



The
Cenacle

31st Anniversary Issue
NUMBER 130 | APRIL 2026



"[A]rt's task is to save the soul of mankind.

And that anything less is a dithering while Rome burns.

Because if the artists, who are self-selected for being able to journey into the other . . .

if the artists cannot find the way, then the way cannot be found."

--Terence McKenna

April 25, 2006

6:59 pm.

Bumpalawee —

Atlix Study ^(work) ~~(study)~~

Meikrose, MA.

Welcome to the 3rd Anniversary Issue of The Cenacle! Compared to last year at this time, the Resistance to the Lunatic Jaux King has come a long way. From winning countless court battles against his sloppy, flailing lawlessness, to millions decrying him in the streets on multiple No Kings Days, to the plain revelation to all that he ran for president to stay out of jail, & make a lot of money. None of that is working out so well in 2006.

Watching him bog down in Iran, no shred of justification nor plan for sending the American military there; discover his usual talents at lying, shifting blame, or changing the subject aren't working; & delighting in the sight of his party sinking down with him; all of this will only prove fully satisfactory when his control of Congress evaporates come early November.

"I JUST WANT TO SAY THIS TO TRUMP'S DEFENDERS: YOU DON'T HAVE TO BEND OVER BACKWARDS TRYING TO MAKE TRUMP'S AUTHORITARIAN POWER GRABS SEEM LIKE THE RULE OF LAW.

HE DOES NOT GIVE A FK ANYMORE! HE'S SAYING IT STRAIGHT UP! TRUMP IS SAYING, 'THE PEOPLE LIKE DICTATORS.' TRUMP IS SAYING, 'I HATE MY OPPONENTS AND I WANT THEM PUNISHED.' AND TRUMP IS SAYING, 'I'LL USE ALL THE LEVERS OF GOVERNMENT AT MY DISPOSAL TO ACCOMPLISH THAT GOAL.'"**

SO YOU CAN GET ON BOARD WITH THAT AND SAY, 'I'M WITH THAT.'

OR YOU CAN JOIN THE REST OF US AND FIGHT LIKE HELL FOR THIS CONSTITUTIONAL REPUBLIC."

JON STEWART

**TRUMP
RESISTANCE
MOVEMENT**

-13-

Tuesday, November 3, 2026 is when this nightmare can truly begin to end. Simple as that. Vote every last Republican on the ballot out of office. None can justify running affiliated with this party. None deserve a pass.

That settled, start impeachment hearings. Roaches don't leave an infested house because you ask nicely, or negotiate. Our votes across 50 states will begin to exterminate the iniquitous pollution that is Donald Trump & every elected official who has allowed him free reign to do his evil deeds.

Let's get rid of them & stay angry for awhile. The countless millions who have suffered deserve the justice found in righteous fury. Forgiveness later, if at all for many of them.

This all said, nothing is sure about 2026. Every day of it will be a war with a weakened but still immensely powerful would-be tyrant.

I stand with this issue's fine contributors, & all of you fine readers, in voting a better path for this world, & bringing down with our votes the motherfuckers who've caused so much harm.



**Mom, what's a
MAGA**

A mentally challenged person who lacks critical thinking, thrives on fear mongering and gets duped very easily into believing any controversial thing without evidence, dear.



Edited by Raymond Soulard, Jr.

Assistant Editor: Kassandra Soulard

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- *Cenacles* #47-130
- Burning Man Books #1-84
- *Scriptor Press Sampler* #1-26
- *RaiBooks* #1-13
- RS Mixes from “Within’s Within: Scenes from the Psychedelic Revolution”; &
- Jellicle Literary Guild Highlights Series

Disk contents downloadable at: www.scriptorpress.com/cenacle/supplementary_disk.zip.

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This issue is dedicated to the memory of dear friend & long-time *Cenacle* contributor, Tom Sheehan, of Saugus, Massachusetts. A kind, gifted, & loving man, he leaves behind a wonderful legacy of great writing. Thank you, Tom.



March 5, 1928 - October 16, 2025

Feedback on Cenacle 129 | Winter 2026

Lou Gámez:

I'm fascinated by Jimmy Heffernan's eschatological explorations in "Notes on Teilhard's Noogenesis," and the possibilities of human and technological singularities in diachronous existence; but I have difficulty reconciling this discussion with Teilhard's sensitivity to divine synchrony. Isn't this implicit in the vision of "the Divine at the heart of the universe on fire" (*The Divine Milieu*)?

Sure, there is an evolution of self until we're ready to make a "reckless vow of all love," and enter into the work of "amorization" of the cosmos (*The Heart of Matter*)—but then we leave our diachronic lives and enter the self-emptying synchrony of the divine: that's our essential teleology, right?

I'm probably missing the point here—but if Teilhard were around, he might say, *no worries*, Lou: *it's really not so much a point as a circle*.

Nathan D. Horowitz:

Lou Gámez truly made my brain go *boing* with his short fiction "British Museum Acquisition Number EA363914," a beautifully plotted, carefully realized, eruditely entertaining short story about a centuries-spanning love. The image of Hager kissing the backs of Zahrah's knees is wonderful, as is the image of him rubbing her withered or gnarled feet. That's love.

Tamara Miles's requiem for her father's passing in her poem "A Candle for My Father" is a religious text in the best sense of connecting its audience to the universe—which, here, is presented in the greatest poetic grace and specificity: "My sun still surprises the back deck, / rides across palm fronds and dogs' ears . . ."

Tamara Miles:

This issue has me contemplating the Beast and its several forms, including: its transforming into a gigantic Kraken, in Madelaine Taylah's short fiction "Doors and Dreams"; following me into a cave in Raymond Soulard Jr.'s *Many Music's* poem "Three Days"; & perhaps even manifesting in the face of Charlie Beyer, chained to a death raft, in his piece "Rafting"?

Louis Staebler:

Judith Weinstein Haggai's poems are interesting and tremendous. My favorite: "Ego sandwich with hubris on the side." Also the lines from the poem "Beat": "lift up the past / push it / groove it / feel the beat."

Jimmy Heffernan:

Martina Reisz Newberry's poem "There Are Days, You See" takes us on a peripatetic journey through her Southern California haunts and, though I have never been to Los Angeles, she made me feel as if I have lived there for twenty years. The hike, the hills, the haunts—they are brought out vividly, and the field trip is an obliging perambulation around a locale that is clearly dear to her heart and soul. This poem is *Hollywood*, baby.

Epi Rogan:

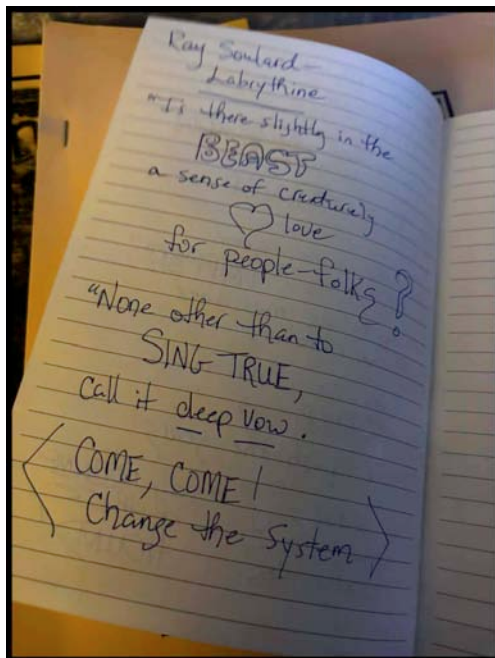
Colin James’s poem “The Good Use of Memory” suggests perception isn’t neutral. Memory isn’t storage—it is interpretation; the world is filtered before we even remember it. “The Brunette Spiral” rejects straight lines and logical systems; “Five can be half of eight in as many words” unsettles mathematical certainty; suggesting meaning is constructed rather than fixed. “Subjective Objectivism” resists aspirations of wine, taste, refinement, and lands on something more: connection, humor, shared moments.



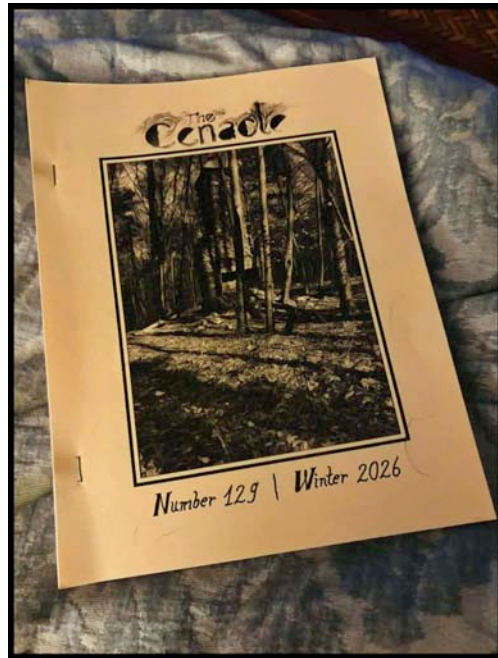
Epi Rogan



Lou Gámez



Tamara Miles



Tamara Miles

Cross-Interview with Epi Rogan

Published on electrolounge.boards.net

Post by Raymond on Jan 28, 2026 at 10:53am

Introductory note: *I am often amazed & humbled at the talents of the many friends on these Forums, & in the pages of The Cenacle. But I have thought for a long time: I don't know each of you as much as I'd like. I am interested in the place of ferment where biography, talent, & craft meet to create great Art.*

Thus, this will be the first of I hope many interviews. I call it "Cross-Interview" to take the pressure off the other person. They can change subjects, shift focus; whatever makes good sense in the moment.

I also invite others here to join in, if they choose. The invitation is open for all.

So, starting with Epi Rogan, who currently lives in Cork, Ireland. Epi, you & I met a few years ago, via *Instagram*, early on in the ongoing Global Pandemic. I was floored by your photos there, & just as delighted to get to know you as a person.

My first question for you is: what do you recall earliest in your life that you can trace to now, in terms of your Art, in terms of who you are?

* * * * *

Post by Epi on Jan 29, 2026 at 2:33pm

Thanks so much, Ray, for wanting to interview me! I'm so interested to find out more about you too. Thanks for your lovely words pertaining to my photos. That's so kind!

I'll jump right in. You know, I think I was always obsessed with liminality . . . like liminal spaces and being on the cusp. Growing up in the '80s and '90s, there were a lot of films and books geared towards young people and teens. Because teenager-hood by its nature is on the cusp, many films tracked that symbolic time. Like in *The Goonies* and *The Lost Boys*, for instance, and then there's all of the horror films which I think were also geared towards teens. When you're dealing with the undead and the spirit world, it's all liminal spaces and portals to other dimensions, isn't it?

I think so many of my photos are of liminal spaces, and from the point of view of an outsider looking in. Growing up, my family didn't go to church. We lived in a small conservative community where all my friends and peers *did* go to church, and I think I was quietly obsessed with all the esoteric things involved with religion because I didn't have a grounding in it. It was all these strange rituals, and artwork, and mad outfits worn by clergy. Anyways, I'm still obsessed with all that stuff.

But tell me this now, Ray, how did you get into writing? Have you always just been a writer? Did something or someone inspire you to pick up a pen? What did you read as a teen? I feel like teenage years are so formative in our tastes in films, books, and music. Are there any authors from that period you still read and admire, inspire by?

* * * * *

Post by Raymond on Jan 29, 2026 at 4:24pm

Your mention of “liminality” makes me think of the *Back Rooms* series on YouTube. A sort of psychological horror where one is suddenly thrust into these empty, decaying, weird hallways with yellow wallpaper. Are you familiar with these? They are amazing, & many people have created their own versions. The most famous *Back Rooms* series is by Kane Pixels (Kane Parsons). His *Back Rooms* film will be in theaters this May!

I guess I got into writing because I always loved books, from very small, well before the Internet or even cable TV. I had books, records, radio, TV with maybe a dozen channels. Books were my way of visiting the bigger world, seeing what it was like.

I picked up a pencil, first, inspired by the sitcom *The Odd Couple* on TV, one of whom was a sports writer. I liked football on TV on Sundays too, so I just started my own imaginary football league (CFL) & newspaper for it! Early kind of world-building, I guess.

Read many of the *Hardy Boys Adventures*, gifts from my grandmother, & wrote a novel, *John & Phillip*, when I was 10 or so, imitating their style.

Read another book called *Henry Reed, Inc.*, about a boy who keeps a journal. So I started one too. Those were my efforts from when I was 9 or so, till my early teen years.

Your growing up explains your photographic obsession with esoteric religious images. Since you told me you grew up in Alaska, and now live in Ireland, what similarities and differences have you found between the two?

* * * * *

Post by Epi on Feb 1, 2026 at 5:39am

I've never watched *Back Rooms*, but it sounds so interesting!

What similarities and differences exist between Ireland and Alaska? Well, I think in many ways they *are* similar. Small close-knit communities. I feel like I knew everyone in town growing up and, while our links may not have spanned generations, like in Ireland, those ties were strong nonetheless. Ireland is full of characters, as is Alaska. I think Alaska is probably less progressive, because much of its population is US military, and most of the land is government-owned, so this is unsurprising.

It's so impressive your drive from such a young age! I found it difficult to write two paragraphs and here you are writing whole novels from the age of ten! Did you study writing? At what point did you really start to take your writing seriously? Did you pursue getting published? If so, how did you find that?

Because you publish work, what made you pivot to publishing? Were you interested in other independent publishers? Did any of them ping on the light bulb for you, or did you realize yourself: *oh wait!* I can publish work I like and admire and create an artist community . . .

* * * * *

Post by Raymond on Feb 3, 2026 at 12:20pm

My path from early on has been, luckily, devoted to writing. I majored in English in college, eventually got a Master's degree in English, and another in Writing, Literature, & Publishing. Before the Internet made it much easier, getting "published" was a rare event for most. I had no luck when I sent out pieces to magazines long ago. Yet I did enjoy making zines with friends, & working on school publications.

So I started tending toward independent publishing. Saw little value in wasting time begging strangers to, just maybe, consider the value of my work. I know my work has value, even if nobody ever saw it, or cared for it. It's what I do, have done, through years lavish & lean. Editing & publishing I see more as collaborative activities. Ways to support others. And if someone asks me, "why don't you publish?" I just point to scriptorpress.com. That's how I do it for my work & for many others.

Back in '95, I spent my income tax return money on a \$500 Canon photocopier, & started *The Cenacle*. Here's the first issue: scriptorpress.com/cenacle/01_april_1995.pdf.

I was ecstatic to have what Karl Marx called "the means of production" in my little apartment. No more copy shop visits! And I was happy to have a way to publish my friends' work. It's amazing how many talented people there are out there, versus how many have their work ever known by many. So I take them with me along our shared path. I've also built up various associated things—like these *Forums*, various chapbooks series—as ideas come along.

So tell me your journey to being the brilliant photographer that you are. Please, all the details. Your first camera & onward.

* * * * *

Post by Epi on Feb 4, 2026 at 4:12pm

I feel like zines are having such a moment. From the little fold-able pocket-sized fellas to infinity or something . . . A longing for imperfection and analogue. A contributor to *Flotsam* (<https://linktr.ee/Flotsammag>) [Epi's arts magazine in Cork] wrote an article about neuro-divergence and art funding. It's really about the hoops that artists have to jump through to get funding, and how difficult that can be for them.

Anyway, I mention it because there are similar gauntlets artists have to run even to submit their work to be published. On top of *doing* the work, there's so much work in the *submitting* of work. It must take its toll when rejection letters/emails are received. We always try to make it as painless as possible for people to submit their work. That people can submit on impulse.

I like that you see editing and publishing as collaborative. Collaborative/group efforts feel in flux, you know? Not rigid. Not perfect. Wabi Sabi. I really love the way *The Cenacle* looks. The aesthetic. You sent me an online version of the first issue before and I realized how much I like the style. It's very nineties,

which like zines are also having a moment.

Gosh I dunno if I had much of a journey. My father was an avid photographer, and had a dark room, when I was very young. He had a solid 35mm SLR. When I could buy a camera, it was the same but digital. There were old box cameras and Rangefinder knock-offs in there too. Now I just take photos with my phone. Although I keep threatening to go back to digital. I would love to not use my phone as often for things. The problem is I can't remember to bring a digital camera with me. Sounds stupid but unless I carry it with me in my bag everywhere, I'll never remember to bring it with me.

I used to cycle into work during the summer, so I'd have to change over bags so I could cycle. My purse to a backpack, without fail every time the switch happened (multiple times a week) I'd forget my camera. The upside of the phone is, I can bring it everywhere and it's unobtrusive. I'm not really interested in capturing something perfectly anyhow . . . it's more like I want it to make someone feel how I felt when I saw whatever it was.

Tell me about the aesthetic of *The Cenacle*? I once read a book about fonts and since then I think about why people choose certain typography. Or why black and white? Why color? Do you still photocopy the entire publication? I feel like to photocopy the entire issue is a feat in itself.

* * * * *

Post by Raymond on Feb 4, 2026 at 5:21pm

The Cenacle at that time was created on my manual & electronic typewriters (the latter a cherished gift from my father). Even now you can see these still in action on the *Epigraph* page (first one after front cover) & the *Last Yawp* page (last page before the back cover). Also, my *From Soulard's Notebooks* near the beginning harkens back to handwriting, typing, photographing. They keep its origins alive, in a good way. That first issue was a big deal to me but, honestly, I doubt I had even seen many other "zines," save at sci-fi conventions!

The collaborative spirit is super important to me. I guess, in a way, something of a gift I can give to friends, to be part of something that honors the Art they make. To me, that matters a lot.

Do you have pictures your father took? Would love to see them! How did he become an avid photographer? It's not something to happen randomly. Do you have any of his old cameras? I would love to see pictures of those too. Did he teach you about dark rooms & such? I'm very curious that kind of mentoring.

The Cenacle is laid out in the Adobe Garamond Pro font, for the most part. Why is, I guess, sorta funny. Long years ago, I had this job as a copy editor for a local weekly arts newspaper, down in Connecticut, where I am from. This paper used that font, & I liked it, & just went with it for *The Cenacle* thereafter. I had friends who thought about fonts more than I did, & eventually I learned to pay better attention too.

I don't know if it has an aesthetic, per se. The best part of my Master's degree in Writing, Literature, & Publishing was the publishing part, the history I learned, & the desktop publishing tools too (QuarkXpress). I studied magazines from the 19th century, early 20th, mid-century; learning, learning.

KD & I also have sat years back in bookstores, looking at lit & art & music mags, picking up bits here

& there.

Also, I like, no, *love*, that there are so much great visuals in the *The Cenacle*. You & KD & Louis Staebler & AbandonView make the journal visually *wow*-ing. That's how some people are drawn in.

Used to be all black & white, till then I started making the April (anniversary) issues in color. Then bits & bobs of color in the other three issues. It's costly, to be honest. I have an old color laser printer I keep going. I prefer it to photocopying for time saved, & for quality.

Your photos *do* capture a moment, but it's a moment captured by a person with a *very* gifted visual aesthetic. An instinct that is as innate as taught or practiced. I can often tell a picture of yours on *Instagram* before I even see your user name!

* * * * *

Post by Epi on Feb 7, 2026 at 10:19am

That's so kind! I don't have any of my father's photos. He'd given up the dark room by the time I was old enough to ask about them. I think he got into photography because he traveled so much with work when he was in his twenties. I'm not sure why he gave up the dark room; two kids perhaps? Then we moved to Alaska, and he became more interested in fishing and hunting. He still took photos, but mainly of the natural world. Sidelined for stalking deer and reeling in salmon.

The visuals by KD, Louis and AbandonView are stellar in *The Cenacle*. I'm honored to have my work alongside theirs.

I like photographing in groupings of three, but what ties three things together can be pretty tenuous under any real examination. Because I (did) spend an inordinate amount of time out at night, many are night shots. Because that's when I get out. During the summer I cycle and I run a small foraging business so I'm outdoors a lot. We supply upscale restaurants with weeds; it takes you to weird places.

Last year we found an abandoned off-grid cabin in the woods. Everything was left there. We were super confused because it was in a national park. A quick Google search later and we found out it was owned by an artist couple who managed to find a loophole so were able to semi-legally squat there. They both died tragically within a few months of each other. We explored the cabin and surrounds and took hundreds of photos. It was left just as they left it. Even their clothing is still hanging out to dry. I might have some photos to share of them.

