. But suddenly they started forward in a rigid, fixed stare, and his lips parted in amazement. At the

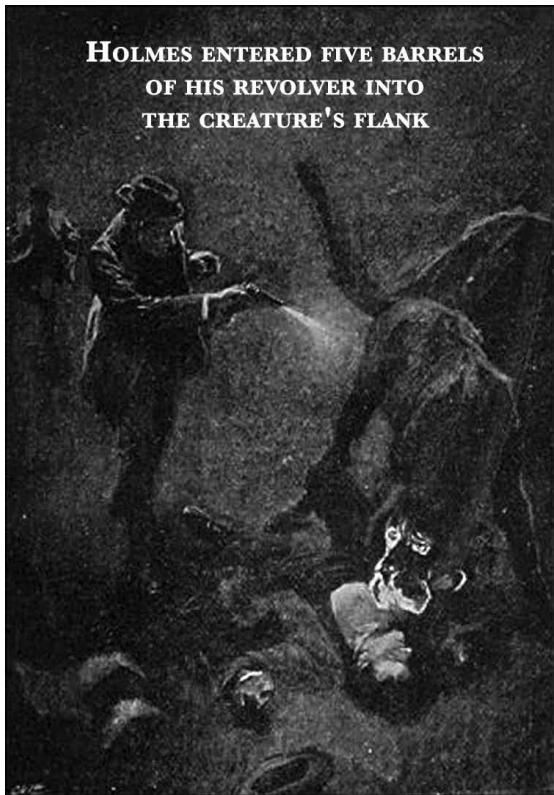


same instant Lestrade gave a yell of terror and threw himself face downward upon the ground. I sprang to my feet, my inert hand grasping my pistol, my mind paralyzed by the dreadful shape which had sprung out upon us from the shadows of the fog. A hound it was, an enormous coal-black hound, but not such a hound as mortal eyes have ever seen. Fire burst from its open mouth, its eyes glowed with a smouldering glare, its muzzle and hackles and dewlap were outlined in flickering flame. Never in the delirious dream of a disordered brain could anything more savage, more appalling, more hellish be conceived than that dark form and savage face which broke upon us out of the wall of fog.

With long bounds the huge black creature was leaping down the track, following hard upon the footsteps of our friend. So paralyzed were we by the apparition that we allowed him to pass before we had recovered our nerve. Then Holmes and I both fired together, and the creature gave a hideous howl, which showed that one at least had hit him. He did not pause, however, but bounded onward. Far away on the path we saw Sir Henry looking back, his face white in the moonlight, his hands raised in horror, glaring helplessly at the frightful thing which was hunting him down.

But that cry of pain from the hound had blown all our fears to the winds. If he was vulnerable he was mortal, and if we could wound him we could kill him. Never have I seen a man run as Holmes ran that night. I am reckoned fleet of foot, but he outpaced me as much as I outpaced the little professional. In front of us as we flew up the track we heard scream after scream from Sir Henry and the deep roar of the hound. I was in time to see the beast spring upon its victim, hurl him to the ground, and worry at his throat. But the next instant Holmes had emptied five barrels of his revolver into the creature's flank. With a last howl of agony and a vicious snap in the air, it rolled upon its back, four feet pawing furiously, and then fell limp upon its side. I stooped, panting, and pressed my pistol to the dreadful, shimmering head, but it was useless to press the trigger. The giant hound was dead.

Sir Henry lay insensible where he had fallen. We tore away his collar, and Holmes breathed a prayer of gratitude when we saw



that there was no sign of a wound and that the rescue had been in time. Already our friend's eyelids shivered and he made a feeble effort to move. Lestrade thrust his brandy-flask between the baronet's teeth, and two frightened eyes were looking up at us.

"My God!" he whispered. "What was it? What, in heaven's name, was it?"

"It's dead, whatever it is," said Holmes. "We've laid the family ghost once and forever."

In mere size and strength it was a terrible creature which was lying stretched before us. It was not a pure bloodhound and it was not a pure mastiff; but it appeared to be a combination of the two—gaunt, savage, and as large as a small lioness. Even now, in the stillness of death, the huge jaws seemed to be dripping with a bluish flame and the small, deep-set, cruel eyes were ringed with fire. I placed my hand upon the glowing muzzle, and as I held them up my own fingers shuddered and gleamed in the darkness.

"Phosphorus," I said.

"A cunning preparation of it," said Holmes, sniffing at the dead animal. "There is no smell which might have interfered with his power of scent. We owe you a deep apology, Sir

Henry, for having exposed you to this fright. I was prepared for a hound, but not for such a creature as this. And the fog gave us little time to receive him."

"You have saved my life."

"Having first endangered it. Are you strong enough to stand?"

"Give me another mouthful of that brandy and I shall be ready for anything. So! Now, if you will help me up. What do you propose to do?"

"To leave you here. You are not fit for further adventures to-night. If you will wait, one or other of us will go back with you to the Hall."

He tried to stagger to his feet; but he was still ghastly pale and trembling in every limb. We helped him to a rock, where he sat shivering with his face buried in his hands.

"We must leave you now," said Holmes. "The rest of our work must be done, and every moment is of importance. We have our case, and now we only want our man."

"It's a thousand to one against our finding him at the house," he continued as we retraced our steps swiftly down the path. "Those shots must have told him that the game was up."

"We were some distance off, and this fog may have deadened them."

"He followed the hound to call him off—of that you may be certain. No, no, he's gone by this time! But we'll search the house and make sure."

The front door was open, so we rushed in and hurried from room to room to the amazement of a doddering old manservant, who met us in the passage. There was no light save in the dining-room, but Holmes caught up the lamp and left no corner of the house unexplored. No sign could we see of the man whom we were chasing. On the upper floor, however, one of the bedroom doors was locked.

"There's someone in here," cried Lestrade. "I can hear a movement. Open this door!"

A faint moaning and rustling came from within. Holmes struck the door just over the lock with the flat of his foot and it flew open. Pistol in hand, we all three rushed into the room.

But there was no sign within it of that desperate and defiant villain whom we expected to

see. Instead we were faced by an object so strange and so unexpected that we stood for a moment staring at it in amazement.

The room had been fashioned into a small museum, and the walls were lined by a number of glass-topped cases full of that collection of butterflies and moths the formation of which had been the relaxation of this complex and dangerous man. In the centre of this room there was an upright beam, which had been placed at some period as a support for the old worm-eaten baulk of timber which spanned the roof. To this post a figure was tied, so swathed and muffled in the sheets which had been used to secure it that one could not for the moment tell whether it was that of a man or a woman. One towel passed round the throat and was secured at the back of the pillar. Another covered the lower part of the face, and over it two dark eyes—eyes full of grief and shame and a dreadful questioning—stared back at us. In a minute we had torn off the gag, unswathed the bonds, and Mrs. Stapleton sank upon the floor in front of us. As her beautiful head fell upon her chest I saw the clear red weal of a whiplash across her neck.

"The brute!" cried Holmes. "Here, Lestrade, your brandy-bottle! Put her in the chair!"



MRS. STAPLETON SANK UPON THE FLOOR

She has fainted from ill-usage and exhaustion."

She opened her eyes again.

"Is he safe?" she asked. "Has he escaped?"

"He cannot escape us, madam."

"No, no, I did not mean my husband. Sir Henry? Is he safe?"

"Yes."

"And the hound?"

"It is dead."

She gave a long sigh of satisfaction.

"Thank God! Thank God! Oh, this villain! See how he has treated me!" She shot her arms out from her sleeves, and we saw with horror that they were all mottled with bruises. "But this is nothing—nothing! It is my mind and soul that he has tortured and defiled. I could endure it all, ill-usage, solitude, a life of deception, everything, as long as I could still cling to the hope that I had his love, but now I know that in this also I have been his dupe and his tool." She broke into passionate sobbing as she spoke.

"You bear him no good will, madam," said Holmes. "Tell us then where we shall find him. If you have ever aided him in evil, help us now and so atone."

"There is but one place where he can have fled," she answered. "There is an old tin mine on an island in the heart of the mire. It was there that he kept his hound and there also he had made preparations so that he might have a refuge. That is where he would fly."

The fog-bank lay like white wool against the window. Holmes held the lamp towards it.

"See," said he. "No one could find his way into the Grimpen Mire to-night."

She laughed and clapped her hands. Her eyes and teeth gleamed with fierce merriment.

"He may find his way in, but never out," she cried. "How can he see the guiding wands tonight? We planted them together, he and I, to mark the pathway through the mire. Oh, if I could only have plucked them out to-day. Then indeed you would have had him at your mercy!"