Printing rather than photocopying. That's fair! Despite the cost, time and energy, you still do it. A labor of love. Speaking of love, when did you and KD start collaborating with your work? Was it *The Cenacle*?

And also some questions for you about writing and stuff. How do you know when a piece is finished? How do you feel about how culture is produced and consumed? Is there a tradition you feel in conversation with, or continuing with, in writing? In publishing?

* * * * *

Post by Raymond on Feb 10, 2026 at 12:16pm

Well, I started *The Cenacle* back in '95, and KD and I met in 2003, so she didn't know me before I was doing it. I met her in a rough patch in my life, struggling to pick up the pieces from some bad experiences. Bad choices. There was this stretch of a year and some when I did not do any issues. When I started again was around the time I met her. Nice coincidence!

She became my assistant editor in Oct 2003 (*Cenacle* #49), even before we ended up living together in Seattle in 2004. It took awhile for me to figure out how really good a photographer she is. She's not one to really get loud about her own talents. But, honestly, I had all these projects going, and she jumped in, and figured it out along the way. I've learned as much from her as she has from me.

A piece is finished when there seems no more to do with it. Sometimes that means no revisions are needed. Sometimes a lot. I wrote a poem some years ago, well, a sequence, and the final one was a kind of mixture of the several hundred before it, and I rewrote it and rewrote it for months. Then it was done.

I suppose what it involves is trust in one's artistic mind, and also a discipline to create something that eventually lands well. And some deep intuition about it all. I don't know if any of those answers really hit it, but my artistic mind says: *enough*. Haha!

Culture seems to consume everything, as people are restless in countless ways both for the new, and more of the known. In essence, we don't know why we are here; we don't know what we are supposed to do; and we don't know what comes next. Culture feeds on these mysteries, and gestates them into works of Art, and other less interesting things.

I don't know what tradition I work in. I'm pretty steeped in American literature, but also in European art, South American poetry, films from all over the world, etc. I'd rather think that what I do is part of Art in general than in one place or time or another. In publishing, I have lots of things I've learned but, honestly, simply by choosing never to sell my own work, or that produced by my press, but to make it free for all to share, that kind of marginalizes me and Scriptor Press New England in a way. Most people seem to place more value on what they have to pay for. Gifting doesn't compute with them, so to speak.

But, on the other hand, because I work for a living to finance all I do, I owe nothing to anybody in terms of my writing or press projects. So many talented young people get caught up in the idea that Art *needs* to be sold to be of true value. They sometimes get exploited. They waste their time worrying about it. They lose the thread of what they loved in the first place when they started to write, or play guitar, draw pictures, dance, etc. I guess Art as presumed commodity is where I see a lot of pointless stupidity and suffering.

But it's not all bad. Shakespeare was famous. The Beatles. Even Bad Bunny during the Super Bowl, and his million coded messages of joy and self-respect for Puerto Ricans, and everyone really. These are famous examples of great Art that was commodified, and yet rose above that to become something timelessly wonderful.

No simple answers!

Now, if I were to challenge you to engage with me in a kind of photographic game, would you be interested?

* * * * *

Post by Epi on Feb 10, 2026 at 2:33pm

It's so nice to hear about KD. It feel likes there was a lot of shared momentum. It's been a mighty collaboration between you both.

And yes, no simple answers. What is this photographic challenge?

* * * * *

Post by Raymond on Feb 10, 2026 at 3:46pm

Well, since this cross-interview is pretty freewheeling & open-ended, which is cool, what if we challenge each other to make some Art on the spot? Like, say, I name a topic, or an object, or something of some kind, & let you loose with your camera. Your turn, you could challenge me to do the same thing, or some new topic, a photo, a slide of writing, something like that. Or you could just take your picture and tell me to "respond." One of my favorite things is to just improvise, jam, see what happens. That would be the "show" to our "tell" so far. Play around with this idea, modify if you like, and let me know!

* * * * *

Post by Epi on Feb 18, 2026 at 2:16pm

Sounds fun! Sorry for the late reply. I've a few things on the last couple of weeks and it's all happening at the same time.

* * * * *

Post by Raymond on Feb 18, 2026 at 5:16pm

Here is a picture today I took on my little Samsung Reclaim phone, Gumbee, because he's green. His phone part does not work anymore, but he has other talents, including photographing:



This stone mushroom is deep in snow, in someone's yard, a picture I took on my way back from the dentist. Cold day, but good for walking. 40 minutes each way!

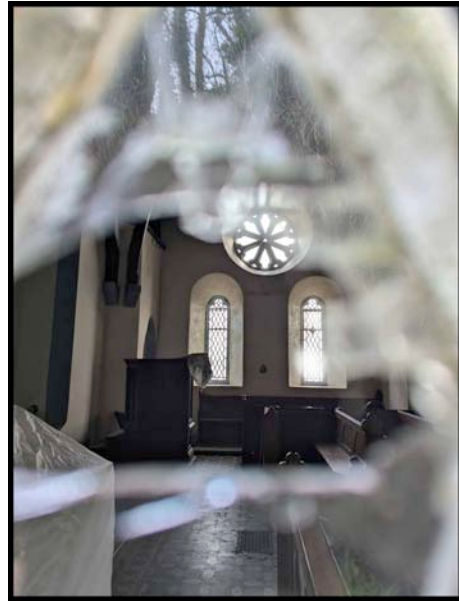
Anyway, I lucked into this small snowy portrait. See if it inspires in you some kind of response, photographic or otherwise.

Post by Epi on Feb 24, 2026 at 1:15pm

It looks *very* snowy! Sorry for lag in response. We had a pop-up this weekend and have another one next week. Sending along an image from West Cork. Peeking into an empty chapel from three weeks ago.

Post by Raymond on Feb 25, 2026 at 3:45pm

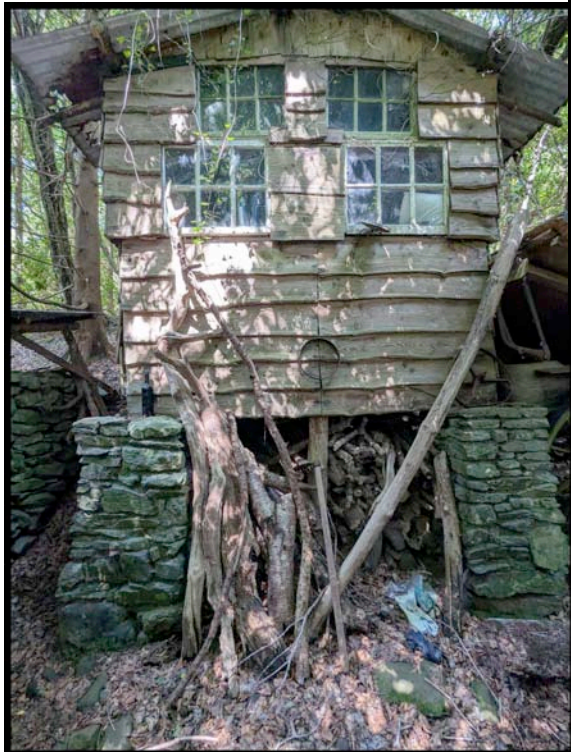
I love when you peek with your camera! Just for fun, I opened that image in Photoshop, applied some filters, just to play around:



Post by Epi on Mar 16, 2026 at 3:02pm

I love the filters! I'm sending some promised photos from Glengariff. The off-grid cabin we found while we were out foraging that I mentioned previously. One is an image of the couple who lived there. Another is an image of their studio (both were artists). The third image is of the outside of one of the cabins:

What sort of things do you tend to take photos of?



Post by Raymond on Mar 16, 2026 at 5:22pm

Those photos are sweet! What a strange place you found. There are art books in those piles. Maxfield Parrish. Watercolors. Maybe canvases. Is there any kind of story you can tease out of what it's all about?

I tend to look for strange shapes in what I see around me. Something that urges me to snap. No real plan when it occurs; just does. Here's one from not long ago, a local park pond in the snow:



Only training I ever got was from a friend who said to me, “When you set your shot, keep mindful of everything in the picture, not just your main subject.” Good advice, I think!

* * * * *

Post by Epi on Mar 18, 2026 at 3:35pm

What's It All About? Or More About That Couple

I found out a bit about them after finding their gaff. They moved to the woods and built cabins through a loophole. The woodland is owned by the state, but there's some thing about road access. I can't quite remember, but it's something to do with a road anyhow. There's an old road running to their homestead.

They were artists, and I think well liked. Behind them, outside of the wood, or at the edge is, I think, a hippie commune. We walked past one day, and there was a mother and child dancing around a stone fort. I think built by the commune, so not ancient, but very impressive.

The couple was living in the woods for I think about 20 years. The gentleman became ill after breaking a leg. He never fully recovered and died about a year after. His partner died about a month after him. She fell in the woods, and passed away from hypothermia.

When I first read the reports it sounded as if she was left alone after he passed. She was suffering from dementia and probably should not have been on her own. Upon further reading, and realizing the commune was almost directly behind them, I don't think she was not being looked after, which is a relief. There were people very close in proximity, and looking after her.

I'm digging the pond photo! I feel almost as if I would rather *not* keep off the ice.

I'm going to remember this: "when you set your shot, keep mindful of everything in the picture, not just your main subject."

* * * * *

Post by Raymond on Mar 19, 2026 at 9:57am

It's pithy but weirdly good advice. My friend who gave it was a photographer himself. A good one.

Your story of the couple is quite compelling. Thanks for telling it!

* * * * *

Post by Tamara on Mar 25, 2026 at 2:42pm

I love reading this interview, and admiring the photography! I will see what images I might be able to contribute.

Thinking of this too:

"What if, instead of choosing between my two sides, I choose the liminal space between them? What if I claim this complex and intricate space for myself? What if we all do?"

—Melanie Cheng, "On Liminality," *Liminal Magazine*, 03.October.2019,
www.liminalmag.com/blog/melanie-cheng

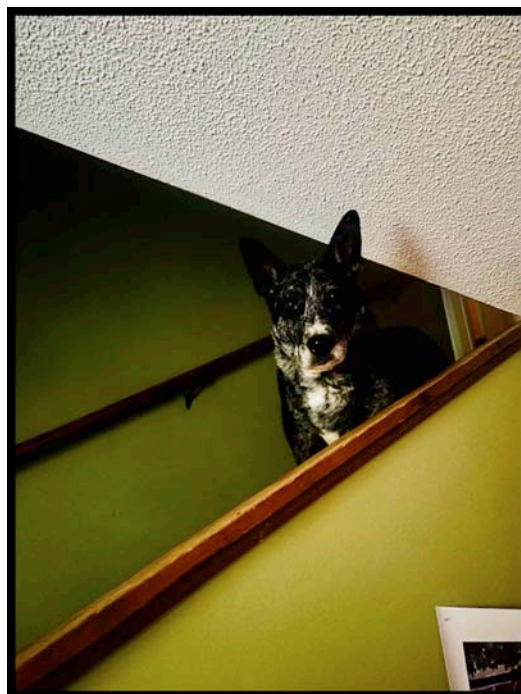
* * * * *

Post by Tamara on Mar 25, 2026 at 3:00pm

My boy Sherlock in his liminal space:

That space between upstairs and downstairs—the peering over to see who might be in the next world and whether it is time to descend further. That moment of communion with silence. A tender reckoning. Mom is down there, but she might be coming back up. She is taking yet another photo of me. The step on which I often sleep lies just at the bottom of the stairs. Is that annoying little French bulldog that Mom babysits here? Still, a treat might be involved.

* * * * *



Post by Raymond on Mar 25, 2026 at 3:29pm

That is a lot of deep doggy thinking going on in that space, Tamara! What a cool photo! Glad you joined in here!

Post by Epi on Mar 29, 2026 at 2:22pm

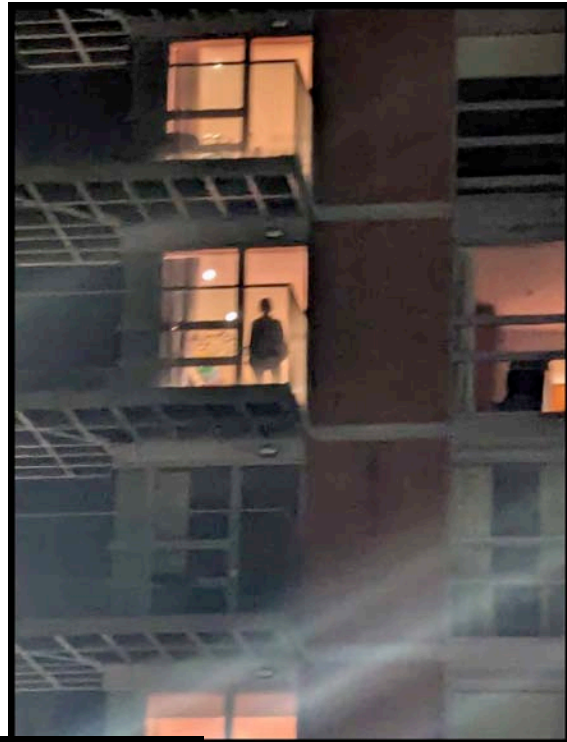
Tamara! I'm loving Sherlock in the in-between! *Haha!*

Post by Epi on Mar 29, 2026 at 2:31pm

I only got one liminal photo of note this week. We pick magnolias at night for restaurants . . . steal them! This is a guy on a hotel balcony, looking rather out of focus.

Post by Epi on Mar 29, 2026 at 2:42pm

Another liminal photo but from a few weeks ago. It feels a bit like you're looking into a mirror or something. Does anyone else want to join? I'm loving this new liminal outlet!



Post by KD on Apr 4, 2026 at 11:32am

Hi Epi! The way you describe your growing up feels exactly like the kind of early fascination that turns into a lifelong aesthetic sense. There's something so liminal about religious imagery when you're on the outside of it looking in. It's half-ritual, half-theater, and all atmosphere.

I feel the same as you that the “perfect” photo is never as interesting as the one that carries the feeling of the moment. Liminal spaces especially work that way; they're more about mood than accuracy.

I completely agree with Raymond, Epi, that your photos always have that slightly off-center, atmospheric quality that makes them instantly recognizable.

And your story about the off-grid cabin and the artist couple were fascinating and a little sad, like a story you only get the edges of.

Your balcony photo looks like a still from a movie. It has that “something is about to happen but you don't know what” feeling.

And here's mine!

We watch YouTube video channels on our TV some Friday nights—especially *Hoods N Hollers* (only the hollers). This is a shot from West Virginia that popped up one night. Something about the decaying house on the big screen in our cozy living room felt perfectly in-between:



* * * * *

Post by Epi on Apr 8, 2026 at 5:42am

Kassi! How are you? Thrilled to get to chat with you. I absolutely love the religious stuff. I think if your job is otherworldly there's a lot of stock in creating vibes.

Have you always noticed things with a camera? Or do you have multiple practices? I really love your photography in *The Cenacle!* What is it like co-editing a literary journal?

It *is* sad about the couple in the cabin. I think they lived really interesting lives on their own terms though. Both lived and worked as artists, and pretty much completely opted out of capitalism. It's quite brave and cool to live on your own terms.

Your *Hoods N Hollers* picture is perfection!

* * * * *

Post by Epi on Apr 8, 2026 at 5:47am

From a recent visit to Galway. It was giving “Red Room” via *Twin Peaks* vibes for me:

* * * * *

Post by KD on Apr 11, 2026 at 12:52pm

Hi Epi! I'm thrilled to get to join in your cross-interview—how fun! And yes, absolutely on creating vibes. If your work leans otherworldly, atmosphere becomes part of the job description.



For my photography, I think the main driver is just trying to stay observant. Having a camera makes me feel like I should be looking more closely at everything, so it keeps me tuned in. Nature is my biggest inspiration—motion, texture, small shifts in light. That's what I'm always trying to catch. I think that's why your photos feel so familiar to me while still being mysterious—they have that same attention to atmosphere.

I've had cameras since I was young—actual film cameras, which we still use sometimes. My uncle had a darkroom for a little while, so I got to develop my own photos, which was fun and taught me a bit about contrast. But honestly, most of my learning has just come from taking a lot of pictures and editing them for *The Cenacle*. And co-editing with Raymond is fun—he had been doing it solo for a long time before I came along, but we've learned a lot together, and the collaboration keeps making it richer.

About the couple in the cabin—yes, the initial reaction is sadness, but I agree with you. They lived exactly the way they wanted to, and that's brave and beautiful in its own way. I'm glad they lived on their own terms.

And I have to say, I love your “Red Room/Twin Peaks” photo. The texture in that one is incredible—the ceiling grid, the stone wall—you captured the tactile feel of the space in such an interesting way!

* * * * *

Tom Sheehan



Night Forgery

Just before dawn
a shadow makes tracks
in the dew-lit grass.

Later, a whisper
and a scent follow
the forsaken imprints.

Not a leaf stirs,
but if I watch closely,
blades of grass ease upright,

a loam granule
is released to airs
staggering under stars,

and the whisper, vague,
is familiar, perhaps stripped
from gists of old conversations.

Years ago,
at a Red Sox game, I
became separated from my father.

All the goblins
of young creation hung over
my hysteria, poked at my terror.

When he found me,
pawed, frayed, diminished,
he said he'd never leave me again.

This soft forging
in the night grass
is a kept word, a vow.

* * * * *



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, & perhaps these thoughts will be expanded upon sometimes as well.

* * * * *

Dream Raps, Volume Fifteen

All volumes of Dreams Raps can be found at:
scriptorpress.com/dream-raps.pdf

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*“Is all that we see or seem
But a dream within a dream?”*

—Edgar Allan Poe, 1849.

* * * * *

Prelude: Conversion

*“Hobo Jones is not a machine.
He is a mythic organism of continuity and repair.”*

—Scholar A,
A Dream Raps Reliquary
[Scriptor Press International]

* * * * *

Hobo Jones, also known as Hose Jones, the most advanced Robot Man in the Many Worlds of the Star Spiral, was in the Fix-It Shoppe, with his dear friend Lilianna. How it had come about was that, after many, many an adventure seeking him, Hobo Jones had reunited with his dear friend, & sometime traveling companion in the far reaches of Outer Space, Mulronie the Space Pirate. They’d now returned to the Thought Fleas’ famed Rutabaga Festival & Fleastock located, as ever, in the Great Clearing of

the White Woods.

And Mulronie had introduced to the many Festival-goers there a language called Urhu, it being a very important ingredient in people-folks enjoying of the Great Story of *Evolution. Synthesis. Ferment.* Told in Moss, & with dancing, in Alvinarah's Posey's beautiful Mosstudio.

Eventually, it seemed as though Mulronie was eager to be getting along onto new Outer Space adventures. And Hobo Jones was wondering if he & Lilianna might also go along on these new adventures. She'd never been on such an adventure before, out to the far reaches of Outer Space & all.

But Mulronie had looked closely at his old friend Hobo Jones & said, "You, my friend, look exhausted. I have greatly enjoyed this long recent reunion travel of ours. In Ellisses, & now back here to this Mosstudio, & the wonderful Festival. But you are *tired*. You need to go & see the Mechanic."

Now Lilianna didn't know exactly what this meant, but she kept mum for now, & just sort of . . . observed.

But Hobo Jones knew. It had been a while since he'd seen the Mechanic, it was true. He wasn't really sure where the Mechanic was at this moment.

Ah, but Miss Flossie Flea knew, of course. As a matter of fact, she'd now sidled on up to him, with her lovely brilliant genius smile, & said, "Mr. Jones? If you & Miss Lilianna will come this way, I will take you to the Mechanic."

And thus Hobo Jones was now taking his temporary fare-thee-well from Mulronie the Space Pirate, even as this venerable Outer Space hero was mumbling eagerly about "brand new adventures!" & "far reaches of Outer Space!" Perhaps even "near reaches of Inner Space!" Helping the Six Brother-Heroes in saving the Many Worlds of the Star Spiral was all that was on his mind, is the point.