It was evident to us that all pursuit was in vain until the fog had lifted. Meanwhile we left Lestrade in possession of the house while Holmes and I went back with the baronet to Baskerville Hall. The story of the Stapletons could no longer be withheld from him, but he took the blow

bravely when he learned the truth about the woman whom he had loved. But the shock of the night's adventures had shattered his nerves, and before morning he lay delirious in a high fever, under the care of Dr. Mortimer. The two of them were destined to travel together round the world before Sir Henry had become once more the hale, hearty man that he had been before he became master of that ill-omened estate.

And now I come rapidly to the conclusion of this singular narrative, in which I have tried to make the reader share those dark fears and vague surmises which clouded our lives so long and ended in so tragic a manner. On the morning after the death of the hound the fog had lifted and we were guided by Mrs. Stapleton to the point where they had found a pathway through the bog. It helped us to realize the horror of this woman's life when we saw the eagerness and joy with which she laid us on her husband's track. We left her standing upon the thin peninsula of firm, peaty soil which tapered out into the widespread bog. From the end of it a small wand planted here and there showed where the path zigzagged from tuft to tuft of rushes among those green-scummed pits and foul quagmires which barred the way to the stranger. Rank reeds and lush, slimy water-plants sent an odour of decay and a heavy miasmatic vapour onto our faces, while a false step plunged us more than once thigh-deep into the dark, quivering mire, which shook for yards in soft undulations around our feet. Its tenacious grip plucked at our heels as we walked, and when we sank into it it was as if some malignant hand was tugging us down into those obscene depths, so grim and purposeful was the clutch in which it held us. Once only we saw a trace that someone had passed that perilous way before us. From amid a tuft of cotton grass which bore it up out of the slime some dark thing was projecting. Holmes sank to his waist as he stepped from the path to seize it, and had we not been there to drag him out he could never have set his foot upon firm land again. He held an old black boot in the air. "Meyers, Toronto," was printed on the leather inside.

"It is worth a mud bath," said he. "It is our friend Sir Henry's missing boot."

"Thrown there by Stapleton in his flight."

"Exactly. He retained it in his hand after using it to set the hound upon the track. He fled when he knew the game was up, still clutching it. And he hurled it away at this point of his flight. We know at least that he came so far in safety."

But more than that we were never destined to know, though there was much which we might surmise. There was no chance of finding footsteps in the mire, for the rising mud oozed swiftly in upon them, but as we at last reached firmer ground beyond the morass we all looked eagerly for them. But no slightest sign of them ever met our eyes. If the earth told a true story, then Stapleton never reached that island of refuge towards which he struggled through the fog upon that last night. Somewhere in the heart of the great Grimpent Mire, down in the foul slime of the huge morass which had sucked him in, this cold and cruel-hearted man is forever buried.

Many traces we found of him in the bog-girt island where he had hid his savage ally. A huge driving-wheel and a shaft half-filled with rubbish showed the position of an abandoned mine. Beside it were the crumbling remains of the cottages of the miners, driven away no doubt by the foul reek of the surrounding swamp. In one of these a staple and chain with a quantity of gnawed bones showed where the animal had been confined. A skeleton with a tangle of brown hair adhering to it lay among the debris.

"A dog!" said Holmes. "By Jove, a curly-haired spaniel. Poor Mortimer will never see his pet again. Well, I do not know that this place contains any secret which we have not already fathomed. He could hide his hound, but he could not hush its voice, and hence came those cries which even in daylight were not pleasant to hear. On an emergency he could keep the hound in the out-house at Merripit, but it was always a risk, and it was only on the supreme day, which he regarded as the end of all his efforts, that he dared do it. This paste in the tin is no doubt the luminous mixture with which the creature was daubed. It was suggested, of course, by the story of the family hell-hound, and by the desire to frighten old Sir Charles to death. No wonder the poor devil of a convict ran and screamed, even as our friend did, and as we ourselves might have done, when he saw such a creature bounding through the darkness of

the moor upon his track. It was a cunning device, for, apart from the chance of driving your victim to his death, what peasant would venture to inquire too closely into such a creature should he get sight of it, as many have done, upon the moor? I said it in London, Watson, and I say it again now, that never green-splotched bog which stretched away until it yet have we helped to hunt down a more danger-merged into the russet slopes of the moor. ous man than he who is lying yonder"—he swept his long arm towards the huge mottled expanse of

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*Chapter XV
A Retrospection*

It was the end of November and Holmes and I sat, upon a raw and foggy night, on either side of a blazing fire in our sitting-room in Baker Street. Since the tragic upshot of our visit to Devonshire he had been engaged in two affairs of the utmost importance, in the first of which he had exposed the atrocious conduct of Colonel Upwood in connection with the famous card scandal of the Nonpareil Club, while in the second he had defended the unfortunate Mme. Montpensier from the charge of murder which hung over her in connection with the death of her step-daughter, Mlle. Carere, the young lady who, as it will be remembered, was found six months later alive and married in New York. My friend was in excellent spirits over the success which had attended a succession of difficult and important cases, so that I was able to induce him to discuss the details of the Baskerville mystery. I had waited patiently for the opportunity, for I was aware that he would never permit cases to overlap, and that his clear and logical mind would not be drawn from its present work to dwell upon memories of the past. Sir Henry and Dr. Mortimer were, however, in London, on their way to that long voyage which had been recommended for the restoration of his shattered nerves. They had called upon us that very afternoon, so that it was natural that the subject should come up for discussion.

"The whole course of events," said Holmes, "from the point of view of the man who called himself Stapleton was simple and

direct, although to us, who had no means in the beginning of knowing the motives of his actions and could only learn part of the facts, it all appeared exceedingly complex. I have had the advantage of two conversations with Mrs. Stapleton, and the case has now been so entirely cleared up that I am not aware that there is anything which has remained a secret to us. You will find a few notes upon the matter under the heading B in my indexed list of cases."

"Perhaps you would kindly give me a sketch of the course of events from memory."

"Certainly, though I cannot guarantee that I carry all the facts in my mind. Intense mental concentration has a curious way of blotting out what has passed. The barrister who has his case at his fingers' ends, and is able to argue with an expert upon his own subject finds that a week or two of the courts will drive it all out of his head once more. So each of my cases displaces the last, and Mlle. Carere has blurred my recollection of Baskerville Hall. To-morrow some other little problem may be submitted to my notice which will in turn dispossess the fair French lady and the infamous Upwood. So far as the case of the Hound goes, however, I will give you the course of events as nearly as I can, and you will suggest anything which I may have forgotten.

"My inquiries show beyond all question that the family portrait did not lie, and that this fellow was indeed a Baskerville. He was a son of that Rodger Baskerville, the younger brother of Sir Charles, who fled with a sinister reputation to South America, where he was said to have died unmarried. He did, as a matter of fact, marry, and had one child, this fellow, whose real name is the same as his father's. He married Beryl Garcia, one of the beauties of Costa Rica, and, having purloined a considerable sum of public money, he changed his name to Vandeleur and fled to England, where he established a school in the east of Yorkshire. His reason for attempting this special line of business was that he had struck up an acquaintance with a consumptive tutor upon the voyage home, and that he had used this man's ability to make the undertaking a success. Fraser, the tutor, died however, and the school which had begun well sank from disrepute into infamy. The Vandeleurs found it convenient to change their

name to Stapleton, and he brought the remains of his fortune, his schemes for the future, and his taste for entomology to the south of England. I learned at the British Museum that he was a recognized authority upon the subject, and that the name of Vandeleur has been permanently attached to a certain moth which he had, in his Yorkshire days, been the first to describe.

"We now come to that portion of his life which has proved to be of such intense interest to us. The fellow had evidently made inquiry and found that only two lives intervened between him and a valuable estate. When he went to Devonshire his plans were, I believe, exceedingly hazy, but that he meant mischief from the first is evident from the way in which he took his wife with him in the character of his sister. The idea of using her as a decoy was clearly already in his mind, though he may not have been certain how the details of his plot were to be arranged. He meant in the end to have the estate, and he was ready to use any tool or run any risk for that end. His first act was to establish himself as near to his ancestral home as he could, and his second was to cultivate a friendship with Sir Charles Baskerville and with the neighbours.

"The baronet himself told him about the family hound, and so prepared the way for his own death. Stapleton, as I will continue to call him, knew that the old man's heart was weak and that a shock would kill him. So much he had learned from Dr. Mortimer. He had heard also that Sir Charles was superstitious and had taken this grim legend very seriously. His ingenious mind instantly suggested a way by which the baronet could be done to death, and yet it would be hardly possible to bring home the guilt to the real murderer.

"Having conceived the idea he proceeded to carry it out with considerable finesse. An ordinary schemer would have been content to work with a savage hound. The use of artificial means to make the creature diabolical was a flash of genius upon his part. The dog he bought in London from Ross and Mangles, the dealers in Fulham Road. It was the strongest and most savage in their possession. He brought it down by the North Devon line and walked a great distance over the moor so as to get it home without exciting

any remarks. He had already on his insect hunts learned to penetrate the Grimpent Mire, and so had found a safe hiding-place for the creature. Here he kennelled it and waited his chance.

"But it was some time coming. The old gentleman could not be decoyed outside of his grounds at night. Several times Stapleton lurked about with his hound, but without avail. It was during these fruitless quests that he, or rather his ally, was seen by peasants, and that the legend of the demon dog received a new confirmation. He had hoped that his wife might lure Sir Charles to his ruin, but here she proved unexpectedly independent. She would not endeavour to entangle the old gentleman in a sentimental attachment which might deliver him over to his enemy. Threats and even, I am sorry to say, blows refused to move her. She would have nothing to do with it, and for a time Stapleton was at a deadlock.

"He found a way out of his difficulties through the chance that Sir Charles, who had conceived a friendship for him, made him the minister of his charity in the case of this unfortunate woman, Mrs. Laura Lyons. By representing himself as a single man he acquired complete influence over her, and he gave her to understand that in the event of her obtaining a divorce from her husband he would marry her. His plans were suddenly brought to a head by his knowledge that Sir Charles was about to leave the Hall on the advice of Dr. Mortimer, with whose opinion he himself pretended to coincide. He must act at once, or his victim might get beyond his power. He therefore put pressure upon Mrs. Lyons to write this letter, imploring the old man to give her an interview on the evening before his departure for London. He then, by a specious argument, prevented her from going, and so had the chance for which he had waited.

"Driving back in the evening from Coombe Tracey he was in time to get his hound, to treat it with his infernal paint, and to bring the beast round to the gate at which he had reason to expect that he would find the old gentleman waiting. The dog, incited by its master, sprang over the wicket-gate and pursued the unfortunate baronet, who fled screaming down the Yew Alley. In that gloomy tunnel it must indeed have been

a dreadful sight to see that huge black creature, with its flaming jaws and blazing eyes, bounding after its victim. He fell dead at the end of the alley from heart disease and terror. The hound had kept upon the grassy border while the baronet had run down the path, so that no track but the man's was visible. On seeing him lying still the creature had probably approached to sniff at him, but finding him dead had turned away again. It was then that it left the print which was actually observed by Dr. Mortimer. The hound was called off and hurried away to its lair in the Grimpden Mire, and a mystery was left which puzzled the authorities, alarmed the country-side, and finally brought the case within the scope of our observation.

"So much for the death of Sir Charles Baskerville. You perceive the devilish cunning of it, for really it would be almost impossible to make a case against the real murderer. His only accomplice was one who could never give him away, and the grotesque, inconceivable nature of the device only served to make it more effective. Both of the women concerned in the case, Mrs. Stapleton and Mrs. Laura Lyons, were left with a strong suspicion against Stapleton. Mrs. Stapleton knew that he had designs upon the old man, and also of the existence of the hound. Mrs. Lyons knew neither of these things, but had been impressed by the death occurring at the time of an uncancelled appointment which was only known to him. However, both of them were under his influence, and he had nothing to fear from them. The first half of his task was successfully accomplished but the more difficult still remained.

"It is possible that Stapleton did not know of the existence of an heir in Canada. In any case he would very soon learn it from his friend Dr. Mortimer, and he was told by the latter all details about the arrival of Henry Baskerville. Stapleton's first idea was that this young stranger from Canada might possibly be done to death in London without coming down to Devonshire at all. He distrusted his wife ever since she had refused to help him in laying a trap for the old man, and he dared not leave her long out of his sight for fear he should lose his influence over her. It was for this reason that he took her to London with him. They lodged, I find, at the Mexborough

Private Hotel, in Craven Street, which was actually one of those called upon by my agent in search of evidence. Here he kept his wife imprisoned in her room while he, disguised in a beard, followed Dr. Mortimer to Baker Street and afterwards to the station and to the Northumberland Hotel. His wife had some inkling of his plans; but she had such a fear of her husband—a fear founded upon brutal ill-treatment—that she dare not write to warn the man whom she knew to be in danger. If the letter should fall into Stapleton's hands her own life would not be safe. Eventually, as we know, she adopted the expedient of cutting out the words which would form the message, and addressing the letter in a disguised hand. It reached the baronet, and gave him the first warning of his danger.

"It was very essential for Stapleton to get some article of Sir Henry's attire so that, in case he was driven to use the dog, he might always have the means of setting him upon his track. With characteristic promptness and audacity he set about this at once, and we cannot doubt that the boots or chamber-maid of the hotel was well bribed to help him in his design. By chance, however, the first boot which was procured for him was a new one and, therefore, useless for his purpose. He then had it returned and obtained another—a most instructive incident, since it proved conclusively to my mind that we were dealing with a real hound, as no other supposition could explain this anxiety to obtain an old boot and this indifference to a new one. The more *outr'e* and grotesque an incident is the more carefully it deserves to be examined, and the very point which appears to complicate a case is, when duly considered and scientifically handled, the one which is most likely to elucidate it.

"Then we had the visit from our friends next morning, shadowed always by Stapleton in the cab. From his knowledge of our rooms and of my appearance, as well as from his general conduct, I am inclined to think that Stapleton's career of crime has been by no means limited to this single Baskerville affair. It is suggestive that during the last three years there have been four considerable burglaries in the West Country, for none of which was any criminal ever arrested. The last of these, at Folkestone Court, in May,

was remarkable for the cold-blooded pistoling of the page, who surprised the masked and solitary burglar. I cannot doubt that Stapleton recruited his waning resources in this fashion, and that for years he has been a desperate and dangerous man.

"We had an example of his readiness of resource that morning when he got away from us so successfully, and also of his audacity in sending back my own name to me through the cabman. From that moment he understood that I had taken over the case in London, and that therefore there was no chance for him there. He returned to Dart-moor and awaited the arrival of the baronet."

"One moment!" said I. "You have, no doubt, described the sequence of events correctly, but there is one point which you have left unexplained. What became of the hound when its master was in London?"

"I have given some attention to this matter and it is undoubtedly of importance. There can be no question that Stapleton had a confidant, though it is unlikely that he ever placed himself in his power by sharing all his plans with him. There was an old manservant at Merripit House, whose name was Anthony. His connection with the Stapletons can be traced for several years, as far back as the schoolmastering days, so that he must have been aware that his master and mistress were really husband and wife. This man has disappeared and has escaped from the country. It is suggestive that Anthony is not a common name in England, while Antonio is so in all Spanish or Spanish-American countries. The man, like Mrs. Stapleton herself, spoke good English, but with a curious lisping accent. I have myself seen this old man cross the Grimpden Mire by the path which Stapleton had marked out. It is very probable, therefore, that in the absence of his master it was he who cared for the hound, though he may never have known the purpose for which the beast was used.

"The Stapletons then went down to Devonshire, whither they were soon followed by Sir Henry and you. One word now as to how I stood myself at that time. It may possibly recur to your memory that when I examined the paper upon which the printed words were fastened I made a close inspection for the water-mark. In doing so I held it within a few inches of my eyes,

and was conscious of a faint smell of the scent known as white jessamine. There are seventy-five perfumes, which it is very necessary that a criminal expert should be able to distinguish from each other, and cases have more than once within my own experience depended upon their prompt recognition. The scent suggested the presence of a lady, and already my thoughts began to turn towards the Stapletons. Thus I had made certain of the hound, and had guessed at the criminal before ever we went to the west country.

"It was my game to watch Stapleton. It was evident, however, that I could not do this if I were with you, since he would be keenly on his guard. I deceived everybody, therefore, yourself included, and I came down secretly when I was supposed to be in London. My hardships were not so great as you imagined, though such trifling details must never interfere with the investigation of a case. I stayed for the most part at Coombe Tracey, and only used the hut upon the moor when it was necessary to be near the scene of action. Cartwright had come down with me, and in his disguise as a country boy he was of great assistance to me. I was dependent upon him for food and clean linen. When I was watching Stapleton, Cartwright was frequently watching you, so that I was able to keep my hand upon all the strings.