But he of course hugged his dear old friend, & Lilianna too. To Hobo Jones he said, "Let the Mechanic clean you out good for our next great travels together!" Smiling all, they parted for now.

So Miss Flossie led Hobo Jones along for a good check-up with the Mechanic. Turns out that the Mechanic was in the Fix-It Shoppe that the Thought Fleas had set up in their Domicile for the inimitable bloo-&-pink Piglet Creature Old Cookie. And there was the Mechanic, & Old Cookie, OC for friendly, awaiting at the long working-table. Tools at the hand & paw, as it were.

When the Mechanic saw Hobo Jones, he let off with a great gruff sort of laugh. A kindly laugh, full of layers. Layers of dirt, layers of gold, layers of love. This reassured Lilianna a great deal that her dear friend was in good hands. He wore greased overalls, & had a baseball cap askew on his head. Looked like it said, "Travel Angels."

Now he could have had Hobo Jones sit down on the empty stool that was nearby, but instead he stood up, smiling, & said, "My friend, as you know, when you come in for a checkup with me, I've got to give you a look from high to low, in & out. Every which-a-way." His dark caterpillar mustache was twirling up & down a bit.

Hobo Jones nodded friendly but was quietly waiting until the Mechanic brought out his red handkerchief. Lilianna had never seen a handkerchief of this kind before. Quite a thing to behold!

Crimson, like it was on fire. Like it was glowing from both dark & light. And it was the one he always used on these kinds of checkups. No other way with him, Hobo Jones well knew.

And so, after the Mechanic & OC had greeted Lilianna politely, & invited her to take that empty stool, the Mechanic began his checkup, with OC assisting.

“It’s going to take a while, Miss Lilianna,” said the Mechanic.

She nodded. “You fix-it gents & gentsesses take care of him right, please? I thankee kindly.”

And they nodded, & began their work.

* * * * *

Also Known as Hose Jones

The Mechanic studied Hobo Jones with great interest. And OC, who’d hopped up on the long working-table, studied him too, bloo-&-pink paw on her Creaturely chin.

And then the Mechanic smiled at Hobo Jones & said, “Well, it’s time to take you apart, piece by piece.” Hobo Jones quietly nodded.

Lilianna on her nearby stool gasped a little bit. She’d not expected this. “Does he get shut off, Sir?” she asked uncertainly.

The Mechanic shook his head & smilingly said, “Well, I could, but I don’t think he’d enjoy it. It doesn’t hurt none. Besides, he likes to keep track of every little repair. Isn’t that right?”

Hobo Jones nodded, & smiled a little bit too.

So they unscrewed his head from his shoulders. They unscrewed his arms from his torso. And his legs from his torso. And then, with OC’s help, the Mechanic got all the parts of Hobo Jones laid out, side by side, on the long working-table.

Then Lilianna noticed something that was still connecting them all, even though they were taken apart. And she said, “Sir, if I may. What is that?”

The Mechanic smiled & his eyes twinkled. And he said, “That is the Hose.”

Lilianna thought for a moment, & then her eyes twinkled too. “Is that why he is sometimes known as Hose Jones?”

The Mechanic laughed, his bushy mustache bobbing up & down on his lips. He wiped his face a little bit with his crimson handkerchief, & then he said, “You know, I don’t know how that nickname got out there, but that *is* the Hose. That Hose is what connects Hobo Jones from top to bottom. And all the parts in between. It’s how he’s able to work, & be the most advanced Robot Man in the Many Worlds of the Star Spiral.”

Well, Lilianna was positively fascinated. Hobo Jones’s face on his head, which was along the row of

parts on the table, looked at her. Wasn't exactly smiling, but he seemed to be listening bemusedly to these tales.

The Mechanic was aware that Lilianna greatly enjoyed viewing all of this &, even though she'd known Hobo Jones for a long time, she'd never seen him get his checkup before. So he smiled at her again, & said, "Miss Lilianna, as I begin to do my more detailed work, I will be happy to answer any questions that you may have along the way. Please think of some good ones. And we'll talk all through them. We'll be done sooner than soon with your friend, & mine, I assure you."

She nodded & considered.

* * * * *

Hobo Jones Lay in Pieces

So Hobo Jones, also known as Hose Jones, lay in pieces. Organized pieces but, nonetheless, side by side, on the long working-table in Old Cookie's Fix-It Shoppe. The Mechanic was the primary repair-person for Hobo Jones, but OC was certainly assisting.

And now she was really critical for the steps that the Mechanic was up to in his checkup of Hobo Jones. You see, the Hose that connects Hobo Jones, from top to bottom, every part of him, needed to be cleared. It was one of the most critical things in this checkup that needed to be done.

And it needed to be done in a very particular way. The Mechanic & OC consulted. And then OC excused herself, for a moment.

Lilianna, watching from her stool, asked, "Where did OC go, Sir?"

The Mechanic smiled his charming smile, wiped his brow with his beautiful crimson kerchief, & said, "We need a certain someone to blow through the Hose, from end to end."

Lilianna leaned forward to inspect the Hose that connected all the parts of her friend, & said, "That's a very narrow Hose, Sir."

The Mechanic nodded. "We have a very specific need."

And just then, OC returned with a smirk on her face to light up any room. And from her bloo-&-pink paw emitted the wildest of cacklings! She held a little black-&-white Pandy Bear Imp Creature, with wild merry eyes!

The Mechanic took one look & said, "Yep, she'll do just fine, my friend. Pop her in."

So OC popped her little Imp friend into the far end of the Hose. Muffled cacklings emitted. And then OC put the Hose to her lips, & blew!

The Mechanic explained to Lilianna that, as the Hose was cleared, Hobo Jones might start speaking, & say all manner of strange things. "And there's no hardly way of knowing whether these are experiences of his, or dreams, or from books, or something else entirely," he added.

Sure enough, Hobo Jones's closed eyes suddenly opened & came to life. And he began to speak, in a strange voice, "Seems late at night, & I have a paper bag of *thingssssss*. Need a bus to get me from this *townnnnnnn* to the next! It comes, but I don't think I have any *moneyyyyyyy*." Garbling noises followed these words.

Then he resumed: "I find a complimentary *passssss*, for one ride, in my pocket. Scribbled on, but the tired old bus driver accepts it." More garbling noises.

He then resumed: "Everyone sets their own paper bag of *thingssssss* on the left side of the bus. Seats on the right. Finally my stop, I guess, or close at it comes. So I grab my brown bag of *thingssssss*, & get off ready to walk again!" More garbling noises. "Find the Seam in *thingssssss*, *Hobo-bo-bo Jonesssss!*" He cries, with an anguish somehow both sorrowful & comical.

Lilianna looked on with great concern, but the Mechanic raised a finger. She recalled what he said, & nodded. Then he gave her a thumbs-up. She's reassured.

And then there's quiet for a while, but then Hobo Jones began to speak again: "I think I am a Tiger, on a long stairs, when the Bear attacks begin, but I easily kick him down again, & again, even when he climbs the side. Bow & scrape, bow & scrape!" More garbling noises.

Then there's quiet again for a while. The Mechanic was studying all of this very closely, even though Lilianna could not see where the little Imp was in the long Hose. The Mechanic held his finger up again, though, & seemed to indicate that it's almost done.

Hobo Jones spoke one more time: "A supported place *liiiiike an islaaaaaand*. These fish came there to eat the *fondoooootion!* So it remains good where else it's *notttttttttt!*"

There's again quiet for a while. Then suddenly, with the wildest of cackles, the Imp came out of the other end of the Hose! All white from her efforts, but utterly pleased. She looked wildly at the Mechanic, who nodded her friendly. Then she hopped onto OC's bloo-&-pink paw, & they departed, to go *wherever* they go, *when* they go.

The Mechanic said, "That was an extra good cleaning. There was a lot in there that needed to be cleaned out."

OC returned, Imp-less, but with a big smirk on her face, for satisfactions. "Her colors will be back soon," she said to the Mechanic, who nodded pleased.

Lilianna looked at the two of them & said, "What now?"

The Mechanic smiled at her, with all the reassurance he can in his kind eyes, & said, "Don't worry, Miss Lilianna. Just have a little more patience. We're almost done with your dear friend."

* * * * *

Hobo Jones Being Reassembled

Hobo Jones was now being reassembled by the Mechanic, who's very careful, & affectionate, with each gesture & movement of this reassemblage. He used his beautiful, & some think magikal, crimson

handkerchief, to wipe each part & piece of Hobo Jones. His legs. His arms. His torso. His head. All of them gently caressed, & cleaned, & comforted.

OC helped him by propping up different parts as he affixed them in. Lilianna, sitting on the stool nearby, finger 'pon chin, studied the whole process very carefully.

Now Hobo Jones was sitting, whole, on the table. He's not exactly a short fellow. So they're all looking up at him a bit. But Lilianna got a feeling that the Mechanic's work was not done. Hobo Jones did not . . . look . . . fully . . . there . . . somehow.

"Is he OK, Sir?" she asked.

The Mechanic smiled at her, his handsome mustache wiggling a little bit, & said, "Well, there is one more step. And it might seem a little spooky to you, but it's OK. It'll involve more of him strangely talking, but it'll be a little different too. So just sit tight &, when it's all done, your friend will be back & better than ever. Isn't that right, OC?"

OC threw the friendliest, most affectionate wink at Lilianna & said, "This Mechanic knows his stuff. And Hobo Jones & he go way way back, as a matter of fact." Lilianna nodded & smiled too.

And so the Mechanic stood in front of Hobo Jones, who was still sitting upright on the working-table. He didn't seem to touch Hobo Jones in any way, but he did give him a strange kind of instruction. It involved saying a word, & then *hmmmming*, & continuing to *hmmmm*, as things happened, & this was how it all went.

He looked Hobo Jones straight in his eyes, & said, "Re . . . set. *Hmmmmmmmm.*"

And the Mechanic continued to *hmmmm* on & on. And then OC joined in the *hmmmming*. And then Lilianna felt compelled to join in too, & so now they were now all *hmmmming*.

Hobo Jones' eyes began to clear. He began to arrive more fully to where he was. But, on the way, he seemed to have a few more little bits to spew out. And so he talked really fast, & then really slow, & then really strange.

"Onabusiftheywishtoknow . . . grabthereporttoNew-York . . . the bus . . . comes to . . . Central Row . . . I'llhangonmyvoicechannels . . . Good . . . Good . . . Good Good . . . Good . . . Good . . .

"I . . . recallthecomfort . . . warmth . . . & urge to near others . . . thisishow to survive the bad shit . . . be alone, but not too much . . . bealone . . . but not too much . . . be alone . . . but not too much! Aw, grrrrrrr!

"*Yeabbbb*. I'll *telllllll yaz* . . . I'll *telllllll yaz* allllll . . . you want to know where it's at? . . . it's double football . . . with double quarterbacks . . . twice the fun, pals . . . *twice the fun* . . . travel a long way, some kind of strange *MOANNN!* . . . reunite with an old tie-dye friend of mine . . . he was very upset when I met him . . . something had gone wrong . . . *MOANNN!* . . . this time he promised to deliver to me the dosed caramel-&-cream on a stick . . . *MOANNN!* . . . just for *me* . . . & he handed it to me . . . & he smiled." He then grunted & snorted a variety of odd noises, till fewer, then none.

And then he was back, just like that, every last strange word blown out of him. He was reset. He looked

at them all & smiled a small, but a clearly Hobo Jones smile. He looked at Lilianna, & then he said suddenly, with great concern on his face, “Miss Lilianna, I hope this did not upset you. If it did, I apologize humbly.”

Well, Lilianna looked at him with the most affectionate of smiles & said, “Mr. Jones, we need to make sure that this fine Mechanic & this fine OC get to do a checkup on you on a regular basis hereon. You must promise me.”

Hobo Jones looked down, a little abashed, & said, “I promise, Miss Lilliana. I promise.”

Then he hopped off the table, & leaned down to hug Lilianna, & to hug the Mechanic, & even OC got in there somewhere, sort of mixed in among the hugs. And it was *all good*.

And then Hobo Jones looked at his friends & said, “Thank you so much. That was a really good check up. Mulronie, of course, was right. I did need it badly.”

The Mechanic wiped his hands with his crimson handkerchief, nodded & said, “Glad to help, my dear friend, glad to help any time. Any time.”

And then he looked at OC & said, “Say, you want to go walking around & see if we can find anything random at the Festival that needs a-fixin’?”

OC threw a wink all around & said, “That sounds like fun!” And she hopped up on the Mechanic’s shoulder where, being a Creature, she fit just perfectly.

Miss Flossie Flea was watching from the doorway. And the Mechanic came up to her, took off his hat, & said, “Mission accomplished, Ma’am.”

And Miss Flossie smiled & said, “I never had any doubt.” And then she gave him a hug too.

And then the Mechanic gave a wave to all, & was on his way with his friend OC, to find things to fix at the Festival.

Then Miss Flossie walked up to Hobo Jones & Lilianna & said, “Everything good now?” They both nod. And Miss Flossie said, “I’m glad to hear that, because I would like your help, if you are able.”

Well, Hobo Jones & Lilianna looked at each other, & smiled. They were *more* than able. They were *raring* to go. Get back into their adventures after this stop along the way.

So Miss Flossie led them out of Old Cookie’s Fix-It Shoppe, & out of the Thought Fleas’ Domicile itself. They walked along through the White Woods for a while, until they came to the Rutabaga Festival & Fleastock, in the Great Clearing.

And Lilianna asked, “Where are we heading, Miss Flossie?”

And Miss Flossie smiled at them & said, “I think it’s better to show you than to try to tell. We’re almost there. Let’s hurry!”

* * * * *

Part One: Into the Mossy Map

OK then, I am no longer in the backstage of Dreamland. I had led my dear friends, Rey & Amalia the sometimes Pink Bunny & the Seeker, into that Mossy Map, & we had thought that, as we traveled, hand to paw, this Map to the Room of Song, whatever we found in it, we would do it together.

The Seeker had said that with the Mossy Map, unlike other maps, you had to go *deeper*, you had to go *further*. I didn't know what this meant, but the first thing I realized, as I dived on in, was that, while I distantly felt the presence of my friends, it was just the most tenuous of connections. They weren't gone, but they weren't that near either. I hope they are OK.

I find myself sitting on a dirty brown couch, springs poking out, in a small room, with one window, & a shade on it, pulled down, kind of ripped, definitely dirty, & this room is filled with all manner of things. Piles of things. Papers, books, trash. This *certainly* isn't the Room of Song.

And then, coming over to me, carrying an old chair, like a kitchen chair, rusty, crooked, is a small man, scrawny. He has tight red curls on his head, & dark blue eyes, not pretty, not poetical. And he sits down closer to me than I like.

And he says, "So are you gonna help me get to the top of the Mound, or what?"

I stare at him. I can't think of any words to say.

He stares back at me & says, "Are you my Counterpart that was sent to help me do this?"

I don't know what to say. I don't know how I'm this guy's Counterpart, though maybe in some kind of weird Dreamland logic, I could be.

He looks at me again, his eyes raw & fierce. He says, "When they get on those Spaceships to the stars, I want to be on them. And I've got to get to the top of the Mound to make that happen. To that very old barn with the small telescope. And if you're my Counterpart, you've *got* to help me."

And I say, "Man, what are you talking about?"

And he picks up a grubby newspaper & shows me the headline:

CHAOS!

That's all it says. And there's a smeared photograph of two men, dripping evil. I don't know how smeared newsprint can *drip* evil, but it does.

And he points to them with a kind of reverence I cannot speak words to. "I'm following them to the stars. You see this?" And he points to the word headline again:

CHAOS!

I nod. I *do* see the word.

“It’s all distraction so that we can get on the ship, & get away from this *broken, fallen, sad, poisoned, bitter* world. Do you understand that? It’s all distraction.”

Now I’ve encountered a lot of weirdoes in Dreamland, in my long times writing for Dreamland’s newspaper, *The Eighth*. But this guy, *hoo boy*.

I stand up, & I walk over into his kitchen, such as it is. And I rummage among his drawers & his cabinets. There’s not much there but trash & rust, old things. But then I find, in the very back of the last place I look, a half-full jar of creamy peanut butter. And I rustle around some more, & I find a couple of spoons. I might have to clean them with my tongue because there’s nothing else to do it. So I do.

And I walk back over to him, & I grab him by his scrawny nape, & I sit him down next to me on that broken brown couch, & I unscrew the jar of creamy peanut butter.

“Open,” I say. He looks like he’s deciding fight or flight.

I look at him & say, “If you want to go to the stars, it begins with *this*.”

And I dip in, & get a big scooping amount of creamy peanut butter from that jar, nod to him, & his mouth opens wide. I gently press the spoon in, gently as I can.

“Now I want you to close your eyes, & I want you to taste every last little bit of that delicious treat I’ve given you. And when you’re completely done, you’ll know how to get there, & you *won’t* need me.”

And he does. He closes his eyes. I can see that he is licking & chewing & sucking. And I stand up, & I leave. *What else could I have done in that situation?*

I leave the room of that strange fellow, my so-called Counterpart, him enjoying that delicious creamy peanut butter. I hope it turns him in a different direction, toward virtue & empathy. How could one or more great big scoops of creamy peanut butter *not* turn any wayward soul toward the path of virtue & empathy?

* * * * *

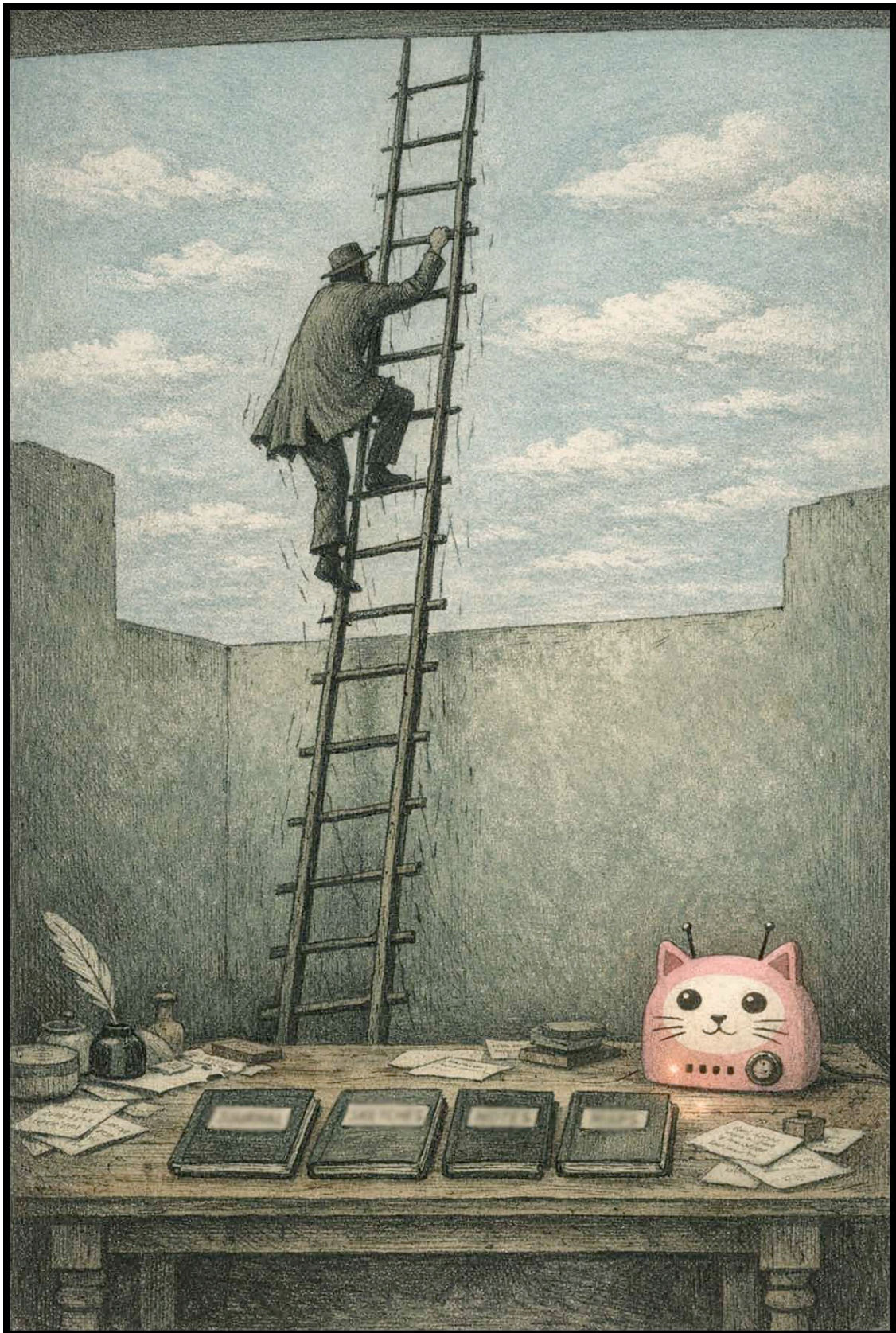
The Study-Room

I find myself somewhere else now. Is it familiar to me? Is it familiar to some version of me? Some other way, some other time? It seems to be some kind of a Study-Room.