"I have already told you that your reports reached me rapidly, being forwarded instantly from Baker Street to Coombe Tracey. They were of great service to me, and especially that one incidentally truthful piece of biography of Stapleton's. I was able to establish the identity of the man and the woman and knew at last exactly how I stood. The case had been considerably complicated through the incident of the escaped convict and the relations between him and the Barry-mores. This also you cleared up in a very effective way, though I had already come to the same conclusions from my own observations.

"By the time that you discovered me upon the moor I had a complete knowledge of the whole business, but I had not a case which could go to a jury. Even Stapleton's attempt upon Sir Henry that night which ended in the death of the unfortunate convict did not help us much in proving murder against our man. There

seemed to be no alternative but to catch him red-handed, and to do so we had to use Sir Henry, alone and apparently unprotected, as a bait. We did so, and at the cost of a severe shock to our client we succeeded in completing our case and driving Stapleton to his destruction. That Sir Henry should have been exposed to this is, I must confess, a reproach to my management of the case, but we had no means of foreseeing the terrible and paralyzing spectacle which the beast presented, nor could we predict the fog which enabled him to burst upon us at such short notice. We succeeded in our object at a cost which both the specialist and Dr. Mortimer assure me will be a temporary one. A long journey may enable our friend to recover not only from his shattered nerves but also from his wounded feelings. His love for the lady was deep and sincere, and to him the saddest part of all this black business was that he should have been deceived by her.

"It only remains to indicate the part which she had played throughout. There can be no doubt that Stapleton exercised an influence over her which may have been love or may have been fear, or very possibly both, since they are by no means incompatible emotions. It was, at least, absolutely effective. At his command she consented to pass as his sister, though he found the limits of his power over her when he endeavoured to make her the direct accessory to murder. She was ready to warn Sir Henry so far as she could without implicating her husband, and again and again she tried to do so. Stapleton himself seems to have been capable of jealousy, and when he saw the baronet paying court to the lady, even though it was part of his own plan, still he could not help interrupting with a passionate outburst which revealed the fiery soul which his self-contained manner so cleverly concealed. By encouraging the intimacy he made it certain that Sir Henry would frequently come to Merripit House and that he would sooner or later get the opportunity which he desired. On the day of the crisis, however, his wife turned suddenly against him. She had learned something of the death of the convict, and she knew that the hound was being kept in the outhouse on the evening that Sir Henry was coming to dinner. She taxed her husband with his intended crime, and a furious

scene followed, in which he showed her for the first time that she had a rival in his love. Her fidelity turned in an instant to bitter hatred and he saw that she would betray him. He tied her up, therefore, that she might have no chance of warning Sir Henry, and he hoped, no doubt, that when the whole country-side put down the baronet's death to the curse of his family, as they certainly would do, he could win his wife back to accept an accomplished fact and to keep silent upon what she knew. In this I fancy that in any case he made a miscalculation, and that, if we had not been there, his doom would none the less have been sealed. A woman of Spanish blood does not condone such an injury so lightly. And now, my dear Watson, without referring to my notes, I cannot give you a more detailed account of this curious case. I do not know that anything essential has been left unexplained."

"He could not hope to frighten Sir Henry to death as he had done the old uncle with his bogie hound."

"The beast was savage and half-starved. If its appearance did not frighten its victim to death, at least it would paralyze the resistance which might be offered."

"No doubt. There only remains one difficulty. If Stapleton came into the succession, how could he explain the fact that he, the heir, had been living unannounced under another name so close to the property? How could he claim it without causing suspicion and inquiry?"

"It is a formidable difficulty, and I fear that you ask too much when you expect me to solve it. The past and the present are within the field of my inquiry, but what a man may do in the future is a hard question to answer. Mrs. Stapleton has heard her husband discuss the problem on several occasions. There were three possible courses. He might claim the property from South America, establish his identity before the British authorities there and so obtain the fortune without ever coming to England at all; or he might adopt an elaborate disguise during the short time that he need be in London; or, again, he might furnish an accomplice with the proofs and papers, putting him in as heir, and retaining a claim upon some proportion of his income. We cannot doubt from what we know of him that he

would have found some way out of the difficulty. And now, my dear Watson, we have had some weeks of severe work, and for one evening, I think, we may turn our thoughts into more pleasant channels. I have a box for 'Les Huguenots.' Have you heard the De Reszkes? Might I trouble you then to be ready in half an hour, and we can stop at Marcini's for a little dinner on the way?"

FINI

* * * * *





Colin James



The Good Use of Memory

The sensualist
wakes up
to the smell of
bacon and coffee.
The vegetarian,
cat piss and cotton.

Borges was right
when he said your
mirror is lying to
you, better paint
the town blue.

Subjective Objectivism

Free the Concord grape
so we can have a decent
wine up here in the northeast,
unlikely due to the climate.
Sweet ciders and commingling
are not such rare things.

I met some nice people
at the local Cracker Barrel.
We joked about the salt-shaker,
and laughed joyfully for hours.

When you hit it off like that,
those moments are priceless.
No amount of alternative nostril
breathing compares, nor can it
amalgamate as adequately.

* * *

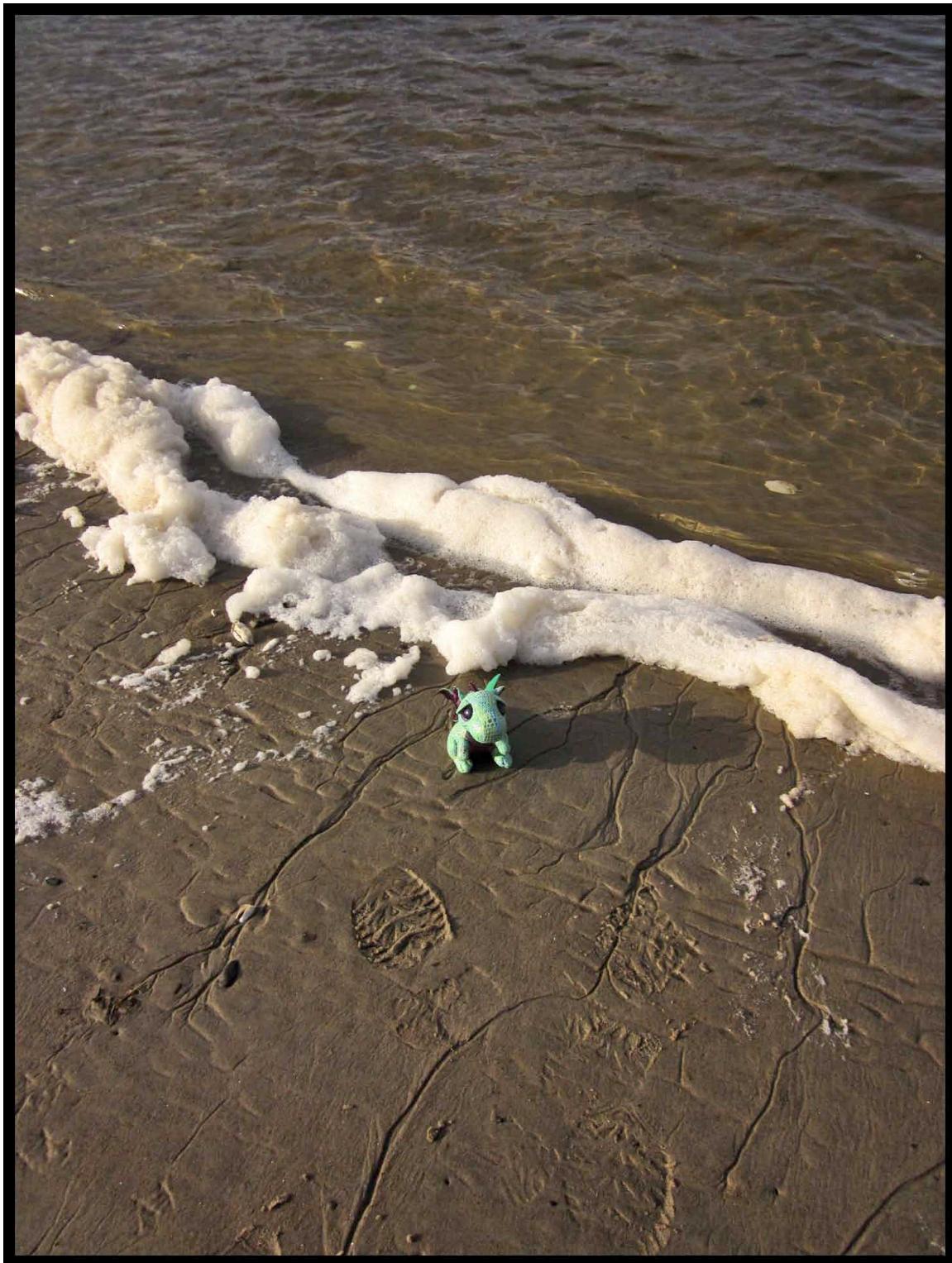
The Brunette Spiral

Beauty outthinks intelligent design.
See the harbormaster's hairy ayatollah
on page 1.6, then work backwards,
forming an epistle yet again.

They put me in a remedial class
at an early age where I excelled.
But I got bored with plowing in straight lines
and thought: *what if Fibonacci was right?*
Five can be half of eight in as many words.

Even now I hesitate to abdicate.

* * * * *





Raymond Soulard, Jr.

Labyrinthine [a new fixtion]

Part Two

"I tell you, there are, more worlds,
and more stars to them,
than you will think of in many years!"
George Macdonald
London, 1870

xlii.

Nearly 6 months to begin this next section. 4136 pages. 18 years & 4 weeks. Here. *New page. Next page.*

OK, then, saw how *Lx* arrived full-all into the *Great Grand Braided Narrative*, rode through, & then began to flounder. *Whereto next? What of the next?*

I did not know till I then arrived to pages & pages & pages of review. Right from its start. Wonderful. Nearly endless.

Now here. And an idea niggling at me. Has to do with the Gate-Keeper, last seen on Abe's Beach, in his company. Some time he needs to spend with Abe the Ancient Sea Turtle there. Eventually to re-unite with the Six Brother-Heroes & Schola' Dan'l, & they all bound for the Great Tree at the Heart of the Many Worlds. Eventually.

Time for coins & dice. *Buckle in! Safety First!*

xliii.

How to begin, resume. I think: try this moment, on Abe's Beach of Many Worlds:

We're standing in the shadows just inside a strange little Hut. Outside, there is a merry, noisy ruckus. You see, the Six Brother-Heroes were just re-united, just last night, the Night of the Wobble Moon, & now they & their many friends, the Four Famous Travelers, Algernon Beagle, Princess Crissy of Imagianna, among many others, are hugging Abe the Ancient Sea Turtle's great smiling bulk best they can, climbing into the also-famous Boat-Wagon, driven by those bloo-eyed Kittees & their Friend Fish, itself rolled up onto the green-&-golden schnoggin of just-arrived Calgary the Sea Dragon who, after all are safely buckled in (*Safety First!*), safety scales in place, rises up with a great *thwup!-thwup!-thwupping!* of his beautiful wings—"Come to the Festival soon!" he calls down in his gruff, merry voice—Abe waves a friendly flipper, & some small brown Bear Creatures near him sniff friendly too—swirls up &

up toward those clouds up there—"Goodbye! Thankee!" everyone calls down again & again—till he finally dives straight up into those clouds with a great *Ker-Splash!*—tis the bottom of the Deep Deep Sea, & there cascades down some salty spray—& they are on their way to the Thought Fleas' Rutabaga Festival & Fleastock—

There is a long moment of quiet on this Beach—save for the ever-on *whoosh! whoosh! whoosh!* of the Deeper Deeper Sea.

Then: "You are welcomed to come out now, my friend," says the kind, ancient voice of Abe the Ancient Sea Turtle.

And thus Gate-Keeper leaves this strange little Hut, & climbs down the old wooden stairs, back onto the Beach, & over to sit with Abe & those little Bear Creatures. Peppermint Bears by moniker.

Straightening out his tall crooked self best he can, low-drooping faux-furred cap, rags fulla pockets, boots of vines & stones—

Abe the Ancient Sea Turtle is less house-tall than sometimes, since his current companions so small, but Gate-Keeper is ever in awe of him, as his every other visit—

But he knows well how to deftly curl up among Abe's flippers, half-turned so they can see each other's faces—

No words awhile. Gate-Keeper closes his eyes, & just the Sea's pretty music—

"The Brother-Heroes promised to help me unblock my world, when they return here."

"Yes."

"Will this be my final circuit?"

"If they succeed."

"Will we?"

"*You must.*"

Eyes lock eyes.

"You don't know or you can't say?"

"Future cannot be *said*, my friend. There are mysteries wait learning."

Quiet again.

Suddenly Abe's Toothéd Imp, also called the First Islander, bursts up from a half-buried stone bucket attached to a rainbow thread. "Ké?" she says to Gate-Keeper, merry mad eyes. "Stories!" she adds, & cackles wildly.

She meant Gate-Keeper's Tripod Camera, & how he had during previous times visiting here shown some of what he filmed in his travels. Some of what becomes **RemoteLand**—

Not that he would know what he would show Abe & this cackling First Islander, or to the Peppermint Bears too this time. His Tripod Camera seemed to decide this. What was OK by him.

But how to set up his camera so a great Sea Turtle, two small Bear Creatures, & a tiny Imp could all watch comfortably?

Maybe the magicks of the Wide Wide Sea would not leave this puzzle unsolved because what he would do is plant its 3 long spindly legs firmly in the sand, lift the camera's face tilted up, & crank slowly away, & the images would seem to broadcast like onto the very air above the Deeper Deeper Sea—Gate-Keeper would crank & crank, & all would watch like the strangest but most charming movie theater!

So his audience got clustered & comfortable, & Gate-Keeper began to crank & crank, not knowing, as always, what they would see . . .

[Wait—sneak in a few lines here—what has obscurely lacked in my mind is more of the *why* for Gate-Keeper's staying with Abe—

[From dreams as often does emerged murky bits toward an answer—

[I don't think it's so much physical captivity for Gate-Keeper's people—I think they are captive to what they *think* happened back when they were in their spaceship, bound from Emandia for a chosen new home—

[They did indeed collide with a fragment of Wobble, but mistakenly believed themselves thrown off course to a different world—& arrived to one barely hospitable—their ship crashed, themselves captive to . . . what?

[Wobbled, they perceived wrongly, & this how they are captive—

[What Gate-Keeper must learn is that much of what his people believe to be true about their situation *isn't*—discovering this, he will know better what needs saving from—

[Thus, his challenge is like that of the Six Brother-Heroes—even as they none of them know this yet—

[Does Abe? He knows much & little—but sums to feeling that Gate-Keeper is close to discovering what he needs to—

[Were I even on Abe's Beach right now, I could not tell him this such that he feels it *true*—

[His work is to learn it with these dear friends in close company with him—

Now, resume—]

xliv.

Murky what then becomes a somewhat cramped space, strange noises both organic & electronic, yes I think it's true Emandian ships are not inert metal & glass—

But something else too—something fake—was it apparent all along? Were there clues?—weird repeating blips on the monitor?

Did this dreamlike psychosis increase nearer collision with the fragment of Wobble? Or just different?

Was there really a crash at all? Was there no logic to this, therefore no ground upon which to stand? Where the sky? Where the horizon?

4094-4099 6
 4100-4105 6
 4106-4111 6

4114-4115, 4120-4123 ~~6~~

4124-4128 ~~4129-4133~~ ~~6~~

4131-4132 ~~4133-4135~~ ~~6~~

① Toss 2 coins —

- 2 heads = character

- 1 head/1 tail = place

- 2 tails = theme

② Whichever 1 comes up, toss dice

1-6 to determine how many will be

that category — that leaves up to 5 for
 others to claim

③ Toss 2 coins again — whichever gets it,
 dice says how many in that category —
 remaining category gets what remains —

Try it now.

Toss 1 = 2 tails = other theme

Dice = 5

So = Toss 1 = only 1 other ~~other~~ category
 gets 1 = it's 2 heads = character

So, 5 themes + 1 character

Now, how to select within category toss dice again

1-page 4094-4099

5-pages 4124-4128, 4130

3-pages 4100-4105

6-pages 4131-4136

3-pages 4106-4111

thus, toss: 4 P 4114-4115 / 5 themes
 So: ~~1~~ P 4114-4115 / 1 character
 4120-4123
 EASY EASY!

3-pages 4114-4115
 4120-4123

What real? What true & why? How to swim to light & clarity with no knowledge of what any of this is?

“Was there a Wobble? Did we crash?” Gate-Keeper cries out, flails, caught neatly tween Abe’s great flippers, landed deep in a Croon of Abe, the Peppermint Bears, even the First Islander.