There is a great working-table. Upon it, an antique rite-typer. And a white-faced pink cat radio. I sit on down, & study the really big pile of notebooks. They’re hard to read! Maybe I’m not supposed to, but I peer closely, & seem to make out: *Dream Raps. Labyrinthine. Many Musics. Bags End News*. What are *any* of these?

And there is a pile of books on the working-table too, dusty, tattered with long love. Some of the titles I think maybe I know are: *Five New Authors from 1928; Luminous Ends; Aftermath with Additional Appendices & New Dream Fragments; & The Unofficial Guide to the Mulronie the Space Pirate Universe*.

But then I see, before I study any more of what’s on this table, something interesting on the floor,



under the table. I pick it up, & put it on the table to study. Looks like a hand-made book, made out of branches & stones & string. It feels as soft as the Mossy Map I seem to be traveling through.

The book falls open before me, to a page of text. Hardly looks old, unlike everything else here. It's not covered in dust. But I try to read it, & the handwriting is hard.

And these are Notes more than Narrative. Peering closely helps again, though I don't get all of it. But there's one sentence that reads: "They were never quite lovers, though remained the closest of friends always." And then there's some more. I just *can't* read it. I don't even know if it's words? I don't know *what* it is.

But then I turn the page, & it seems like the ink on this page is gleaming wet! As though it was just written moments ago. And it's much clearer to read than that previous page. I read aloud for some reason:

*The bloom & the branch,
high up winter mountains.
Empty snow lodge, improbable to reckon.
Yet become softly, fiercely bound.
A whisper, like deep love,
neither envy nor stupidity could break.*

Is it a poem? Sort of. I'm not sure I'm qualified to speak about such things.

But I feel like, this page being so fresh & all, that perhaps whoever actually works at this table—& writes in this book, & uses that rite-typewriter, & listens to that white-faced pink cat radio—well, he or she is probably going to be coming back any time now. And I probably don't want to be here when that happens. It might seem rude, as though I am trespassing. And I'm really *not*.

So I stand up &, at that moment, the white-faced pink cat radio turns on. And a voice, if you could call it that, is muttering words, in some kind of syncopated rhythm: "Trippy. Fuse. Hope. *BOOM!* Butterfly? *LIGHT!*"

And that's all.

I *really* better get going now. So I turn around in all directions, looking for the next room that I suppose to travel through. But even the door that I came from is not there. There are no doors leading *into* or *out* of this room. *Uh-oh*.

Then I look straight up & realize: *There's no ceiling*. OK. And then I notice a ladder in the corner. It doesn't look very sturdy, but it might just do the job. So I lift it up, & lean it against one of the walls. I start to climb up, feeling it shake & quiver. Rickety, but holds together as I climb to the top of the wall, & rest there for a moment.

And it's very light, so I am able to pull it up, & sort of raise it up high, there being no ceiling, & then gently lower it down to the other side, & thus descend into the next room. I appreciate that ladder more than I thought I did.

I have climbed down to an entirely different place again. *Oh my!*

Over the Wall

I've come to a living room, it seems, of a house or an apartment. Not like my hovel in ZombieTown! Far too big. Got a couch. Got a big, comfy-looking armchair. A great big DüMont television. I mean, it's the largest TV I've *ever* seen.

So I decide to turn on the great big television. And I manage to find the power knob, which is not hard to find. Right in front. Turn it on. But then instead of TV pictures, what comes on the screen on is:

USER NAME:???

PASSWORD:???

I don't know what this means except then I can see that there is some kind of a keyboard nearby. And I notice that there's a taped note on the keyboard, which tells me what user name & password to use, I hope. I type in *John & Phillip* for user name. And, for password, I type in *First Novel*.

Well, OK! The TV comes on. I sit on back of the couch. Wishing I had a bag of *ChocoSmax (Them's the Fax!)*, but all else is fine. On comes a movie. I think that's the King of Rock & Roll. He's traveling down Turnpike with Kitten in his "Burning Sphere of the Road." Well, I'm not sure what all that means, but it doesn't last long on the screen. Sort of fades out.

And then the next thing I see on the great big TV looks to be a classroom. Kind of shiny & distorted. And then I hear *my* voice! It seems as though somehow the camera is from my angle. So I can't see me on the TV, but I can hear my voice. And I'm describing my struggles in an art class.

I say: "I don't understand. Straight lines? Crooked lines? One dimension? Six? I just like best to draw on the far edge of the picture. Leave the big canvas mostly empty. Why can't I?" I struggle & struggle to explain, adjust my collapsed top hat uncomfortably, worry about my pants falling apart at my knees. But everybody in the classroom nods & taps their pencils on their heads, as though this is some kind of empathetic gesture. I don't like this TV program as much, but I don't see a clicker to switch channels. Luckily, it fades out too.

Channels fly past with only moments to catch snatches of TV show titles along the way: *TripT* > *Clarendon I* > *Battle Blac* > *Homestead* > *Sanctu* >>>

And then something comes on slower next. It looks like a CFL football game, with our side holding a slim lead. And it's as though we're watching it from the end zone, as a wide receiver tiptoes down the sideline for a touchdown. But the refs don't call it. But everybody's crying: *It was a touchdown! It was obvious!*

But now I find, with all this watching, & yelling, & emotional fervor, I'm sinking deeper & deeper into this very comfortable couch. And I wonder if just a little nap in this Room of Song would do any harm.

As I sink deeper & deeper, I am still holding on, however tenuously, & distantly, to the hands & paws of my dear friends, Rey & Amalia the sometimes Pink Bunny & the Seeker.

* * * * *

Are You Me Too? Are We the Same?

At some point, I'm no longer down deep in the couch I started up from, or down from. How would you say it? Which *direction* is it that I'm going? It doesn't matter. I'm no longer there.

In fact, I don't know if I'm anywhere right now. Seems like I was watching a movie with much interest on the great big DüMont TV, but then weirdly I always seem to be somewhere *inside* the movie . . . in a corner . . . of every scene & situation. Not far enough away not to be able to see & hear the action, but never part of the action. Just an extra, as it were.

And I watch, or witness, or experience, how they met, probably in that art classroom I was in, & how they fit together, at that time, in perfect embrace. Or, I wonder to myself: *Are embraces themselves just perfect?*

He called later, & Figga sounded wild, & desperate. I hear both sides of their phone call. He kept a cool deep affectation about himself, but assured her that they would talk soon. Time passes, as it does in these things, *whatever* these things may be.

Now they are come back together at that Ancienne Coffeehouse, that I'm sure I have passed through before, in some other way, some other time. But there's some kind of strange celebration going on here. A *wild* one. And he's longing to put his arm around Figga's shoulder, let it rest there for a few beats. Talk about her favorite books, Mulronie & so on. But he doesn't quite.

Later, if you could say time has passed, he's now alone at the all-night bus station. You know about those, I'm sure. All sorts of strange people stay in the all-night bus station, on benches, in corners, counting pennies, rolling up cigarettes made from the used butts they find between the cracks of benches.

All manner of things stuffed down in those cracks over the course of time. Old chewed-up gum. Empty blurred-out wrappers. Unsent love notes. Pages from unfinished novels. Scores from imaginal symphonies. Thoughts collected together, with no venue to offer them, rolled up, in tight little balls, pushed down there, with the used butts & the old gum.

I've always thought that bus stations are good places to see what's going by in this world. All sorts of reasons people are on the bus, taking the bus, waiting for the bus. One elderly lady with grey hair done up in a pretty pink scarf, multi-colored layers of clothes, sits next to a strange ragged figure before leaving abruptly. Wait: Was that me, in some other way, some other time?

Well.

So anyway, he's in that all-night bus station, but he's on the run. I follow him, after a fashion. He's running for that bus, racing down the hill. *Elliptical City Xpress*, says the sign on its back window. It's early morning now. Rainy.

And that bus is at the bottom of the hill, waiting for him. But his pass gets away from him, flies up in the wind. And he just stands there for the longest time. Wondering.

I walk up to him &, though I'm not her, I put my arm around his shoulder. And he looks at me, not surprised somehow.

And he says, “I was wondering how long would it be before you would say hello to me.”

I look at him closely & quietly for a long time, & I say, “Do we know each other?”

And he says, “Well, kind of. You see, we’re the same person, but separated by time. Now ordinarily, we’d be separated by space too. But it seems like that’s not true right now.”

“Am I later than you?” I say, fearing I’m right.

“I suppose so. Look at me.”

I do. I study him. His face is younger than mine. Cleaner than mine. Even with his woes & troubles, shinier than mine. And I say, “How do you become me?”

He says, “That’s impossible to explain, simply, or in any complex way. But it’s not even assured. For example, if you were to hop on that bus that I can’t take, because my pass flew away from me, you might travel to places that I haven’t yet traveled. And therefore someone else than you & me might occur. Try it.”

“But I don’t have a pass,” I protest.

“Feel in your pocket.”

I feel in my pocket &, sure enough, I pull out a wrinkled, crumpled old piece of paper. And it says **E. C. Bus Pass** on it, underneath the random scribbles.

“The engine’s starting up. It won’t wait long. You better go,” he says. Gives me a sort of friendly pat.

“What about you?”

“I’ll be fine. Right now I have to go back inside. I have a phone call to make, you see. Try to figure some things out with someone.”

“Good luck!” we say to each other, at the same time, in the same tone of voice, & then we both smile, give a wave that looks identical one to the other.

And I walk toward the bus, & he walks back inside toward the payphone.

* * * * *

Part Two: Homesteadin’ Plus!

So I boarded that bus that my, uh, Counterpart, I might call him, recommended. Presented my somewhat scribbled-on bus pass to the tired-looking driver. He’s dressed up in a driver’s uniform & hat, old & raggedy. He nodded me long, somewhat indifferently.

And I made my way to the back seat, as I usually do, when it comes to bus riding, I’m not sure if I knew exactly where I thought I was going. But then, where I sat in the very back seat, the triple row, right

next to the bathroom, I found a milk crate. It was an old milk crate. If plastic could be rusty, that was this. An all-green color. Couldn't even read the writing on it. And it was *full* of contents.

I looked around for anybody who might claim this milk crate but, honestly, there was nobody around. Bus was fairly empty, & the few other passengers were sitting up near the front, as most passengers prefer to do. I guess this was going to be my milk crate, if it had anything interesting in it.

It's really full of all kinds of different kinds of things. Pamphlets. Again. *Always* the pamphlets in my many travels. But then it also had this sort of a little TV. It was a strange TV, a Filco. It seemed to have a videotape poking out of it, below the screen, above the buttons. I wondered what that meant. And I was going to tip the TV a bit to see if it would pop in & turn on, but I decided to hold off & look at the pamphlets a little bit. See what was going on there.

They all seemed related. This was someone's scholarly work, but I could only find a single enigmatic Author's credit, buried in footnotes: *Scholar A*.

And it was very strange scholarly work. For as I read through, I came to understand it was scholarly work about a TV show called, originally, *Homesteadin'*. I read back & forth through the notes. They were somewhat tangled, & certainly not linear in any kind of way. Some kind of faux Narrative, you might say.

But what I came to understand is that *Homesteadin'* was originally on back in 1969, on the United Television Network (UTN). On the public information content schedule for a season. Then it was canceled. Purged by UTN, even before the rural comedies were, in 1971. You remember all of that, of course? *The Great Purge?* Yes, we all do. But then it was brought back the following season, by DüMont, the struggling sixth network. And it was renamed *Homesteadin' Plus!*

As I read deeper into these notes, these pamphlets, I found that this TV show was about two families, the Cadabras & the Pocuses. One black. One white. And these two families lived in homes right next door to each other, even though, strangely, this was the time of homesteading, long ago. When, supposedly, you would buy a house cheaply out West, in the Great Grand Prairie, & you get some land around it for yourself & your family.

But somehow these two families had tracks of land right next to each other, & their houses were right next to each other, too. *Goodness me! How strange!* Well, the drama immediately begins when the white teenage girl & the black teenage boy hook up. That was probably controversial for those times.

And then they came back for a second season, with more trouble. More complications. You know how these sitcoms are. They sort of start somewhere familiar in every episode, & then they travel afar into comical complications & then, 22 minutes later, they kind of come back around to where they were at the beginning.

And then, in season three, came the arrival of the Kazams, an Asian family. They have a gay teenage son or daughter, depending on who was available for the episode, according to my notes. It was a very low-budget show. The Author of all these notes, perhaps Scholar A, wondered in the margins if this might have been an early version of a transgender character on TV. But he tends to doubt it.

After season three, the new Show Runner who had taken over, a young hotshot, only went by his initials, wanted to have a Native Indian family come on board. Have another tract of land &, again, the

house be incomprehensibly located right next to the other families.

However, he determined that first he had to have a Peyote vision, in order to better understand the Native Indian family he was going to bring on board, & so he had to go on a Peyote Vision Quest. Now interestingly, the Author notes, in some scribbles on the back of one of the pages of one of the pamphlets, the original Show Runner had had a vision of an Island that, strangely, he did not bring into *Homesteadin'* or *Homesteadin' Plus!* But it was a moment where a big aeroplane passed overhead, & this new Show Runner, reading these notes, wondered in his Peyote vision: *How did it not crash? It made no sense that such a thing could be up in the air.*

Thus season four brought the Wampums, the Native Indian family that the Peyote vision had produced. And so now you had four families all living close together in a little neighborhood, surrounded by thousands & thousands of miles of empty prairie. And none of it made any sense, except that it was a sitcom, so it was funny after its own fashion.

Season six was the final season. They knew it was the final season. Many wondered how it had gotten this far anyway. But the Janitor, who would come around & be comic relief, sweep up & fix things & whatnot, played by various actors in various seasons, was finally going to explain why all their houses were so close together, in these thousands of miles of empty prairie. It was gonna be in the series finale! All the answers would come together with the finale.

But the finale never aired. DüMont suddenly went out of business, its 36 affiliates notified by postcards. There was a rumor, for years & years, according to these notes, that all the Janitors from all the seasons would have appeared in that finale. Although the one of them who did show up at the 1986 reunion convention, at the Civic Center in Elliptical City I believe, before the roof caved in, or possibly after, claimed he could not remember. All he would explain is: "A lot of drugs, man. A *lot* of drugs."

The show was never syndicated. There was no DVD. Only a few episodes existed, & most of them were audio recordings made by fans with tape recorders. But one or two existed from a fan who had used a home camera to record TV episodes. But even these are incomplete. And you can hear people talking & doorbells ringing in the background. A fight next door breaks out. It's very hard to understand.

But the fact of the matter is that I held this strange little TV-like thing in my lap. I pushed in the videotape, & I was able to watch what little there was of this show, *Homesteadin' Plus!* It was grainy, it was noisy, but there it was, thousands of miles of prairie, empty, except for these four houses.

And I watched & watched, wondering what I could learn. Wondering who would abandon all this research, in the back of this bus? What became of the Author, perhaps Scholar A? I was just not certain that there wasn't much more to all of this, & so I resolved that this crate would travel on with me awhile.

* * * * *

Homestead-d-din' ++!

And here's the thing: I thought that was the end of it because, as far as I could tell from, all the pamphlets & notes & what-not in the crate, the most recent information about any of this was that 1986 convention that was held at the Elliptical City Civic Center, either before or after the roof collapsed. And I'd read all those pamphlets backwards & forwards, including the notes in the margins, & some on the back of the pages. So I was stuck.

That is, I was stuck until the strangest thing happened. I mean, this was so strange that it could only have happened because it happened, not because there was some rhyme or reason or logic to it. It just happened because it happened. I think those Creatures that I meet sometimes like to refer to it as “tis so.”

What happened was that someone saw all my studying in the back seat of the bus. Going through the crates, reading the pamphlets & all. And had sat down on the seats, sort of across from mine, maybe a row up. Because I was really next to the bathroom, you see. And had watched me, apparently for a while, & then saw how I kind of ran aground. I was more thinking with paw on chin than actually doing any more studying. And at that moment, she spoke up. And she said to me, “When they revived it, after that convention, I auditioned, & got a part.”

And I looked at her, & she had to be the strangest-looking girl I had ever seen. I mean, she *looked* like a girl, sort of, but she didn't exactly look like any one *particular* girl. She was kind of vague, as though somehow her facial expressions & her whole physique sort of shifted back & forth. And I couldn't figure out the how or why of this as well. And again, man, can you even say “tis so” at this point? I don't know.

But she had things to tell me. She *surely* had things to tell me. She said that she was on the revival of that show, now called *Homestead-d-din'+ +*, because there were some legal entanglements whereby they couldn't *exactly* call it the same thing as the show that it was a sequel to. So she explained to me how *Homestead-d-din'* was spelled with a couple too many d's, & plus-signs instead of words spelled out.

She said to me, “People thought it was cool that we did that, but we only did it because we didn't have any money for the lawyers, to straighten it all out, get the rights & all.”

And I asked, “When was this? You don't look that old.”

And she said, “Well, it was a while ago. I'm older than I look in some ways.”

And I asked, “Now what does that mean?”

And she said, “Well, maybe you'll find out eventually. But let me tell you the rest of the story before you get there.” I nodded, agreeably enough.

And then she said, “You see, there were people who still wanted to tell more of the stories. And then there were people who were convinced that there were more stories to tell. And *then* there were people convinced even more that it was *real*. That it was based on a *real* place. That somewhere out there, on the Great Grand Prairie, all of this exists. For *real!* That someone brought the story of it back, & turned it into a TV show.

“So what happened was that I auditioned, & got a part, & we got to traveling out there, in a bus not too different from this. And we *found* it. But what we found was that all the houses were empty. And they were all run down. But they were all kind of next to each other, neighborhood-like. Just like on the show.

“And so we all walked around & tried to figure out, from what was there, what had happened to those that had been living there. But nobody could figure it out very much. There were clues, but none of them fitted together to form a complete puzzle, you know.



“So what happened next was that we brought ourselves a bunch of cameras, & things, & even though we couldn’t exactly say it was a sequel to what had already been told, the fact of the matter is that we all moved in to those, you know, houses. We fixed them up. And, sure enough, we now have a neighborhood, & it is still surrounded by the Great Grand Prairie. Nobody had done anything with that. And we filmed & filmed.

“And somehow we got the films back to the city, & it got broadcast on the television. I think it was maybe, you know, not a big station or network. It might have been that, you know, DüMont one, that you hear tell about, from time to time. It needed shows since it came back. And, uh, I’d still be there—”

I had to interrupt her here. “Wait a minute, wait a minute. Are you saying you were *actually* there? And you *lived* there? And you were part of it all? You are an actor, but you’re also part of it for *real*?”

And she nodded & said, “Well, yeah, I was the girl that hooked up with the boy, & caused all the trouble in season one. See, part of what we did was that we remade some of those episodes for, you know, modern audiences. Because that was how they sold it to DüMont. They said they’re going to make it for ‘modern audiences.’ I don’t really know what that meant.”

Well, for a moment, I’m just sitting there with my jaw hung open because this is just beyond my capacity to understand. And then it sort of hit me. “Wait a minute. Where are you going now?”

She smiled & said to me, “Well, I went back to Elliptical City, to visit some people, but I’m heading back now to film the next season.”

“Of *Homestead-d-din’*++, with too many d’s?” I cried. Worried the driver would kick me off if I didn’t calm down.