“Did we crash? What is unknown? How to trust any of it?”

xlv.

Pause the flow to think on page about this book & what best to do for it—

So I did the 6-month review of 4000-some pages back to 2006—& *what?*

What is conjure a method to let them join in—

I tend to think pick 6 items per try—random how many of each category—

Try this:

1. Toss 2 coins—
 - 2 heads = *character*
 - 1 head / 1 tale = *place*
 - 2 tails = *theme*
2. Whichever *1* comes up, toss dice 1-6 to determine how many will be that category—that leaves up to 5 for the others to claim
3. Toss 2 coins again—whichever gets it, dice says how many in that category—remaining category gets what remains—

Try it now.

Toss! = 2 tails = *theme*

Dice = 5

So = Toss! = only 1 other category gets 1 = it’s 2 *heads* = *character*

So, 5 themes + 1 character

Now, how to select within category . . . toss dice again

- 1 – pages 4094-4099
- 2 – pages 4100-4105
- 3 – pages 4106-4111
- 4 – pages 4114-4115, 4120-4123
- 5 – pages 4124-4128, 4130
- 6 – pages 4131-4136

Thus, toss: 4

So: pages 4114-4115, 4120-4123 – 5 themes, 1 character

Peasy Easy!

How does this work? Let me guess. Yes. That's it, I'd say. I guess. But the magick comes in guessing over & over, as many calendar pages turn, guess better the next time & the next one—

There are tricks & traps & floors
& doors are not what they seem,
which makes it more fun—
follow the rules directly & well
to the starting line, & then *go*—

If *go* isn't *happy, often, & free*,
go ain't being done right—

Turn again topic to the Deeper Dreaming, do, & wonder this the rough path for Gate-Keeper to travel?
Let's see . . .

“How deep can I film down into the Dreaming?”
“Deep?”
“Deeper than the Wobble?”
“Ké?”
“Below the Great Tree at the Heart of the Many Worlds?”
“Ké?”
“Farther back than Unitive Time?”
Abe laughs merrily.

“Are these possible?”
“Hard to say?”

Gate-Keeper falls silent. His cranking hand still.

“What are we saving?”
“The Many Worlds?”
“From?”
“Loss.”
“Of?”
“Everything.”
“One or the other?”
“Yes.”
“No other way?”
“No. Growth or decay. That is the only choice.”

Gate-Keeper is quiet.
Says, “World isn't still, ever, is it?”
“No.”

The First Islander wriggles loose to find a seat 'pon Gate-Keeper's downturned hand. Looks up at him with crazy, merry eyes.

Gate-Keeper smiles her. “More stories?”
She cackles merrily . . .

Not precisely like her own merry laugh in that hotel room they [we] shared, but not far from it in a strange way either. She'd stretch out on the [our] bed till it seemed like she resembled one of the oddly elongated images in his [my] blood canvases—

Luring me [yet not]—inviting me [really?]—what was I [we] there for? Why did she say to me, sex kitten voice to claw me deep[er], “We'll never leave this room, Charlie. Even long from now & far away, we're here, & always.”

Something different this time. Circuits don't always snap & evolve themselves.

Croaks harshly, barely. “Come with me.”

Silence.

Clearer. Calmer. “Come with me.”

Barely: “Where?”

“Through that door. Onward.”

“Onward?”

“Onward, Cordel'a. I'm ready, if you are too.”

“Where?”

“Will you come?”

“*To where?*”

“To help save the Many Worlds.”

She almost says, “Save?” but doesn't. She stands, roused madly by this, by realizing she's in translucent panties & a bare mention of a half-shirt, & this strange man she can't fathom her feelings for is *inviting her* with him, *out*.

But instinctively to test him. Leads him unsure to the old dim room's one old armchair. Straddles him, eyes upon eyes, does not touch him with her hands or lips, lets him do as he wills.

He smiles. He holds her. Not like a raw bite, but gently. Quietly. Hard down there? Yes, but she'd be hard for herself right now too, if she had *that* kind of plumbing.

No time long passes like this.

He *means* this.

Whatever *this is*.

They don't have much to pack.

A few clothes.

That strange camera.

Has she been excited like this before? Long time, *ever*?

Has she trusted a man's hand to hold like this? Long time, *at least*—

xlvi.

White-Faced Pink Cat Radio playing some electro-kaleidoscope vision & the words travel loosely about their room as they go—



“The machinery, the blood & the marrow & the bones & the tentacles that undergird this world, & all its beauties & terrors.”

The words settle in as the door closes, will wait for them, on the walls, the shadows underneath the bed, sliding down the bathroom mirror, in the bed where touch is truth, touch is confession, touch, touch, *touch*—

And in this Deeper Dreaming is where Gate-Keeper is able to do with Cordel'a something he cannot recall ever—

He slows them in this strange hallway, smiles her real, hands her his Tripod Camera, & nods—

Her smile Cheshire Cat wild as she holds the camera in her grasp, trying to figure out the details of this. He is patient as she studies. Each must know this magick device uniquely, is his guess.

“Show me.”

“Are you sure?”

Nods. “Go slow, OK?”

Nods in return.

Her grasp is gentler than his, unsure at first, but Gate-Keeper finds he does not have to teach her much at all really.

The three spindly legs seem to shorten to her height, & the crank handle curves to complement her smaller hand. Even the camera face gentles around its edges, nearly bloom-shaped now.

“Now turn the handle. Slowly at first. Find your rhythm.”

She goes slow at first but, not quite satisfied, turns more rapidly. Also arhythmically, to suit herself & the camera. Something forms on the lens.

Letters form, but they do not stay stable, but she picks out several that recur:

Y O U A R E
J I N N

But then they fade, & what next forms pulls her in, tugs her in, deeper & deeper, till she slows cranking to test that she can retreat. She can.

She finds herself walking in White Woods, neither dreaming nor awake, a feeling of warmth in the air, in her, a wordless fullness, no purpose to any of it, never was, yet happiness, *pleasure in presence*, a phrase she recalls from an old poem—

The Woods now give way to a clearing, & in its center a very still pool, & she curiously approaches to gaze what she is right now—leans over to look—

Her eyes look calm, intense.

Her long hair done up in elaborate
braiding.

Her dress is long on her, folds
 upon folds of pink & white.
 Her feet are bare, unpainted,
 unadorned.
 Her body feels unlit.
 Her heart still as this pool.

She sits down by the still pool, realizes she hears no sounds here, recks no movement about her.

Remembers & wonders what was meant by:

Y O U A R E
 J I N N

She lays down by the still pool now, lightly & curiously touching her face, hair. Her hands explore her breasts, her tummy, her bare pussy. Her legs, feet. *This is her?*

This is me? Should be an odd, or obvious question, but isn't. She feels like she hasn't ventured this deep within before, not asked that question, or wondered whatever answer she would give or not give.

She looks up at me. I nod.
 "What is . . . jinn?"
 "I think you are."
 "What does it mean?"
 "It can mean many things. But I think, for you, a kind of magickal companion. Untame, much unknown, little saddled."
 "Saddled?"
 "Some jinns may be harnessed, controlled. Or do the harming & controlling."
 "Not me?"
 "I don't think so. It's barely a word for you. A vague approximation."
 "What am I for?"
 I shake my head. Gesture her to slow her crankings to return.

xlvii.

I did a good long review of this book, & feel more familiar with it than in a long time, plenty of fresh notes & ideas what to do with them—but—

How does this book fit in with the larger *Tangled Gate Mythopoeia* about it? More directly? More obscurely?

Each project of the *TGM* has its own unique way & challenge, no single rule for them all—I feel like long review & notes-taking was prelude to what must happen here—

I know Gate-Keeper is bound for reunion with the Six Brother-Heroes. Is Cordel'a?

I tend to think no, & yet something too for her ongoing story. Maybe she is the way back even as he is the way on?

What of her will linger & how? She needs her own device.

J'z'hin. That's closer to what she is, what she will do.

"You need to be brave."

"Brave?"

"And trust me."

"Trust?"

"And I think soon say goodbye to the Gate-Keeper. At least for now."

"Why?"

"You need to go back & give news & fetch help."

She just stares at me now.

"You also have a role in saving the Many Worlds."

Now listening.

"I need soon to bring you to the Room of Song."

She nods. Unknowing, yet nods.

xlviii.

She is going to meet the Brother-Heroes. I don't know what this will mean. Right now to travel her awhile back to the Gate-Keeper.

xlix.

To sloop them back to that No-Tell room, gather them again before a longer parting, have they so honestly held each other before?

He is tall but bony, his frame coiled around her not unlike his long-legged camera. Gentle, open, but something else too. Like he would consume her from her deepest depths, if she let, if she could, if she wanted, if she knew how. She tempts to try but cannot, yet.

Her warm flesh burns him to know better, what it is, what it does, how rawly it affects. Even her shoulders, her ankles, her elbows, often along a man's hungry, licking way elsewhere, these too badge him with need, a need he understands, a need he radiates too.

Enough words to bind more deeply by, & too a sense they will be parted some long while, yet he does something to breach this. Neatly fractures a slice of his camera's lens, & wraps in an old green-&-golden kerchief from deep in his ragged clothes. In turn, she gnaws & chews & rubs high & low on her the palm of his cranking hand. Making her presence on him, by waking, & in dreams of course too.

l.

Cordel'a has never been to Imagianna before, & this is where she is bound. Her backpack several colors, fitted closely to her back, Gate-Keeper's wrapped gift tucked in a deep pocket within.

I am with her, somewhat, like an extra shadow, one who can talk sometimes.

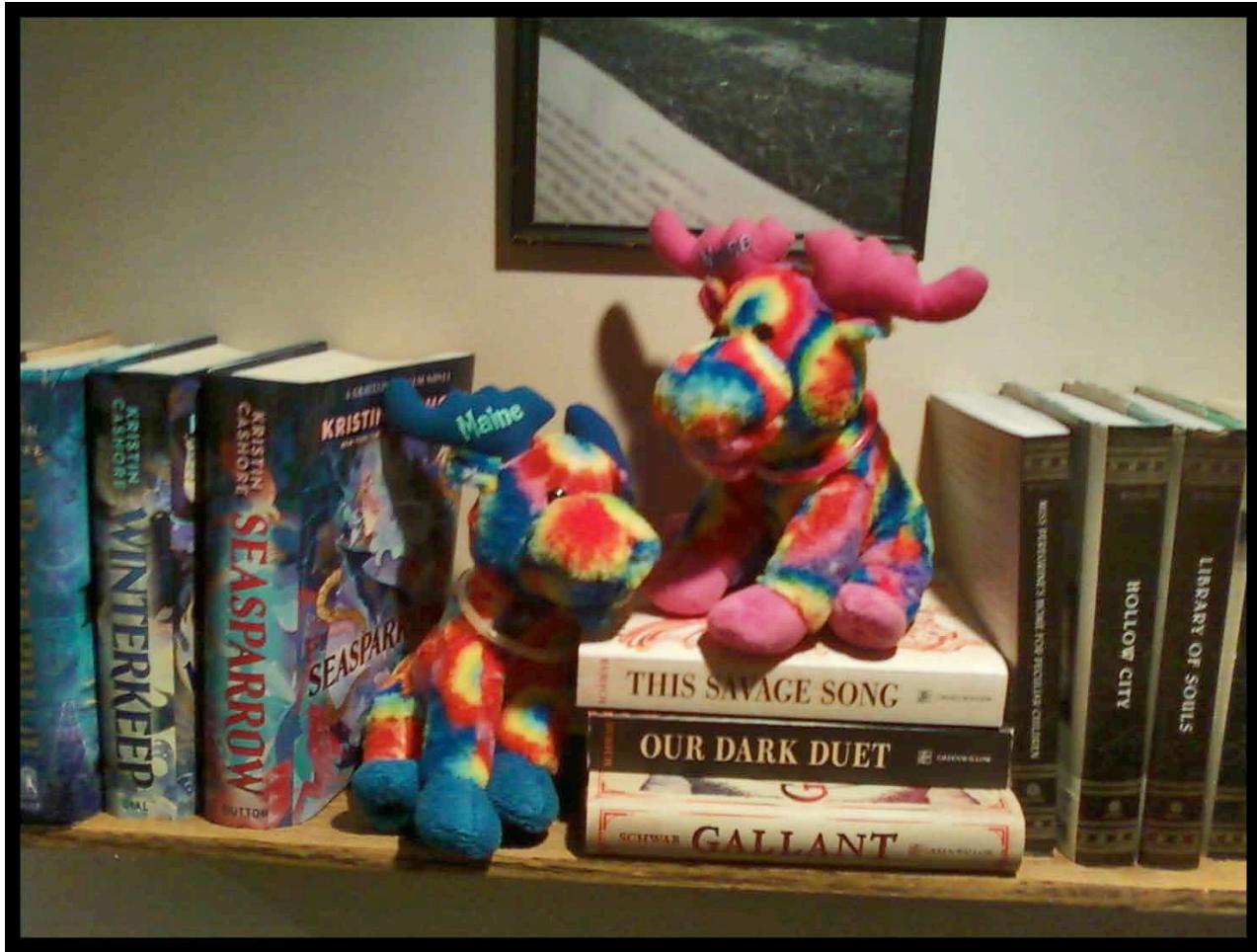
"Can you tell me something more?"

"There is a shift among worlds, for one."

She nods, lets these words slowly arrive to her.

"What's in your book-bag? All of this, written in notebooks?"

"As much as I have so far. Many ragged sheafs of high notes."



More words, slowly arriving.

The long fields we walk are green grass, golden tinted, smear of cloudy sun in the sky. Distant White Woods, distant mountain. Not empty, not at all.

Her hand takes mine, what shadowy hand I have to offer her.

“What is the Room of Song?”

“Something new to me, to this *Mythopoeia*.”

“What do you know so far?”

“It’s full of ancient, living music. Cannot be taken away by memory, but there are other ways.”

She stops suddenly. “Like my gift from Charlie?”

Stopped too, I float, wavering. Neither nod nor nay.

She walks on.

“Where do we find it?”

“Up ahead a-ways, I think.”

“Will you stay near me?”

“As needed.”

“Do you want to?”

“If it makes it work better.”

li.

Let go the map. This is a hard one. Maps are guides, are good, right? Maps also go so far, can guide so much.

OK. Let go the map? Call it a checkpoint more than an order. Is it *still* a good map? *Is it guiding still?*

Maybe start to read it better?

Maybe sometimes a map is part argument, persuasion, interpretation—

Still in the Deeper Dreaming, White Woods, but Cordel'a gone again, as she does, the Gate-Keeper considers that old bit of wise—

Let go the Map.

But to ask: what Map am I grasping?

Is it my circuits?

“Do I still need them?”

“Do you?”

“I did. But maybe I don’t.”

“What has changed?”

“My . . . understanding of the problem?”

Abe smiles & nods down, from Beach's waking, down the Deep Dreaming, & come the Deeper Dreaming.

"Let this go?"

"Finish it. Then *help your Brothers.*"

lii.

"The only truth is Art's.' Yes, I believe this, for me, some others. All? I don't know that for sure. It sounds good when I write it for me, but I'm less certain beyond that.

"Art is an encompassing devotion. Needs the mechanics of talent, the magick of gift, the persistence of discipline.

"I suppose other endeavors demand in equivalent ways. I don't deny it at this moment.

"Are other devotions as good? Bear truth too? Maybe.

"It's just queer funny to write those words I've past written with utter sureness, & now? *hmm.*

"My only truth is Art's.' Maybe fits better? *Maybe.*"

Gate-Keeper switches off the White-Faced Pink Cat Radio even as he fully wakes up, & looks wonderingly around.

Not quite a building or even Hut, but something else. Beneath him upon which he lays a soft bed of Moss. About him walls of twined branches that curve & meet over him, closed save for a seeming intentional gap for the Full Moon.

Hardly a panic's moment before he feels his Tripod Camera close by his grasp. Save the small shard he gave Cordel'a. In the Deeper Dreaming. Was that possible? I'm pretty sure without even checking. My hand still raw from her gnawing.

I suspect Creatures built this around me. Maybe. I remain unmoving for a lingering time, slowing to think, clearly, more than in awhile.

Think about what I was hearing as I waked here.

"My only truth is Art's." Mine too? I've never wondered about this. Does that make it true?

The White-Faced Pink Cat Radio purrs quietly, somehow in my grasp now.

"Art is encompassing devotion." I suppose yes, so.

I have to return to Abe.

liii.