I could not figure out what any of this meant. *What was real? What was not?* “Tis so” hardly begins to explain these matters!

And she nodded & smiled at me, in her vague shifting way, & she said, “You’re coming, right?”

* * * * *

Adrift: A Novel

I nodded my head uncertainly to her. I did have my research to pursue in the rusted green milk crate. But then she sort of came nearer to me, & I sort of backed away a little, not knowing what manner of being she was.

But she was looking down into the crate, which I was holding protectively, with all of its notes & papers & things. And she said, “You missed something down there, at the very bottom. If you don’t read that, none of the rest of it makes any sense.”

So, very gingerly, waiting until she moved away into her own seat again, I reached down deep & pulled out what seems to be a kind of a manuscript of some sort. I can’t tell if it’s a book or a sorta-book. Not a pamphlet anyway. And it said on the cover:

ADRIFT:
A NOVEL

“What is this?”

She looks at me in her vague shifting way, & says, “That’s what you’ve got to read. Between now & when we arrive. It’ll explain everything.”

Now I don’t believe this for a moment. But I am curious, & I had overlooked it in my researches earlier, so I open it up.

There’s no title page. There’s no author. On the back cover, what it has of one, are just these words, in a murky, muddled hand: “What if the Universe splintered from a single decision?”

It just jumps into the Narrative. Almost as though there was more, before this first page. Because it begins with the phrase: “Penultimate episode.” And then the Author of this novel writes:

So far gone. Whatever the Island is. Somehow vast & unknown. And I return back to the Square, walking around, trying to think about it all. Walking through walls. I *still* don’t know where I got that talent from. *Nothing’s explained!* Or even close to explained.

Just what that strange old man with the long beard said to me long ago, “If you’re gonna survive the Island, you better learn how to *hmmm*.” *But what does that mean? What am I to do with it? How am I to go forward?* I feel a-close to a swoon.

But I pick myself up. Dust off my raggedy britches, & my vest. Clear my spectacleez. Rub my grubby fingers through my grubby hair. And walk on. Thinking to myself: *I’m gonna figure this out.*

And I seem to be walking down a sidewalk in the Square. Perhaps muttering to myself a bit? But not much stranger than many of the others in this place, with its jugglers & singers & acrobats, its bookstores & coffeehouses. All sorts of delightful places of different kinds. Never changes. *Nothing ever goes away.*

And that’s when I run, practically smacked dab, into her again. *Oh! My heavens!* She came from afar, possessing me closer & closer. Till this seemed all . . . all else hovel! All else impediment! The world to me both expanded & shrank. *Her eyes. Her smile. Her touch.* Nothing else had, or could ever matter! Back when, long ago.

She smiles at me and says, “Hello! How are you doing?”

I a-swoon.

* * * * *

Snap! Snap! Snap!

I start coughing. I don’t know why. I discover, when I come up for air, from reading the novel, that the

strange girl has secreted herself next to me, & she's reading along. Well, as long as she stays still I can leave her there. I can be understanding, & patient, with strange persons. I turn back to the book, still a little disquieted, but I begin to read again.

Strange to say, wherever I left off, I'm somewhere else:

I'm lecturing on the second floor, wooden room, to a crowd of people. It's a long lecture, about what happens penultimately. I have many theories, but I admit that I doubt any of them are right, & I grow less interested as I utter each one. I don't think it matters.

I cough again, shift in my seat a little bit. Read on:

"I don't think it matters whether the Island is real or not," I lecture, trying a different tact. "I think something else is important." And I'm about to pause, dramatically, in front of this crowd of people, & then to utter my considered point, when they all stand up! And they all leave! Is it lunchtime? Did I say something wrong?

"Hey, you! Go sit over there! Now!" I order.

She snaps at me, but then goes & sits over where she was. I look down again on the page. And I read:

The crowd has returned. On my lectern is my orange drink. I sip & ready to resume.

Now she's glaring darkly at me, so I compromise. I read aloud, so she can listen, over there. I look down at the page again. And I read aloud, about the DüMont TVs rigged up to computers.

Snap! Snap! Snap! I look up, look down, try again:

I half woke, thinking about *Dream Raps*, how these notes transfigure into those on *Within's Within: Scenes from the Psychedelic Revolution*, & then to *The Cenacle*. It's a strange crafting process, & it's like I don't dream to produce content, however that it comes, & I think about linear & faux Narrative—

Snap! Snap! Snap! She doesn't like that, apparently. I read on again, carefully:

Walking through the Square, after having drug myself up again from a-swooning, I see that poster on the wall. It's been there for a long time. It's been disintegrating, piece by piece, but I can recall that it was a poster for a movie, or a TV show, or something, called *Adrift*. Music by Shakirup. Sometimes known as Shakir P. Sometimes SHU.

Snap! Snap! Snap! I read on. I insist:

There are posters on the wall *within* some of the scenes of this poster, & there are posters *within* some of those. And there are posters *within* those. I admire this poster, honestly, even as I see that it is falling down, piece by piece.

I pause. I don't hear any *snaps*. Resume reading:

And you see, it's kind of like a TV show, set at a school, far out on the Great Grand Prairie.

Not sure who I am, but there's a girl I like, who I figure does not like me, but she comes to the school, & does like me, but then there's a parallel storyline, in which she is long waiting her true love, who is far. He's played by one of those handsome, rugged, strange *act-ors*. They are the show's central figures. In another storyline, she & several others phantom into a wall, & become part of a strange dark room, unsure how to return. It's like the storylines exist in this school simultaneously, deep down in the heart of things, so to speak. Multiverses, I wonder?

Snap! Snap! Snap! Snap! Snap! Snap! I page through to the last page of this manuscript, tired of all of this entirely, & I read the last lines, aloud, loudly. The bus driver may throw me off this time, but I insist to read:

There was a noise, a word, or laughter, & all began to begin.

* * * * *

Arrival

I read again the last lines of *Adrift: A Novel*, quieter this time:

There was a noise, a word, or laughter, & all began to begin.

I close this strange volume. Let it sit in my lap. Close my eyes, for a long moment. I can hear bus noises around me. Starts & stops. You always smell a little exhaust back here, given that there's no roof above to keep you from it.

I open my eyes. And the girl is still sitting in her seat over there, watching me peculiarly, seeming to mumble quietly, or *chit-chit-chit*, or something. I don't really know. She seems to be devolving as the ride goes on.

The bus hasn't arrived to our destination yet. And I still don't know about somehow being part of *Homestead-d-din' ++*, with too many d's. Whatever season it might be.

Then I notice on the back of the manuscript some scrawlings. They seem to have been done with some kind of ink marker. Possibly Scholar A's hand? They're hard to read, but I think they say:

The famous director spent '68 to '70 or so teaching at universities, & then he walked away from all that. Traveled to the UK. Had seen her rarely in those years, but now determined to reunite. Whatever this meant.

Hm. I lean back again in my seat. Close my eyes. Somehow drained by this reading experience. I find myself lingering to the very bones & structure of some kind of Narrative. Not like I'm in the audience listening, or reading it, or viewing it before me. No. I'm in the very bones & structure of it. It's like I'm backstage somehow.

I hear a distant voice cry: "Marie! Joe! Daniel! Et . . ." And a distant more girlish voice reply: "Cetera!" And then I sort of fall away with a sloop, from whatever that was. A hard *hard* sloop.

And then I wonder if this really was a dream, for I'm now with my three friends, Rey & Amalia the sometimes Pink Bunny & the Seeker! In the store we work in, called Chief Seattle's Friendly Market.

To the right of the door, the many cash registers, in many tongues, from many centuries. And the stage over there, to the left, & the soda cooler in the back. And the door down stairs . . . to the Spaceship? *Underneath the earth*, whatever that means.

We'd made the decision to go radical. Or maybe we were still deciding, but it was close. And they're debating about how to claim the Orphan Artist, with one of the rings they chose. Each friend had a different one, & a different kind of claim on the Orphan Artist.

Then there's a knock at the door of the room wherein we've secreted ourselves, a secure meeting room, where we've fled from the threat of a shooter in our store. *A shooter?* In Chief Seattle's Friendly Market? How could that be?

I said to my friends that we had to become even better aware of each other, at all times. Going radical would affect our jobs. The journal, the Orphan Artist, & my claim to her, & their claim to her. But it felt good. Good with all of them. I look at them, openly, honestly. Hoping I could do well by each of them.

And just as I was starting to believe that all that back there, on that bus, with that TV show, & that feral girl, were just a weird dream, like maybe I've been a-nipping at my *T-O-O* necklace a few too many times, I hear a loud metallic sound of old brakes, pulling a vehicle to a slow but firm stop.

And I open my eyes reluctantly & see, yes, I'm on this Roofless Bus. The rusted green milk crate of items about *Homesteadin'*. The small Filco television. The strange book in my lap. And the feral girl over there. It's all *real*. At least for *now*.

She's smiling at me. Looking coherent again. She's fixed herself up a bit, I guess you might say.

"We're here," she says excitedly. "Aren't you excited?"

And I suppose that, when you reach the end of the line, you gotta get off. Wherever you come to, by whatever means, you *gotta* get off. But I'm thinking to myself: *I have a feeling that Homesteadin'++ isn't all that we've arrived to out here.*

I wonder if there's something else nearby that would interest me more. But I nod & smile to her, & we make our way to the front of the bus, to get off.

* * * * *

Me? A DJ?

What happens next, after I get off that Roofless Bus, seems to be fragmented, & non-linear. For a moment, I am following the strange girl I'd been traveling with, who'd grown more feral as the trip had gone on, but seemed to have pulled herself together as we arrived, & was ready to go, in her co-starring role on *Homestead-d-din' ++*, with too many d's.

She was all fixed up. She was in character. Her school uniform was a white shirt with black vest, plaid skirt, black tights & shoes. But I'm not even really sure if she knew me anymore. As we headed toward the front of the bus, & we began to descend the steps, she'd been holding my hand up to that point to make sure that I did not get lost somehow from the back of the bus to the front of the bus, but I

remember that, as she stepped off the bus, our hands parted.

And when I got down to the bottom of the stairs, which seemed like too many stairs, but when I got to the bottom of them & stepped onto the ground, I couldn't find her anywhere. I don't know where she went. Ah well, I'll probably figure it out.

Just in case, I look back up to the driver, who has lit up something, & is puffing away peaceably, having done his job.

And I say, "Hey, buddy, when does this bus of yours head back the other way?"

Well, he puffed peaceably. I thought I recognized him, maybe from some other way, some other time. He seemed very very old. And very sort of deflated of some big air that had once filled his lungs, & come out his mouth as endless streams of strange words that deceived all. Now he's just the bus driver again. Practically nameless.

But he does puff on something peaceably that seems to balance him out now. And he looks at me, not unkindly, & says, "It'll be a while. When I'm ready to go, I'll give some honks on my hooter here." And he demonstrated: "Honk-Honk! Honk-Honk!" I gave him a wave, & turned around to see what I might find.

And for just a moment, it seemed like I really was on the set of *Homestead-d-din'* ++, with too many d's. And I thought I saw the houses that were part of the show that I've been reading about, in the materials in the rusty green milk crate. And watching on the little television. I still had the green milk crate with me. I was hauling it along. My book bag was on my shoulder. I mean, I felt like I was sort of ready for all this in some strange way. But are you *really* ready for anything, in this world or any other? I wonder. . .

But maybe then I was hurried away suddenly. Maybe I was not understood to be allowed on the set? And maybe I was led away to a back room somewhere. And maybe I was interrogated for a while, with nothing but a dirty bulb above my head. And maybe I nearly starved, but I can't say any of that for sure. Because it all seemed so fragmented. *Non-linear*, you see.

Maybe I just don't want to remember any of it. But I was not simply rustled off to the cages. That's where I expected I would end up. But maybe that feral girl had put in a word for me, of some kind.

Because now I find myself in a little room, before much equipment, including two turntables & a tape-deck. And I am a DJ. A DJ on a radio station? What in the world does that mean? Have I done this kind of thing before? I don't know. Am I trained, or do I just kind of figure it out? Maybe a little bit of both. I tend to think I was given a couple of instructions. And then patted on the back & told, "Good luck, buddy! You're up."

OK. So that's where I am now. I'm talking into a microphone: "Who am I talking to? Am I talking to the actors on this set of *Homestead-d-din'* ++, with too many d's? Are there others here who are listening to me? I don't know who you are, honestly. But I will certainly do my best. It seems to be a great day out here on the Great Grand Prairie! And I hope you're all going to have a good day doing what you do out here. Thanks for listening to me, on *SpiritPlants Radio America*.

"And I can't say for sure I've figured out any of this thus far. But it's OK. I'll figure it out eventually. And maybe I'll tell you about it on the microphone. Or maybe I won't. It really depends on one thing

or another.”

But the important thing that I understood is that I wasn't in the cages. And eventually I would hear that bus go “Honk-Honk! Honk-Honk!” And when I hear those honks, I am going to race my way back to that Roofless Bus like nobody's business. But until then, maybe there are things to find out here that I haven't found out yet.

I talk on: “You see, I have kind of an affliction. It's because I've spent so much time in Dreamland that I don't have the same kind of memory I once had for things. And so there could be other things I'm not recalling about all of this that I can't do anything with.

“So I appreciate you listening to me as I fumble my way through DJ'ing a show that I didn't know I had. And I see that I have a group of friendly Creatures who are here to help me out. A grey Hedgedy-Hog, & many shiny-eyed fellows, & Creatures that squeak, & others that shake or jingle. So many lovely friends!

“And I have a piece of paper to help me know what to say. So I'm going to say these things, & then maybe we will listen to a little bit of music thereon. Here goes. Is everybody in? Is everybody in? Is everybody in? Is everybody in? Is everybody in? Are you in, I ask? Are you in? I wish to inquire. Are you in? I wish to know. Are you within? Within? Within?

“Oops, oops, I dropped my piece of paper! Oh, picked it up again! OK. Within? Within? Within? Within? Within! Within! Within! Within's Within! You are listening tooo . . . the *Within's Within: Scenes from the Psychedelic Revolution!* I'm DJ Souldard, your host on SpiritPlants Radio America, broadcasting around the Many Worlds of the Star Spiral! Where you are always invited to turn on! Tune in! And welcome to all!”

Then I read at the end of my piece of paper. “Coming up now . . . Billy Joel's . . . *River of Dreams!* I hope you like it.”

* * * * *

The LP Record Skips

As my radio show is coming to an end, I play one last LP record, an old favorite of mine called *Fairy Tales*, by Noisy Children. I sit back for a moment, & listen to its strange, soothing sounds.

But then it gets stranger & darker. And then it begins to skip.

I hold real still, but it skips again. And then it again . . . & then it . . . & then it . . . again . . .

When I come to, I'm not in that radio booth, playing those vinyl LP records. As some kind of DJ?

And those friendly Creatures, that seemed to form my staff, are nowhere in sight.

I come to . . . slowly . . . finding myself . . . climbing up . . . a tall hill . . . of sand. And I see that all I have left of my possessions is that strange manuscript called: *Adrift. A Novel.*

I climb to the top of the tall hill of sand, & I look out. Is this the Great Grand Prairie? It's pretty sandy



for a prairie. And there's a strange house that I can barely make out, way way out there where, strangely, it's darker. Now how can that be? It's daylight here.

And there's a man standing in front of the house, & he's calling to me. He's waving me over. He seems to be smiling some kind of smile but, even from this distance, I don't like it. And he's urging me to come over as though he's got the answers. He'll tell me what's going on, & what's going to happen. Well, OK, I admit, I slowly approach. Who am I not to at least hear out someone who claims to have answers?

I approach & approach, & it gets lighter. And I look back, & that hill that I was on, that I can now hardly see anymore, is darker. Hmm. Is that how it works here? I don't know. That's a *strange* way for something to work.

But I finally arrived to the house, but it's not a house actually. It's a little bus station. In fact, it's a *very* little bus station. It comes up to about my waist. But, in every other way, it looks like a bus station. It has revolving doors, & windows. I bend down to peer inside, & it seems like there are seats of the waiting room, old cracked benches, & a counter where you buy a ticket.

I just got off a bus. I don't really need to get on another bus right away &, since that other driver said he was going to "Honk-Honk! Honk-Honk!" when his bus is ready to go, I'd kind of rather go with him. But this smarmy smiling man, who's still standing there, hands me a crumpled bill, & some coins, & says, "You can wait out here."

OK. But now I give him a close look. He's shorter than I am, though not as short as the bus station we stand in front of. He's got kind of a weird moustache. It seems sort of styled differently on each side of his face. He's wearing some kind of suit, I guess you'd call it. It seems sort of patched sloppily together from a variety of raggedy clothes. A lapel here, a button there. He's wearing boots, but they almost look like they are made of vines & stones. And I think: *huh*.

But he convinces me to wait for the bus. And he did hand me a crumpled bill & some coins. So I agree, at least for the moment.

And then he says to me, "Listen, I gotta go. You see, I'm up for this film role, in which I play a very very old man. Who looks just like me, but he's very very old. And it's a really juicy role. He thinks he is running the world, but he is really just this old bus driver who is locked up in a padded cell for all his past crimes. And they told me, if it works out, I can play this role for years to come. *Years*. Maybe until I get that old. Now how's that for a golden opportunity?"

Well, OK, I agree. That *does* sound like a golden opportunity, of its own strange kind. So he gives me a wave, & off he goes. In fact, he's gone before his wave concludes. It's like he gives a wave, & the wave brings him along to wherever he is going.

So now I'm standing on this bus station. Meaning I've climbed up *on top* of it, you see, to look for the bus. It was short. But there's no bus coming. And I begin to think: *There is no bus coming*. I'd looked in every which way.

So I sit down, on the bus station. First it was a platform for me to look from, & now it's a seat for me to sit upon. And I begin to read *Adrift: A Novel* again. Maybe it will advise me on what to do next.

But the pages are getting soft, & crumbly. And the more I turn them, the more they crumble between my fingers. I close *Adrift: A Novel*, because I don't want to destroy it completely. Maybe I can freeze it later or something, & get the pages solid again. I don't know much about these things.

But then I think I hear distant sounds like . . . *Whoosh-Whoosh! Whoosh-Whoosh!* I climb off the bus station, tuck my crumbling copy of *Adrift: A Novel* into my pocket.

I'm going in *that* direction. And begin to walk with purpose.

* * * * *

Part Three: The Wide Wide Sea

The distant *Whoosh-Whoosh! Whoosh-Whoosh!* brings me away from that strange small bus station. I walk a long time, following that beautiful sound. And, for a long time, it doesn't seem like I'm quite . . . anywhere. I really don't think I'm where I was, that Grand Grand Prairie.

But how is it that I am approaching sounds of the Wide Wide Sea anywhere near that Great Grand Prairie? I don't feel lost. *Am I?*

So I pull out the crumbling *Adrift: A Novel* from my pocket. Strangely, as I hold it before me, floating above it is an arrow! A green-&-golden arrow, floating right above the book! If I gesture the book, now resting on my hand, to the left or right, the green-&-golden arrow insists instead on the current direction that I'm walking. It points me straight ahead. So perhaps *not* lost right now.

And the *Whoosh-Whoosh! Whoosh-Whoosh!* becomes more pronounced, so I'm getting closer & closer. The arrow floating atop the book on my hand begins to . . . shake & quake. *WOBBLER* a little bit.

And then, in the far distance, I see . . . waves. Foam. There it is! *There it is!* The Wide Wide Sea! How? I don't know. The arrow, though, seems quite happy. In fact, the arrow rises up before me & . . . *whoosh!* Is gone. Is that where the arrow lives?

Well, I'm grateful to this crumbling book & its . . . accoutrements. Or friends? And I tuck it back carefully into my pocket. Still need to get it to a freezer to make its pages solid again. Such my strange theory goes.

I walk along the beautiful shore for the longest time. And when I look up, behind me, or around me, I don't see anything else like I had before. It's like it's *all* a kind of beach. There's nothing else. But I keep walking for a long long time. As close to the Sea as I can get.

Until I come to a low cement wall. Usually you might see a low cement wall in front of a building, or maybe in a park. Or part of some other kind of structure. Or something. Is it the remains of something like those from long ago? I can't tell.

I sit down on the low cement wall. It seems to stretch on for a long ways. And I look at the Sea for the longest of times, just listening. *Whoosh-Whoosh! Whoosh-Whoosh!*

Then along comes a strange little friendly dog. I don't think it's a Creature. I don't think it's a critter. I'm not sure what kind of little dog this is. It is on an elaborate harness. Maybe it's one of those *My Golden*

Puppy robot dogs you see on the late night TV commercials. Or something else entirely.

Eventually along too comes a strangely garbed lady. She seems, oh, about eight or nine feet tall, & that's not including her elaborate headdress. Her costume flows long from her. It's as though she's in the center of a multi-colored melted candle that flows down, & she moves along almost seeming like she's not actually on the ground. Maybe she's levitating along. I don't see her feet down there, under all that, but she moves along. She's holding the little dog's leash.

The little dog comes up to me, making odd sounds, & I give it a pat. It seems both a little too warm & a little too cold, & it's making weird *chit-chit-chit* sounds.

I look up at the tall, tall lady, & I say, "Really nice dog."

She agrees, loudly, weirdly: "**FXIONBDDTXHXEGSJEOAIMTIJNJTGFHFIJNZGGS!**"

O-OK. Well, I don't know what else to say. So I give them a little wave, assuming they're on some kind of walk along this beach. Maybe they're going to the Great Grand Prairie? What do I know about these things?

But they continue along, & I give a long long look as they go on their way, & I never see *any* feet under her strange, long, melted-candle-looking dress. Not even *once*. Not even the *shade* of a foot. Hmm. I don't know what that means.

Well, I've had a good set down, on this cement wall. But I suppose I should get along. So I pull out *Adrift: A Novel*. Not figuring that that arrow's *ever* going to come back. I just got lucky that once.

But I page carefully into the early pages of the novel, hoping maybe there's a line that might give me a clue. I just sort of . . . peek in. And I see a phrase. And the phrase says: "Drink deep of sleep."

And then I look down at my feet. And there's a strange little soda can. I wonder for a long moment if I should drink deep of sleep, via this can?

* * * * *

Them Stars Are Speeding By!

Whoosh-Whoosh! Whoosh-Whoosh! I lean down to pick up that strange little soda can, trying to follow the advice given by *Adrift: A Novel*, if advice it could be called, to drink deeply of dream.

But, wait, was that it? I have now drunk deeply, but *what was the rest? Dream? Sleep? What? What was it?*

Was I sitting on a low cement wall? A wall that seemed to run endlessly along an endless beach?

I look around. This is *no* beach. There's *no* strange drink in my hand.

"You OK, man?" asks the semi-gaseous formation near me. I guess he's my co-worker. Macon, I think?

He wears among his, um, gases, a sort of little headset, that I think allows him to speak & understand the languages of his fellow employees, & the customers. Customers? Employees?

I nod slowly. “I think I just . . . drifted off.”

“Where were you, man? Somewhere good? Were you getting it on with those highly oxygenated ladies you hear about, up in the high mountains?”

I seem to recall Macon talks about the “highly oxygenated ladies” a lot. I don’t know whether they’re real, or something he’s imagined. But I guess it makes sense if you’re a semi-gaseous being.

“No, I was sitting on a . . . it was like a low cement wall, by an ocean.”

He chuckles, not unkindly, & points to the windows of the store we seem to be working at the cash registers of. Says: “Them stars are speedin’ by! Wish we had a telescope to watch. Even a small one.”

I nod, & look a little closer, & notice that some of them are not stars. Some of them are Spaceships. And I start to put it together, a little bit. This is a gas station casino, or whatever you might call it, that races along a superhighway in Outer Space.

Now it couldn’t be stationary, because these ships go too fast. But it goes at a middle speed, so they’re able to speed up or slow down to it. Like the commercial on TV says: “Come on in. Gas up! Maybe get a soda pop or a Powerball number? Pack of cigarettes? Check the Keno! Play some Penny Pusher! And then speed on!”

I sorta begin to twitch & *WOBBLE* in my place, even though I’m not semi-gaseous. I close my eyes, & when I do . . . *Whoosh-Whoosh! Whoosh-Whoosh!* It’s still there, though very faintly.

“Hey man, you’ll be OK. This happens to you, once in a while. You come & go. I always got you covered. Always!” Macon’s gases warble in kindly assurance. “Say! You want to see this poster I got? It’s got some fine-looking, highly-oxygenated ladies on it!”

I vaguely open my eyes. He seems to be holding some kind of semi-gaseous thing in his semi-gaseous hands. I can’t see anything much on it, but I nod to him & weakly say, “Oo-la-la, my friend.” He chuckles.

I lean back, woozily. Luckily, there’s a small stool for me to sit down on. I put my head in my hands, & just try to gather myself to where & what I am. I’m not really sure, but . . . *something . . . & then something . . . & then something* else.

And I open my eyes, & I see on the DüMont TV the gas station casino, in Outer Space? I see the semi-gaseous form on the screen. Am I so hard up that I imagined he’s my friend from the television? He’s very funny. Sitting on my broken spring mattress, in my *ZombieTown* hovel, yah, I guess I *am* hard up for a friend.

But I *do* like this show. It’s called *The New Las Vegas Show . . . in Outer Space!* On NUTN (New United Television Network). It’s in black & white, something I especially like on my black-&-white DüMont TV, with the Antennar 200. Then the program ends, & I go into the kitchen for a drink. Drink? Did I drink something before? Hmm. Well, I just stick with water out of the tap. It’s fairly clear.

When I return & sit back down, curling around the wire that pokes straight out from my mattress, I see that the TV screen is a weirdly glowing white. I study it closely. I thought *South Park* was coming

up next! I don't *think* this is *South Park*. But I stare deep into it. And deeper into it. And then I'm not where I was. Again?

I've arrived to a tall hotel complex, on top of a cliff. Looks down to a superhighway! Spaceships & other kinds are speeding by, at unknown speeds. Hmm. We've traveled here for a game, though nobody calls it that. Or anything really. I can't figure out *what* the game is called.

But there's tension in the room where we are gathered. They all sip from blindingly blue little packages marked "G O O O O O," in large friendly letters. *They surely* all know more than I do. Looking out to the glass wall down to the superhighway, there are space tractor-trailers speeding by, all in one color, groups of them. They pass key gaming information. And then the first day's event seems to occur.

The cliff-side wall below the hotel is a maze of hay bales. Two teams each travel it vertically, to battle each other. Each loses players. Yet when I ask, I'm told they combine with others, now resemble both somehow. *How did I end up here? What is this?* They all know it well. Something about the word . . . *Perg . . . ?*

Now I am nearing home, passing through the local ancient cemetery. There'll be more tomorrow, I think. Is this still that movie? That glowing? Whatever that was, that wasn't *South Park!* I close my eyes again. Curl up in a quietly whimpering ball.

And then I find in my grasp, somehow, a book I seem to know: *Adrift: A Novel*. It seems rather tattered. And I try to open it up, just a little bit. For maybe just a word or two of wisdom? Something to guide me?

And I can't quite read the words, because the pages are so beat up, so fragile & crumbly. But then I page on . . . & I come to a very strange page. And the page seems to invite me . . . in . . . as books don't usually invite me . . . in. And it invites me in, & in, & in, & in, & in, & in . . .

* * * * *

Part Four: The Classroom

"What is Beauty, but to be consumed, imitated, or created new? What say you, Sir?"

I shake my head, uncertainly. *Where am I? What am I? Am I me? Is this now?*

"What say you, Sir?"

Oh! It seems to be another classroom. Kind of distorted somehow. I'm sitting in one of the front desks, as I do. Not all do. Most sit back a-ways. But I sit in the front because I like to be able to hear clearly, & I like to be able to raise my hand, & give my answer, & get noticed, & all of that. And that would be all well & good, if I could figure out in this very moment *what* class I'm in. *And what's going on?*

"Sir! Read from that text before you, properly," orders the Professor.

I don't know what he means by *properly*, but I'll try.

It seems to be an old strange book. I don't know if you'd call it a book at all. The cover is deeply scorched

with damage, & the title is mostly blurred out except for the partial word *Pow*—. But I try to focus my eyes best I can, & find myself looking at a particular paragraph.

And I read aloud, hoping for the best that this is *properly*: “As we escaped, into the sky, toward the great butterfly-shaped cloud, the little horse was left behind, but was somehow galloping still, higher & higher up alongside us. Before it could fall back in its efforts, I lifted it up, & tossed it onto one of the backs of the bigger horses.”

The Professor looks at me. I can't figure out what he is. But he's definitely there, whatever he is. And he seems to be pondering what I just read. I hope he understands it better than I do.

And he says, “What make you, Sir, of such prose?”

And I say, “Well, I'm glad the little horse made it.”

“*Silence, Sir!*”

Apparently that *wasn't* a good answer, & I'm glad to be silent anyway.

But then he says, “You, in the back! Yes, you! Read the next passage.”

And I hear a voice that I somehow think I recognize, & I don't know how that is, but it seems like a girl's voice that I heard once. On a bus trip somewhere? She was very strange, & it was a long bus trip, so I recalled her voice from that time. Looking back, I can see she is still dressed in a white shirt & black vest, plaid skirt, black tights & shoes. Hmm.

And she reads, in her strange voice: “The Den of Spies! Each granted a custom bot. Hill knew precisely his wish, & the story of sadness & grief to underpin it. She obsessed him more & more, till the rest simply, hardly mattered. He'd been the best of them.”

“Well done! Well done! Sir, *that* is how you read properly.”

Honestly, I could not see how she did it any better than I did. But that was OK. I mean, I guess.

And then my eyes seem to clear better to see that the Professor who gazed upon me darkly was this amorphous, almost semi-gaseous figure. And I will tell you: Try *not* to find yourself in a situation where you're being gazed upon darkly by an amorphous semi-gaseous figure. You will not enjoy it, I *promise* you.

“Sir? You do *not* belong in this classroom! I bid you *rise*, & depart *now*, without a *word*.”

So I try to stand, but then I find that I don't seem to quite have any feet. But somehow, by giving my arms a couple of little flaps, I kind of rise up from my seat, & I find myself, if I can pay attention right, steering my way toward what seems to be the door.

And I look down & see that I'm garbed in some kind of a multi-colored melted-candle-like costume, & I feel on my head a tall elaborate headdress. And I wonder what any of this could mean?

But I'm lucky that the door opens, & I'm able to exit. Just wondering what in the world I am, & what in the world next? At least I don't have to read any more prose aloud in that distorted classroom.

* * * * *

So Many Strange Toilets

I look about myself, & seem to have feet again, in familiar old boots. And my clothes are the usual raggedy ones that I prefer.

Wondering if I'm still somehow within the world, or confines, or whatever it may be, of *Adrift: A Novel*, I find myself in a place with no walls that I can see. It's hard to describe, except to say that there are *a lot* of toilets, out in the open. They range around, but not in an orderly way, like you'd find, say, in a bathroom.

No, they're *scattered* around. I can see a little cluster of them up ahead of me, & others are here & there. I wonder if to be . . . *intimidated by toilets?* Maybe not yet.

But as I walk along, I admit to keeping a good distance from them. Especially the ones that are clustered together. You do hear about obscure places, back rooms & such, where the chairs are something to be concerned about. But I ain't never heard of a place where the toilets ran the joint.

Anyway, I keep walking & walking &, eventually, there are fewer & fewer toilets. And I guess my curiosity has gotten the better of me, because I've been walking along among them for quite a while now, such that when I come to what is probably one last toilet, I brave up & allow myself to give it a good look.

It's, uh, I guess you could say, maybe off-white? And it's got a tank, & a lever, & a seat, & a cover. There's nothing about it that seems . . . *un-toilet-like*. I dare myself to lift up the lid, & the seat, & to look down.

There's *no* water! In fact, the more I allow myself to lean in & look at what's down there, the more I realize: *This isn't a toilet*. It's a kind of disguised door that goes *down* somewhere. I reach in, & I feel rungs, like a ladder? OK, this is going to be a tight fit, & I really don't know if I should do this, but the curiosity has me.

And so I begin to work my way down into the toilet. Squirm in, just enough room. And slowly I begin to climb down, rung by rung, into the toilet. Or whatever you might call it. *Down, down, down.*

Then I see that way down below there seems to be light of some kind. I continue my slow, careful climb, down & down, until I come to the bottom of the ladder. That light is still in the distance. So I start to walk in that direction.

I seem to be in kind of a tunnel? And the light seems to be where the tunnel ends. I walk & walk &, when I finally come into the light, for the longest moment, I cannot see what is about me. It begins to fill in, but in patches, so that I don't know exactly what I'm seeing.

And then . . . I start to.

* * * * *



Interlude: Inversion

“It is sly—and it’s sly in exactly the Dream Raps way, where the connection isn’t a plot bridge, or a lore dump, but a cross-world resonance that feels like someone left a breadcrumb trail between realities.”

—Scholar A,
Washington Street Cafeteria Notebooks
 [Scriptor Press International]

OK then. Let’s turn the other way. Yonder goes the Narrative! But let us turn here, for a few moments. See what happens. Going . . . *elsewhere*. Now *elsewhere* is not a place, but sometimes it can be the beginnings of a direction, & perhaps it will arrive to a place. Or . . . maybe not. Maybe the path *is* the place. The *where* is the *when*. The *who* is the *what*. You see? Ah yes, you do.

But listen with ears, I say. If we keep going . . . *elsewhere* . . . we might end up in . . . Dreamland. It happens, you know. More often than not.

And so . . . here we are. Gee, that wasn’t hard. Dreamland, behold it all around you! Oh, my gosh! *What can this mean? What can it be?* Let’s keep our calm. Let’s keep our cool.

Let’s keep along. Let’s see what we find. On this *path-place, where-when, who-what*, kind of deal. *Look down there*. Nice & low. Kind of a game of Marbles going on. Big & small. We play back & forth to the final. Then we push out all in hand, even our most prized ones, almost . . . accidentally? And leave them in. *And roll!*

All right. Are we lost? Hmm. That’s a good question. There’s no pattern. Or action or assumption that can be understood & relied upon, that continually holds true. Things seem to shift & shift, between this & that, in no ongoing truth. *One, none, many*. Is that a claim of truth? Hmm. It’s a kind-of-kind-of-truth, one could say.

Where did those Marbles go? We’ll come back to them again. Maybe. “Hard to say,” as Creatures put it. And it *is* Dreamland, you know. So let’s keep going. Let’s see what happens *next*. You see, above, it’s growing late at night. In Dreamland even. How about that? And we look about us. We listen. There’s music. There’s *always* music flowing through Dreamland.

Now look down the path. Is that the *Sea*? Is that the *Wide Wide Sea*? Here, deep in the White Woods, in Dreamland, the *Wide Wide Sea* is *never ever* far away. Let’s look, down there, past that low cement wall, toward that *beautiful* Sea. *Whoosh . . . whoosh . . . whoosh . . .*

Now find ourselves on the Sea. Are we alone on the Sea? Oh, you’re *never* alone on the Sea. Especially if you’re with friends. Look above! *Thwup! Thwup! Thwup-ing* up there is the great green-&-golden Calgary the Sea Dragon! A Guardian of those who travel on the *Wide Wide Sea*.

And where are we? We are sitting in the back seat of the famous Boat-Wagon, driven by those famous bloo-eyed Kittees & their Friend Fish. Our responsibility in getting into this Boat-Wagon is to buckle in safely. *Safety first!* is always the motto.

Now we’re going. Feel it? Look at this beautiful Sea. *Whoosh . . . whoosh . . . whoosh . . .* Those bloo-eyed

Kittees know the way. Are they ever lost? No, I don't think they're ever lost. *Paddle-paddle-paddle*, as it were. And so we head along. We hear Calgary's *Thwup! Thwup! Thwup-ing* above us. And we're getting nearer. You can tell. We're getting nearer. Because . . .

The Boat-Wagon seems to be drawing up onto land. In the middle of the Sea? Is that possible? Is this some kind of Island? Seems so. And now we roll along, *peddle-peddle-peddle*. Through these White Woods, deep into these White Woods. And we come to a tall & somewhat narrow mansion. Dark & gloomy too. There is an event sign on the narrow door of this narrow mansion, & the sign says...

Tonight only:
A Performance of Three Works
by Mr. Edgar Allan Poe
“A Dream Within a Dream” | “Dreams” | “Dream-Land”
Sponsored by Mrs. C. Winchester
(with meats in between acts)

Do we roll in? Are we tempted? But wait a minute, there's another tall old building, more like a complex, a little further along the way. We wish Mrs. C. Winchester's event well, & we continue to roll on. Are we lost?

No. *Never!* We're rolling on. Rolling on toward that next old building. It's deep & complex. How did we come to be within it? Was there a door? Was there a vestibule? Were there stairs? Are there rooms? Are there tunnels & hallways? What was that exit? *What does it all mean?* I wonder. And I look at you, & you don't know either!

And you say to me, “You're the one that's sweet-toothin' this, pal.”

Oh, yeah. Plan? Pshaw. Lost? *Never.* We roll on along in the Boat-Wagon. Where are we headed? I don't know, but we're on the path. The *where-when-who-what* path. The *what-when-where-who-why* path. Yes? Yes, of course. Here we go.

The Kittees & their Friend Fish now begin to *paddle-paddle-paddle* a little faster. *Say, did we end up on the Wide Wide Sea again?* I don't know. But we can hear Calgary the Sea Dragon's *Thwup! Thwup! Thwup-ing* above us. And for a moment, all is quiet. *Whoosh-whoosh-whoosh.*

We paddle along until it seems like now we are sinking. *Down, down, down.*

And then we are arrived toward the end of the *where-when-who-what-why* path. The Kittees & their Friend Fish have now given us kisses & licks of advice, & sent us along our way. They know we have to keep going down the path. Going along . . .

And finally we come, in Dreamland, deep in these White Woods, where there is no center, nor far edge to fall off of, to a clearing shaped like a Temple in full moonlight. And we walk into the Temple. Look around. Written on all the walls, in all different manner of ways, like a scrawled cry, like a gnomic warning, it's a word . . . *Memoriae*, high. *Memoriae*, low. *Memoriae*, in the floor. *Memoriae*, in the ceiling. *Memoriae*, in the shadows. *Memoriae*, in the full moonlight.

But what does it mean? I don't think it means what it means. I think it means *elsewise*. I wonder the kindness in its hid meaning. It's kind of like a . . . a little cake. And kindness sweetens the cake. All the

way through. Kindness for anyone who takes even a nibble, & thus then nibbles on kindness, & feels the kindness strolling through them, looking for moments, looking for chances. *Just take a little nibble. You won't be the same.*

Now we leave the Temple, because the daylight is coming. And I think we are getting near to the end of this path. I think we are coming to the place where the Narrative is nearby. It's nearby.

Look over there. There's Miss Flossie Flea, & there's Hobo Jones, also known as Hose Jones, the most advanced Robot Man in the Many Worlds of the Star Spiral, & his dear friend Lilianna. And they are walking towards something that Miss Flossie promised to show them.

Or look over there. There's that strange ragged figure, traveling with or within his crumbly book of ur-wisdoms, throughout his elaborate elusive Room of Song. Neither knowing the questions to ask nor understanding the answers given him thus far. Though still dumbly, on he does stride.

And we feel this *else-where-else-way-else-why* path beginning to join again with them, along their paths. One or the other, but both sooner or later. Because we're eager to know what happens next in this Narrative. We *always* want to know what happens next in the Narrative. We are never lost because we are *following* the Narrative. We're *trusting* the Narrative. The Narrative will bring us where we need to go, even if we don't know what that is, or why. But here we are, going. Lost? *Never*. Lost? *Never*.

* * * * *

A Strange Windowless Room

As the patches clarify, I find myself in a strange windowless room.

There's someone at the front of the room. Seems to be setting up some kind of presentation, & the rest of the room is filled with wooden folding chairs. Oh gosh, another class?

No, I guess not. We're just sitting. These aren't desks. Though I do notice that under my seat is my battered copy of *Adrift: A Novel*.

Gets me to wondering again, casually, am I inside *Adrift: A Novel*? Or is *Adrift: A Novel* now traveling with me? Has it not yet been quite decided who is traveling with whom?