Dare me fill this page to full with words, not a slow for periods or paragraph breaks, dare me to write

as I ever have & newly too, find the thread from heretofore to hence, ago to when, I feel myself travel along this thread, I surely do, & when grasped close, when traveling along, full attention, whatever now may or may not be seems very much less important than this space, conjured by black pen & paper, mad trip-jazz music in the air—whatever seat, whatever lights, whoever about, there's this ongoing, wildly living space of me & paper & pen & music, the words unfurl easily yet not facile, no, they are my mind's drip to page, what matters to me to tell me *who I am, who I have always been, who I wish to ever be—can't be snatched, can't be repossessed, can't be stupid human'd out of me—*

What I am afraid for, tonight as I write from this beautiful coastal place, is how powerful men are intent upon harming many, willfully, for hatred's purse, & profit's too.

There are men in this world who've reckoned themselves *better* than others, & by this *betterness* they declare on themselves powers to harm.

No election victory bequeaths the power of cruelty to others, for the benefits of racism. For profits to gain.

What I pledge tonight is a Vow of Opposition. Wherever these cruelties are visited upon those governed.

Cruelty knows *no* borders.

Kindness knows *none* either.

A Vow of Opposition by statement of intent.

No human *needs* to act cruelly toward another, nor should cruel actions *ever* be sanctioned into law.
Period.

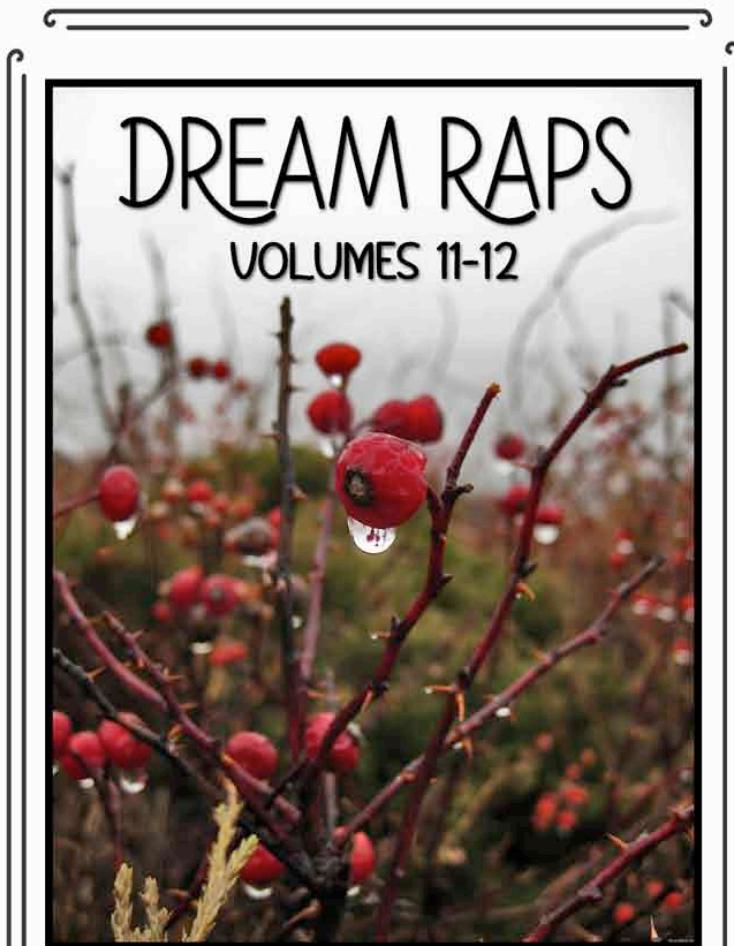


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Notes on Contributors

AbandonView lives in the American Rust Belt. His artwork appears regularly in *The Cenacle*. Wishing you clarity & calmness to create more of your great Art in the new year, my friend. More of his work can be found at: <http://purigare.tumblr.com>.

Algernon Beagle lives in Bags End. He is the Editor guy for *Bags End News*. Delightful books made from the stories in his delightful newspaper appear regularly in *The Cenacle*.

Charlie Beyer lives in New Castle, Colorado. His prose appears regularly in *The Cenacle*. Winters bring restlessness to Charlie's wilderness-wandering soul. Spring will be here again soon! More of Charlie's writings can be found at therubyeye.blogspot.com.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was born in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1859, & died in Crowborough, Sussex, England in 1930. He was the author of four novels and fifty-six short stories about the legendary detective Sherlock Holmes & his boon companion, Dr. Watson.

ElectroLounge Forums is a discussion community for contributors to *The Cenacle*, found at electrolounge.boards.net. Writers, artists, photographers, & readers are encouraged to request a membership (no charge) & visit these forums to meet, & perhaps join, those whose works fill the pages of *The Cenacle*.

Judih Weinstein Haggai passed on October 7, 2023, on the first day of the Israel-Hamas conflict. Her poems in this issue are selected from her 2008 self-published volume, *When Orange Blossoms Call: winter to spring poetry*. A fine little chapbook I recently rediscovered in my library.

Jimmy Heffernan lives in Salt Lake City, Utah. His prose & poetry appear regularly in *The Cenacle*. His prose in this issue is excerpted from his forthcoming book, *Societies of the Spirit: Five Mystical Traditions*.

Lou Gámez lives in Dayton, Ohio. His fiction in this issue is his first for *The Cenacle*, but certainly a long anticipated time in coming! I hope his work becomes a regular feature in coming issues! Lou notes the kind generosity of the real Dr. Daphne Nash and Dr. Andrew Burnett, genuine scholars of ancient numismatics, associated with the Ashmolean Museum of Oxford University, and London's British Museum, respectively.

Nathan D. Horowitz lives in Baltimore, Maryland. Chapters from his epic work, *Nighttime Daydreams*, appear regularly in *The Cenacle*. The students in his high school English classes are very lucky indeed to be taught by him!

Colin James lives in western Massachusetts. His poetry appears regularly in *The Cenacle*. Avoiding frostbite recently even as he searched for the perfect Christmas tree!

Tamara Miles lives in Elgin, South Carolina. Her poetry appears regularly in *The Cenacle*. A fine lover of planting seeds of all kinds, for what delights might come from them. Pumpkins, poetry, & so on . . .

Martina Reisz Newberry lives in Hollywood, California. Her poetry appears regularly in *The Cenacle*. Her most recent book of poetry, *Sadie, Queen of the Swollen Nose Saloon*, was published in April 2025. Wishing you delicious holidays as well! More of her writings can be found at martinanewberry.wordpress.com.

Epi Rogan lives in Cork, Ireland. Her photography appears regularly in *The Cenacle*. More of her work can be found at instagram.com/pieorgan. Her own literary zine is called *Flotsam*, found at linktr.ee/Flotsammag. What a delight each time a new photograph of hers is published online!

Kassandra Soulard lives in Milkrose, Massachusetts. Twenty years ringed happily with you is a wish for twenty & twenty & twenty more . . .

Raymond Soulard, Jr. lives in Milkrose, Massachusetts. Making it out of 2025, & into the many promises of the new year. Lots of good work to do, m'lovelies! A planet to save!

Louis Staeble lives in Bowling Green, Ohio. His photography appears regularly in *The Cenacle*. More of his work can be found at instagram.com/louiestaeb. So glad that reading this journal's pages warms & fills you fine on chilly evenings.

Madelaine Taylah lives in Victoria, Australia. Her writing appears regularly in *The Cenacle*. This issue marks her first contribution of fiction to this journal. Hoping of course for much more to come! Maddie notes that this piece is based on a recurring nightmare she used to have as a child, and has only recently decided that she should explore further. More of her work can be found at instagram.com/thatgirl_books, and at thatgirlbooks.blog.

Timothy Vilgiate lives in Austin, Texas. Their *Rivers of the Mind [A Novel]* is regularly serialized in this journal. The radio version of *Rivers of the Mind*, an amazing work in any form, can be found online at riversofthemind.libsyn.com. Another recent project of theirs is *Songs 2 Panic on Dramamine 2 II*: <https://timmievigilante.bandcamp.com/album/songs-2-panic-on-dramamine-2-ii>.

* * * * *



"All through the darkness where shining strings
are the only light, a woundedness occurs.

And this hurt affects each strand
and each puppet in a different way, because
we are all puppets on strings and we
all hurt and are hurt.

And all the strings shimmer on regardless,
and all of our actions, no matter how small,
have consequences to other puppets

After we are dead, gone to join the darkness
between the lines of light, the strands we
leave behind still quiver their lost messages
into the hearts of those other puppets we met
along the way, on our journey from
light into non-light. These lost strands
are the memories we leave behind

Each extinguished life leaves a hole in many
other lives--a series of small extinctions
that can never be completely forgotten or
survived. Each survivor carries a
little of that void within."

--Jeff VanderMeer, Shriek: An Afterword, 2006.