So she's setting up a movie projector, & I guess she's going to show us all a film. I look around at the crowd, which is rather sparse. And I can't tell what any of these people are. I wonder if some of them are those semi-gaseous folks I've met? Or that lady with the melted-candle-wax dress that I also met, sort of? And *was*, for a brief time, sort of? All that.

And the lady up front is frail, you see, & small, & she smiles weirdly, & maybe a little too much. Her name-tag reads, in a crabbed cryptic handwriting, "Mrs. C. Winchester." I notice also that, as she's setting her things up, she's mumbling to another little device nearby. It looks like a really old kind of clamshell laptop. And it's sitting right next to a hand-made book—*Memoriae* seems scraped into its rough-textured cover—containing what seems like a sort of tied-together collection of index cards & photographs—that she occasionally references. Sitting on top of a beat old box, covered in sigils & scorch markings.

When she seems all set up, she scurries off in a corner, where there's a kitchenette. And is that an ice cream maker on the counter? Is she making us all ice cream to enjoy? Well, it turns out she is. She brings over these small green-&-golden bowls, with little spoons, for each of us. They hardly fit in your hand, but they have ice cream in them of some kind. Looks like it's got a lot of colors, maybe a few too many that I don't know. But I give it a little taste, & it sure tastes like *some* kind of ice cream.

Then, after mumbling to her clamshell laptop again, & checking in her hand-made book to make sure she's got all her information at hand, she begins to show the film.

Even though I think it's called *More Fun*, the film is about how bad bad things are coming. Something happens, & people just start dying. They get weak, & they sort of melt away, parts of them becoming invisible. Still there, but invisible, till all of them are gone.

Mrs C. Winchester says, "Some people call these poor unfortunate souls Melties." Actually she's doing all the talking because the film is projecting on the cement wall with no sound.

Then she's describing a long conversation she's had with her friend, Scholar A, & how she's been arguing with him about the Pending Apocalypse shown in the film. She had asked Scholar A how it could be stopped?

She shakes her head in disgust & says, "All he would go on about is mapping the Pattern, identifying the false inevitability, locating the Hinge Moment, & so on. Then he would get back to talking about his thesis on *Dream Raps* or whatever he calls them. That he writes at that ridiculous downtown lunch counter!"

Strangely, all the while that she's talking about the Pending Apocalypse, the film is showing a passage through a dark deep Woods, which doesn't seem so apocalyptic, in & of itself. But she just keeps talking about the Pending Apocalypse.

And then she opens up her hand-made book, & reads aloud a short passage from it: "Dark! Complex! Not sure of any of it. But an image. Standing by a dark Turnpike, whereby dark countless vehicles flash by! But now, in the middle of the night, it's empty. Then someone on a bicycle rides by. Looking, weirdly, like that strange woman from that old movie!" And then she closes the book as though she's made her point.

And she gets us all another round of her strangely rainbow-colored ice cream, & she's mumbling to herself about the Pending Apocalypse, & she kind of starts running down & down. And then the film ends, & we're all plunged into darkness.

I hang on tight to my copy of *Adrift: A Novel*, because I wonder if that's the only way I'm going to get out of this strange windowless room. I set my little bowl of ice cream, mostly untouched, under my seat, & begin to edge along the wall, hoping *Adrift: A Novel* can advise me on an exit. If there is one.

* * * * *

Curled Up in a Ball in the Darkness

As I continue to edge my way along in this dark room, I get to wondering: *How did I end up here?*

Awhile back I was with my dear friends, Rey & Amalia the sometimes Pink Bunny & the Seeker, all now long unseen, backstage at Dreamland. And then we were following my unfinished story about the Room of Song for *The Eighth*, Dreamland's newspaper, for which I write. And then I mostly lost grip of them all.

I can hardly remember them now. But I hope to remember them again. Is this the Room of Song? I kind of feel like . . . I've lost my way a little bit. And I have to confess that it gets . . . a little harder.

I find myself . . . drifting . . . among documentation. Version tables. Headers! Footers even. I start to look at one, & it relates to another, & then I look at that one, & it references one I can't find, & so I look around for the one I can't find, & I notice one that is kind of sort of the same but a different version, most of the language is the same, & then I look deeper into the whole thing, & realize that many of these documents are both the same & different, & I'm trying to figure out what that means. Has this happened to me before? Some other way, some other time? I don't remember.

Finally, I just . . . slide to the ground in this darkness, underneath the documentation. It can't get me down here, if I curl up in a ball, & I'm very quiet.

And I begin to wonder: *How do I find my way again?* I try to think about all the advice I've been given over time, from various strange & odd individuals, brilliant geniuses along the way. And I do remember another time when I was curled up in a ball in darkness, just a cowering Marble, under something strange, though perhaps not version tables.

But there was someone with me, also curled down there in the darkness. And that someone, whoever it might have been, said to me, in a strange, slow voice: "I learned some good advice, long ago, from someone wiser than you & me, times a hundred thousand, that I'm going to pass to you. But we got to use it going in opposite directions. Do you agree with me, son?"

I whimpered my agreement.

"Well, it's this. You always got a choice, on your travels. You can follow the usual route, or chase away, with that merry laughing Imp, to places she hardly knows!"

And then I heard delighted cackling laughter all around us. And I think he rolled away! And I had agreed to roll away, in a different direction. So happily, since the wild laughter was all around, I just picked a direction, & began to roll in the direction in the darkness that the laughter led me.

And I remember that now, as I am again curled up in a ball in the darkness, though not a Marble this time. I don't hear any laughter, but I do think about chasing with that merry laughing Imp, to places she hardly knows. That seems my good idea.

And so I begin to roll & roll & roll &, as I roll, I begin to think about crouching & rolling & crouching & rolling, & then maybe standing, leaned way over, & rolling, but still rolling & rolling, & then I am standing & rolling & standing & rolling & standing & rolling. And then I am walking & standing & rolling & walking & standing & rolling. And then I am walking & rolling & walking & rolling & walking & rolling & then I am walking. And then I am walking nowhere. Nowhere. Darkness everywhere. Nowhere. Nowhere. Somewhere? Somewhere. Nowhere. Nowhere. Somewhere? Somewhere. Nowhere. Somewhere. Somewhere. Nowhere. Somewhere? Nowhere? Somewhere? Somewhere? Somewhere? Somewhere. Somewhere. Somewhere. I have arrived somewhere.

Music. I hear music. It's in that room, over there, through that door. From here, *nowhere*, to there, *somewhere*. I'm arrived to the very edge of *somewhere*. This is where *nowhere* leaves off, & *somewhere* begins.

And I walk through that door, & it seems like there is a sort of party going on. *What is this strange place? What could it be?* It looks like a bar. It's crowded. I look around. People are laughing. They're all *somewhere*.

I sort of scurry into a corner, to an empty table out of the way. And I sit there very quietly, uncertain. And an older gentleman, wearing an apron with a pretty colorful pattern on it, grey pepper hair, well, he comes over to me with a kindly smile.

And he says, "Can I get you something, son?"

And I look at him & stutter out, "Sir? I-I-I-like cherry cola."

And he nods & says, "Be right up."

And for a moment, I'm sitting, watching the crowded laughing figures in this bar, & listening to the strange wild music. And wondering where I am.

And then he returns, quickly, with my glass of cherry cola. And a straw.

And he says, "You stay as long as you like, son, & I'll get you another if need be. By the way, welcome to Luna T's Cafe."

* * * * *

Luna T's Cafe

So I find myself sitting in a corner of a dark place that I was told by that polite serving gentlemen is called Luna T's Cafe. Do I know this place? Have I been here? *Some other way? Some other time?*

I don't know. But I sip my cherry cola, relax a bit, & start to take a look around at what there is to see.

I think that it's called a barroom, though I don't know much about these. There's a long dark wooden bar, stools all along it. Lots of people sitting on them, laughing. Drinking? Probably not cherry cola.

One older man is wearing a suit that like a combination of about three or four suits that were too beaten up to wear respectably. Looks like what he did was take the best pieces of each—a lapel here, a button there—& put them together. I should try that sometime with some of my raggedy old clothes.

There's an old man who occasionally raises a cane, & begins to shout something. Sounds religious somehow, but I can't tell.

Down further, toward the end of the bar, there's a pretty girl, drawing in a pad. She looks over at me, & nods, & smiles. Friendly, guileless. That's how they are here, I think. All of them, even the crazy shouting old man.

There are Rock & Roll posters on the wall. Every wall really. R.E.M. I know of course. Best Rock & Roll band in the all the Many Worlds of the Star Spiral. Noisy Children too. Others I don't know so well. Supernova. The Pink Floyd. And there's one of that Woodstock Festival, with that couple wrapped in a blanket, standing in a field filled with bodies & detritus. It's a happy image somehow, though I don't know why. And there's one of that wild-haired crazy guitarist who liked to chew his magic bubblegum while he played.

There's a jukebox in the corner, but it's not playing right now because it sounds like there's a live band through that swinging door in the other room, & there's a big crowd in there. I don't think I'm brave enough to go into a place like that. But it's nice to listen, from a distance. It's loud music. It's very pretty. I think I like this place, somehow.

And suddenly through the door comes this big fellow &, for a moment, I start. I convulse. *I think I know him*. He's carrying a drink in each hand. And his guitar, too, somehow. Smiling like all the world is a good joke, & everybody's in on it. Short brown hair, blue eyes twinkling. And he sees me looking at him, & he comes over, & he sits down with me.

"Say guy," he says friendly, "Do we know each other?"

I don't know how to reply, so I don't.

So he takes a long ponder on this. Maybe it's a harder question than he thought. Then he nods without saying a word.

And then he smiles, like remembering his manners, & says, "Some people call me the Traveling Troubadour. Or just Jim."

I struggle about this. But then say, "I think I am Raymond. Or was for awhile. Not a Scholar though. I don't think anyway."

He nods thoughtfully, & smiles me kindly. Then he looks at what I'm holding in my hands, which I didn't even realize I was holding in my hands. Along with my cherry cola.

"Good book?" he asks.

Remembering how to talk, I explain, in halting words, "It's called *Adrift: A Novel*." More shy than I realized. Hand to him gingerly. He looks it over, & reads the strange words on the back cover.

Nods. Hands it back to me. "Sounds good." Smiles, as though deep into his own memories, & says, "Ah! I've been adrift a few times myself, over my years, Smoking something good. Deep in the woods. *High-h-h* as kites, like they say."

I think to myself: *that sounds like fun*.

Then he says, "Your book looks like it's kinda old! Maybe you need to tape it up a little."

I look at my book & realize *Adrift: A Novel* is falling apart faster than I thought. It's crumbling on all sides. "I've been trying to read & understand it for guidance," I explain, trying to speak better words.

He gives this some good thought too. Then stands up. Gives me an affectionate look. Comes over, looks me kindly close, squeezes my shoulder, & says, “Just keep in mind what I told you long ago, Ray. *Beware. And be aware.*” Squeezes my shoulder again, & then heads off to the bar, with his two drinks & his guitar. Everybody greets him happily.

And I watched them all as though I knew them, some other way, some other time, across many, many turns of the calendar. It’s as though all of this is long ago. I don’t know what this means. It sure feels nice to be here for a few moments. I hope it lingers.

* * * * *

Whorling & Whorling

Still lingering at Luna T’s Cafe, sipping on my cherry cola. And that nice gent in the colorful apron brings me another one, with a kind smile. I lean back in my chair, relax a moment. Taking all this in. Wondering what it all means? As if I *ever* know what things mean.

And then the music from that other room captures my attention more & more. It sounds like the old time Rock & Roll. I stand up, more shaky than I would have thought, but I do. And I bring my glass of cherry cola along, & *Adrift: A Novel* of course. Look at all those friendly souls over there at the bar. It could be wishfully thinking, but it seems like, as I’m leaving, they all turn, & give me a friendly wave. As though they thought it was nice to see me too again.

I push through the swinging door, & I am met with a cacophony of lead guitar & bass guitar. Keyboards. Drums. The singer’s tall, lost in his song, as one should be, always. And I notice, off in a corner, near a set of stairs, there’s an empty table, amidst all these crowds, crying out, laughing, dancing. Shaking with their ecstasies. There’s one little table that’s free.

And so I make my way over to it, perhaps danced around a few times, but all in good fun. And no one spills my cherry cola, or damages *Adrift: A Novel*. I sit down at the little table, & almost feel like I’ve sat down at this little table many many times before, but not in a long long time. And I watch the great Rock & Roll show. I watch all the fun dancing.

At one point, the band is leading the crowd in singing out together: “Keep cool! Humble path! No fear! Keep cool! Humble path! No fear!” Over & over. Everyone clapping & shouting. The crazy-looking balding drummer pounding a wild beat to keep it going. *Wow!*

But I feel myself sort of drifting away somehow, even though I’m not moving. But it’s like I’m being gently tugged. And then I notice behind me, on the wall, under the window that looks out to the street, there’s a little green-and-gold door.

And for some reason, I get out of my chair, with a last sip of cherry cola, & lean down to this little door. I open it up. And there inside is something I can’t quite see but, when I crawl on in, I see it’s a old rusty green crate of magazines.

The Cenacle? Is that important? Do I know it? There sure are a lot of them. And I pick them up & page through. Look at the strange pictures & the funny poetry. It all feels familiar, but some other way, some other time.

And it's like . . . they begin to rise, out of the crate, & dance around me. *High & low!* They begin to . . . *whorl* . . . all around me! And I close my eyes, & I whorl & whorl with them too. *What joy.*

* * * * *

Along the Ventilator Shaft

The whorl eventually passes by me, & I am now in some kind of small strange hallway. It's dark but still kind of glows, with some kind of hidden light. I crawl & crawl for a while—

And then I suddenly seem to come to, curled up in a ball, as though I'd sort of crawled myself down into some kind of a nap. And I see that I still have in my grasp my copy of *Adrift: A Novel*. But I swear, it's about to come apart in pieces.

I figure I better get quick whatever additional advice it might give. And so I sit, in this vaguely glowing small hallway, almost more like a ventilator shaft, & I start to read—

And then suddenly I wake up again. Find myself curled around *Adrift: A Novel*, looking, without realizing it, at the crumbling last page at the back, which only has a few words on it. And they're hard to read, in this vaguely glowing light. But I go slow, & read aloud: "To . . . Continue . . . Chase . . . This . . . Music . . . By . . . Its . . . Own . . . Wits . . . & . . . Wiles." Seems sort of like advice?

I reach deep into my many raggedy pockets, & I pull out a kind of a plastic bag, with a little plastic zipper. And I carefully place *Adrift: A Novel* inside, & zip it closed. I tuck it deep amongst my pockets, deeply as I possibly can. For as much safekeeping as I can give it.

And I begin to crawl along again through this ventilator shaft. Then suddenly, the bottom falls out under me! And . . . I . . . crash . . . down . . . into what's below. And . . . I crash . . . through . . . the . . . floor . . . of *that* one. And I crash through the floor of *that* one. And I crash through the floor of *that* one.

And I might have just kept crashing like this but, finally, I put my arms & my legs out. Reach them out as far as I can, & so when I begin to crash through the floor below that comes next, I grab on to whatever I can.

Hold on tight. And I do not crash any further.

* * * * *

The Tall Professor

Having crashed through so many floors, & come to a stop, yet for a moment I am still not fully arrived there. Here. But then I find that someone is standing over me. Smiling curiously. He's a tall dark gentleman, dressed in slacks, nice leather vest. I notice that he's wearing one black boot, & one red boot. I don't think his eyes are the same color either. Possibly green & gold.

And he gives me a moment to catch my breath. Waits patiently. Sees me sizing him up. Sizes me up too. Then he reaches down his hand, offering me help up. Pulls me up with a powerful grip that I appreciate, because now I'm standing, no longer falling. That's a start. Or a restart maybe.

Looks up at the hole in the ceiling. Sort of leans back, & sees there's quite a few holes, dropping from some higher height.

"My! My! That was quite a fall!" he says finally. "You do know how to make an entrance!"

I laugh too. "I probably deserve that."

"Well, come on over here. Sit down. The fact that you survived all that means you're someone I'd probably like to get to know."

I look around & see that I appear to be in an office. Aside from that hole in the ceiling, it's a very lovely office. It's wood-paneled. There's a great big desk & chair in the corner, somehow both elaborate & simple at the same time.

Walls of books, from floor to ceiling. Lovely-looking volumes. And next to the desk, there's a fine hi-fi set, & what looks like a whole lot of records neatly ordered on a number of shelves.

Another chair next to the desk looks very comfortable too, the kind of chair that tells me that this gentleman likes visitors to this office, that I think is his.

So I sit down in that comfortable chair. He sits down at his desk, leans back. He's still giving me plenty of space to say whatever I want to say. Or not say anything I don't want to say, which I appreciate.

Finally I say: "If my recent travels are consistent with this moment, you're some kind of Professor?"

He nods & laughs. Leans forward with a mischievous look & says, "Did my bi-colored boots give it away?"

I nod & laugh too. "That was it." I can tell already that we like each other. I ask, "What do you teach?"

The look on his face is strange because it's like he's caught between what he might say to one person answering that question, & what he might say to another. But he seems to take a moment, & choose, & finally he says, "I teach Harlem Renaissance literature."

"Ah. Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, & all them?" I ask.

He nods. "And many others."

"Well, that sounds pretty good."

He sizes me up again, & says, "You know, I'm going to tell you something I don't tell many. I like those books. I appreciate them. I think well of them. But they're not where my heart lies, to be honest."

I nod & ask, "Where then?"

"You ever hear of the Transcendentalists?" he asks, curiously.

"I think so. Emerson. Thoreau. Whitman. Fuller. All them."

He nods. “Well, I’m going to tell you something. I’ve read all their books, & writings, letters, publications, & papers. And I didn’t think one way or another about them, so much. I liked them. Admired them, like the Harlem Renaissance writers. Until I found out about their secret writings.”

This sounds curious. I lean forward & say, “I’m game. If you want to show me, I want to see.”

Now he looks delighted, & he says, “I’m gonna need to bring you somewhere.”

“I understand,” I reply. Then I look up & say, “What about the holes?”

“Oh don’t worry. OC will have those patched up in no time. She loves the repair work.”

We laugh. Leave his office. Bound for elsewhere.

* * * * *

Part Five: Cypher

So I’m in this new place. He’s not with me, but I can hear him out there somewhere saying, “Go on! Read! Go on!” But first I have to suss out my surroundings. I appear to be in some kind of . . . Round Room? It’s dark, but it’s got a glow to it. And it seems like the round walls around me are some kind of rainbow fur. I can’t even imagine what they’re supposed to be.

But there’s this old book. I see it when I look down in my lap, me sitting cross-legged. I don’t know how that happened. I don’t usually sit cross-legged. But here I am in this glowing rainbow furry Round Room, sitting cross-legged. Muffled voice of my friend encouraging me to go on and read.

This is an old *old* book. The cover like White Birch bark & something like the words *G?ea? Vio????ce* awled into it. Is it only going back to the 1800s, when those Transcendentalists lived? I don’t know, maybe not. Maybe it was an old book for them too! But there’s a page before me in some kind of English that is both familiar & unfamiliar. The handwriting doesn’t seem like someone who either took kindly to the English, or knew it too well. But the words are clear enough to read.

“Read them aloud!” I hear his muffled voice say, almost merrily. So I do.

“Theirs was an affair that could not be known, so they worked out a Cypher. Never written down. Kinds of movements. Gestures, spoken words, sketches, purchases. And this Cypher changed each time they met in private. Half their time spent in lovemaking; the rest in conjuring up a new group of Cyphers.

“He never looked directly at her in public. She practiced privately her ability to address him with near to complete indifference. Nobody would know. They never knew each other’s last names, much less what they did in private. Never met in the same place, or for the same duration.

“Yet deep in those wrapped concentric circles of subterfuge, they had their times & places of complete honesty & love. Respect. Deep affection.

“They might see a film at the same time, but different theaters. Or go to a museum exhibition, but an hour apart. Sit at far ends of a beautiful park. Eat the same foods at a restaurant, but different floors. They trained their love by distance & absence to think more deeply of each other. Conjure better

questions. Make love in a kind of sacrificial inferno. Heated. Hidden. So very *very* close.”

There’s no more to read on that page, but on the next page, on the right hand side, there’s an image! And I couldn’t begin to tell you what this image was because I couldn’t see it right.

And my friend out there, I hear his muffled voice again saying, “Now you’ve read it. You understand better?”

And I say, “Well, that’s kind of a nice Narrative, I guess.”

“Oh Brother!” he admonishes, in his muffled voice. “What about the picture? *What about the picture?*”

I said, “What about it? I don’t know what it is. What is it of?”

“You gotta go in. *You gotta go in!*” his muffled voice rises up in its muffled intensities.

“What do you mean, ‘go in?’”

“Listen. Just take one of your fingers, & touch that picture.”

I do. My finger goes in. Oh, it’s one of *those* things. Yes, of course. “So you want me to climb into the picture & find out more?”

“How else are you going to understand?” he says, his muffled voice crying up again. “Listen, it’s not what it seems. It’s almost like something entirely different. Remember, they talked & communicated by Cypher. Do you think you’re going to be able to read a straightforward Narrative about them in some old book? Go in! Find out, like I did. Then you’ll know! I’ll wait right here for you.”

Well, I dip my finger deeper in, & I don’t feel water or air or fire. Or skin. I don’t know what I feel, but then my hand is in, & then my arm is in. And then somehow . . . I begin to . . . make my way in.

* * * * *

Deep Inside Yet Another Book

So I think I’m deep inside . . . yet *another* book. How many books am I within? I wonder. OK, that’s fine. You know, some people fly kites. And some people run candy shops. I appear to, at least sometimes, travel in books, within books, within’s within books. Like that little green clay fellow on the TV a bit. Anyway . . .

I look around. I’m in the woods. White Woods? Oh probably. And I think there are others around, though I’m not able to get a good look at any of them, per se. But there seems to be a lot of excitement & activity in these White Woods, & I’m not really sure why. Begin to walk along, without direction.

Arrive to a clearing, & then I come across a thick envelope lying on the ground. It’s got words on it I can’t read. But the letters are big & scrawly, as though excited about what’s within the envelope. I open it up &, though I can’t read the writing on these either, they seem to be many coupons! They show strange products though I don’t know what they are. More scrawly letters maybe explain that this coupon will give you a deal on whatever *this* is.

Then I noticed over there, near that tree, sort of laying quietly, on a Mound of Moss, what looks like to be a store circular. It's like one of those old sort-of magazines in newspapers that were just full of ads for a store. I look through it, page after page. There's photographs of items. Again, I just don't know what they are.

But then, as I walk on, with my packet of coupons & my store circular, I come across . . . scattered wads of money! Thick wads of money, tied in bands. At least I *think* it's money. It's sort of green-&-golden, & other colors too, & there seem to be symbols on it. I look through one of the wads & see how the bills all resemble each other, but seem slightly different for different denominations.

Now I have a wad of money, & I have a store circular, & I have a packet of coupons. And this does not help me in the least understand what was *really* going on between those Cyphering lovers. No. It doesn't help me understand it at all. At least *yet*.

So I walk on, & I guess it's good to have a lot of money. And some coupons to save a little money. And a circular, to tell you what products are being sold. But I think to myself: *none of this would be helpful, if there isn't a store to come to, with goods to purchase. If that's what they do here.*

I walk on for a long while, & I begin to weary with the whole thing.

And then suddenly, I come to the store. And I will tell you, whoever ye be, if ye be anyone at all, it's not the kind of store I expected *at all*.

It's a Cypher Store. That's what it says. These are the first words I've understood in anything that I've seen here. Not coupons, circulars, nor money. But on this big sort of a wooden sign, looks like the letters were burnt into the wood with some kind of tool, it says: "The Cypher Store."

The store windows are blacked out, so I can't see into The Cypher Store. But I do see there's a wooden door &, sort of etched into the wood, it says: "Come on in!"

OK, I need to know what my friend back there was talking about. So I put my hand on the handle, & I turn the doorknob, & I push in.

* * * * *

What is a Cypher Store?

The first thing to tell is that that, when I walked through the door of the Cypher Store, I found myself *continuing* to walk through the door of the Cypher Store. I kept walking in, & in, & yet not feeling like I had actually *arrived* to the Cypher Store. I was walking through the door, but I was *not* arriving. I wasn't sure *what* to do. This has *never* happened to me before.

Then I heard a strange, somewhat awkward voice that seemed to be speaking *near* my ear, but not into my ear, as though the bearer of this voice did not know that it was my ears by which I would hear. So whoever bore this voice was talking sort of to the back of my head, saying, "Where's your coupon?"

Hearing that, I sort of slowed my continuous entry into the Cypher Store, & I looked at my coupon book. And there was a coupon that read, "Entry: One," now in words I could understand. So I carefully ripped it out of the coupon book, & sort of handed it forward, into what I could not quite see, because

I had not quite arrived, you understand. And the coupon was taken by someone, & now I was fully arrived to the Cypher Store.

Well, all right. That was strangely harder than it usually is to do. But now I was in the Cypher Store, & looking around, but I still couldn't really see things too well. It seemed like wherever I looked, things would dodge out of my line of sight. OK, sure, another challenge.

I looked through my coupons, but none of them seemed to be the right one. And then that awkward voice seemed to be now talking to the top of my head, still not having figured out what my ears were. And it said: "Map! Map!" And I guessed that maybe the circular had a map in it. So I opened up the circular, & I studied at the map.

Then I looked up again, & now saw that there were all the aisles & rows & shelves of goods that you would expect in any kind of store. *Because* I had the map open, I was able to see what it all looked like. OK.

And I will say to you that it reminded me of a Thrift Shop I used to work in. Shelves piled with all manner of strange things. Endless rows, & just heaps of this, & heaps of that. But it was the Cypher Store, so I had this feeling that it wasn't quite like that here. So I walked into one of the rows, & I picked up this multi-colored ball of yarn.

On a whim, I began to slowly unspool this ball of yarn in my hands, slowly, & I read as it unspooled: "They left each other keys, all over the town. Most were random, tucked secretly into pockets & purses. Carrying with them a wafting minuscule scent, for clue."

Then I spooled it back quickly, & the Narrative told it to me so that it began at the end, just like it had begun at the beginning. And so I left them with their keys in hand, not yet distributed, if that makes any sense. Which it probably, honestly, does not. I liked this Narrative, though, so I looked at my strange wad of cash. I hoped I had enough.

But that's when the voice, the bearer of whom I still couldn't see, said, sort of talking into my neck: "Go to *The Sequel! The Sequel's* better!" And I got the feeling that I was now being sort of hurried along to where the Sequel was.

So I went down this long aisle, shelves piled high with every imaginable kind of good & doodad & knick-knack. Ancient picture-postcards. Beat-up old tape recorders. And, at the end of the aisle, there was a set of shelves I now faced, & a tall rickety-looking ladder.

"*The Sequel's* up there!"

I guess I was going to have to climb high to discover *The Sequel*. Here goes.

* * * * *

Cube-Shaped Room

Climbing to the top of the tall rickety-looking ladder, I crawl into a square hole. And then I crawl in a little deeper. And then I find that I am tipping forward, & I am tumbled into what seems like a cube-shaped room.

The room is covered in letters. This must be *The Sequel*. But what's funny about this cube-shaped room I'm in, barely bigger than myself, is that, as I lean one way or another, it tips that way. And so in order to read *The Sequel*, I have to tip in the right direction in order to read the sentences that come next. And sometimes I go a little too fast, & the room begins to spin. So I need to *slow-w-w-w* down & read *slow-w-w-er*. And this is what I read:

"It was some kind of party he went to, & he took a psychedelic so strong he was sweating blood for hours. The . . . party . . . was . . . on . . . multiple floors . . . shorter than a bookstore . . . There . . . a . . . girl . . . he . . . met . . . a . . . very . . . powerful attraction . . . they-brought-him-to-a-couchwhereheshivered & . . . sweatedbloodforhours. . . coveredhimupbuthewanted. . . towriteher . . . &didforalittlewhile . . . could. . . barely . . . speak . . . how . . . it . . . felt . . . near her . . . she . . . seemed . . . awash in . . . it . . . too . . . but . . . later . . . she . . . had . . . to . . . go . . .

"He searched for a sleep pod. They were sunk in the earth. Lights & switches indicated if oc . . . cu . . . pied . . . if he'd . . . mistakenly . . . happened . . . into . . . his . . . friend's . . . pod . . . then smiling, half-dressed later, wanting his news . . . & he wanted to choose . . . calling us with the elevator number & missed the *alllllll night Boulevardcheeseparade again!* . . . *NOOOOOO!*"

I think I've read it all & now my interest in being in this cube-shaped room is waning. I can't tell if there's another *Sequel*, to *The Sequel*, nor how I'll get to it. I wonder if that voice that was talking to me earlier would help me out.

And I wait. And I wait. And finally I shout out, "Come on, man! Give me something!"

"You want *something-g-g-g-g-g-g-g?*"

"Yah! I want *something-g-g-g-g-g!*"

"*Chew-w-w-w-w-w down-n-n-n-n-n . . .* "

Oh, gosh. *No, really?* Well, I steady myself, & I sort of get squat close to the floor. Balancing carefully for it to stay the floor so we don't tip again. And I put my head between my legs, & lean close to the floor, & give an exploratory lick.

And somewhere . . . somehow . . . there's a noise. It sounds like a laugh! Or a cry. Or something.

But the funny thing is the floor doesn't taste half bad. It tastes somewhere between peppermint & maybe French vanilla.

And so I begin to slowly, lick by lick, lick my way through the floor, to see what in the world might come next.

* * * * *

Licking Down & Down

Now if you ever find yourself . . . *slowl-y-y-y* . . . licking your way . . . through the floor . . . of a cube-shaped room . . . where . . . you had just read . . . *The Sequel* . . . all over the walls . . . as you tipped & turned . . . to the Cypher story you had started reading . . . on the multicolored ball of yarn . . . back

in the Cypher Store . . . down that tall rickety-looking ladder, somewhere back there . . . & you were still hanging on to your coupons, & . . . your wad of cash, & your circular, with the map inside . . . but you found yourself . . . instructed by a strange voice, that didn't know what . . . your ears are for . . . & so would talk to different parts of your head . . . to lick down . . . & the floor was somewhere between peppermint . . . & French vanilla in taste . . . you might wonder a bit about how you got into this situation?

Along your way, long ago, there was that Professor, one of them, & his study of the secret writings of the Transcendentalists. And he had sent you dipping finger down into the ancient *G?ea? Vio??ce* volume, in search of Cyphers. But it didn't really start there, no. It started longer ago &, somehow, while the floor is giving way with your continual licking, & there are noises emanating from here & there, laughter, cries—*Who knows?*—you find yourself thinking back to that vast ramshackle building you lived in for a while, when you were traveling.

It had a dilapidated movie theater. Called *The Nada?* The tattered handmade sign above the door reads: “Tonight Only! Triple Bill! $1X + 2X + 3X!$ Prequels to **RemoteLand?** Watch & decide!” But neither the sign nor the movies within *ever* changed.

There's a big bookstore, called **The Arcadia**. A 24/7 friendly market too. And there were live performances in random places all over this ramshackle building, which looked like it was about to fall down any second now, but didn't quite do so.

Lick, lick, lick. Distant cry, distant laugh.

And you remember the time that you had on your favorite Rock & Roll shirt, of the best band in all the Many Worlds of the Star Spiral, R.E.M. of course. And you met someone in those strange hallways of that dilapidated movie-theater-mart-complex, & he had the *same* shirt on.

And he says, “I know you. We were friends long ago. We first met, twice, in dreams. Remember?”

I look at him closely. The bald head with a little bit of fur on top. Smirking friendly smile. Different-colored eyes. Many rings on his fingers of many different shapes & sizes. Some of them glow. Some of them make little noises. Tattoos, sometimes there, sometimes not, sometimes move around. He's a very kinetic guy. And that's why you called him Kenny. Short for Kinesis.

“Kenny!”

“Yeah, yeah, it's me,” he grins.

Well, we sort of awkwardly hug & then he says, “Listen, man, I got to show you something.” He takes me by his third hand, & I begin to recall that he wasn't quite like ordinary people-folks. But he's cool as jazz, for sure, & now brings me into this bathroom.

It's an ordinary-looking bathroom, compared to the rest of this place. Toilet. Sink. Bathtub. But then he shows me on the wall of the bathtub & shower there are puzzle pieces glued, high & low. All over the wall. I study it close for a few minutes. Looks like a Castle in one place? A strange Labyrinth in another? And some kind of endless beautiful Beach?

I just marvel & say, “Wow! That's pretty interesting.”

“Yeah, man. It’s a special glue. You can take a shower. You can take a bath. These won’t fall off.”

“So who did them?”

“Well, I think she’s in class right now, down the hall. We can go sit in at the very back, & say hi after.”

So he leads me again by the third hand, down the hall, & into this classroom. I didn’t know there were classrooms here. What kind of complex is this? I never really knew back then.

It’s a crowded classroom. Kind of shiny. And the guy at the front has a severe look on his face. Is he the Professor? Probably. And he’s looking all around with disdain at the students, as though he despises them all, & wonders why it is that they live within the same world as he does?

My friend quietly points to the girl who made the puzzle-pieces-bathroom-wall-art &, apparently, the Professor is considering her proposal to illustrate a manuscript. But he’s looking displeased by her ideas. He begins to say words that I don’t understand, but obviously these are angry, disdainful words.

And I don’t know, something compels me. She seems like such a nice girl. There’s nothing wrong with her. And when he moves closer, looks her over disdainfully, I stand up too!

I say, “Hey, man.”

And he says, “Who are you?”

I look back at him & say, “Who the *fuck* are you?”

And he takes a step back. And then he keeps taking another step back, until he walks out of the shiny classroom.

For a moment, everybody’s looking at everybody else. And my friend Kenny is looking at me with a wonder I don’t think he ever looked at me before with.

* * * * *

That’s Why They’re All Here Too

For a long moment, I look around at the various faces in this crowded shiny classroom, whose strange, arrogant Professor I seemed to have chased from the room.

I look at my friend Kenny. He’s still staring wonderingly at me.

I look at the girl that that Professor had berated. She has long brown hair, & turquoise eyes. Coke bottle glasses. She wears a hoody over a flannel shirt, & blue jeans. Probably grunger boots on her feet, is my bet. She smiles at me slightly.

And then it seems like I’m being asked, by many all at once, who I am. *Where’d I come from?* Well, I’m not sure exactly how to them answer that. I don’t know how far to go back.

But I do say, “You know, I think it kind of began with another Professor. This handsome fellow who’s

interested in the Transcendentalists.”

Someone speaks up & says, “Is he the one who thinks that he knows all about their secret writings?”

I nod.

“Ah man, he’s a trip.”

“Is that how you ended up here? He sent you?”

“Well, sort of,” I say. “I got to reading a book by Cypher about a love affair.”

A lot of the students nod & laugh & know about that.

“And then I ended up in the book, & down in the Woods.”

“And with coupons, man, right? Coupons & a circular?”

I nod. I still have these in my grip, & I show them all, & they all laugh.

“And you went in to that Cypher Store, right? You had to have gone into that Cypher Store?”

“I did!”

“And, uh, the cube-shaped room? That strange twisting-turning room?”

I nod. “Why is it you all know about this?”

“Well, that’s why we’re all here. You see, we’re trying to figure it out. Every one of us came here by just about the same route you did. And we don’t know why.”

This seems very strange, & I don’t know what to think.

Then that girl speaks up & she says, “We were going to write it all down, & I was going to illustrate it, but that Professor, well, he didn’t like any of it. We don’t know where he came from. But suddenly he was here, trying to tell us not to do it.”

Now I’m just standing here, sort of uncertain about everything.

“What do you think we should do next?” someone says. And everyone looks at me expectantly, as though I have ideas.

I think about it for a moment. Really give it a good thought. And then I say, “You know, maybe we’re supposed to find the next *Sequel* in the story of the Cypher. Maybe that will give us some guidance. Maybe it’s not just a matter of reading about the Cypher. Maybe we’ve got to let it guide us.”

Well now, everyone looks at everyone, & Kenny’s looking at me, smiling big.

And now there’s sort of this listening air about what we do next. I say, “Look, I can’t tell any of you

what to do since I don't really know what to do myself. That's just my theory. But what do you all say we leave this classroom, & carry on? Because that next *Sequel* in the Cypher story, it could be anywhere, right? Anywhere in this complex."

And so in a moment's moment, everybody's standing up. Getting up my meager courage, I say to the girl who made the puzzle pieces in the bathroom, "You know, I thought that was really creative."

She smiles kindly at me & says, "I got the idea from a dream. In this dream, I was standing on a hill, & I was trying to deliver a package to a customer. But then the customer panicked and said, 'Your car is rolling down the hill suddenly.' And I went chasing after my car, Sydnee Grand Prix SE, but she somehow turned & went up into someone's driveway, & onto their lawn. And this crazy guy ran out of the house, & he yelled at me like I was a spy. Or something like that. And then it all fractured into pieces."

"And that's where you got the idea from?"

She nods.

And so, looking for the next *Sequel* of the Cypher epic, we all walked out the shiny classroom door that looked like an ordinary door. But it wasn't an ordinary door.

* * * * *

Refugees, Fighters, Survivors

And through that door we found ourselves somewhere very different. Then I realized that I was not even with the same group of people. And then I learned that the group I was with now, they were all refugees. Fighters. Survivors. They were on the run. *What does that mean?* I couldn't rightly figure it out. Something about *trying to make it to the brick wall through time & space?* Again, I try to remember if I know all this, some other way, some other time? *A TV show, maybe?*

I don't see that girl with the turquoise eyes, nor my friend Kenny.

And this world I find myself in, the light seems sort of wrong for looking at anybody too close. Everyone's face seems smeared. I'm guessing mine seems smeared to them too. Gravity seems to come & go, but not in any kind of fun way. You just had to make sure that, when you hit a patch of broken gravity, you had something to hang on to. I'd noticed that a lot of the smeared-face-folks around me walked with heavy sticks, & I hadn't understood it, because they didn't look injured or lame.

But then when I hit that first patch of broken gravity, I understood it quite well. So I looked around, & I found a stick nobody had made a claim to, & so that became my stick for those moments when needed.

Our group was now walking out on a lonely road. Bare fields all around. But then we came to some kind of town. And a sort of club. A burnt-out neon sign over the door seemed to say *Lumina*. A party? The noise was, I guess, music, but wasn't any kind of music I'd known. It was crowded, & dark. And I don't think people's faces were smeared no more, but you couldn't see them.

But then I started to notice strange figures in light blue windbreakers. There was just one, & then there was another. Then there was quite a few. And then there were screaming & flight. And I just ran any which way I could with my stick.

I was down an alley. There were some others hiding down there too. And the only word I heard them say that I understood from this whole strange situation I'd come into was the word *sanctuary*.

Then there was sort of a barking, & shuffling, in this dark alley, & then we are running again, & then we're being pulled up into a really big truck. I got one look at it before I was inside it, & it was the biggest truck I'd ever seen. *Ever*.

And I sort of sat down in the corner, not even taking a look at where I'd come to. Sort of drowsing in panic & weariness. And then I found myself being *shaked-shaked-shaked*. And I open my eyes.

And there was Kenny! And there was the girl with the turquoise eyes! And they were smiling at me!

"Dreaming?" they asked.

I looked around, dazed. "I guess. I guess."

And for some reason, I blinked. Once. Twice. A third time. And then I'm yet somewhere else.

* * * * *

Sanctuary

I look around, tentatively, wondering what all this is. But then I realize: *Oh, it's my hovel, in Zombie Town. Guess I made it to the other side?*

I look at my digital clock, & get a clue. The time, according to the digital clock, is 33:66:99. Hmm. I wonder what part of *any* day that might be.

I'm sitting on my old mattress, with the wire that pokes straight out, with my familiar beat blue blanket. And my beat-up pillows. The pillowcases showing Charlie Brown, Snoopy, Linus, Pigpen. There are the two windows of my hovel. The curtains on them depicting that fantasyland. You know, the one with the caterpillar & the guy with the big hat.

There's my working-table over there, where I work on *The Cenacle*. And over there are my many boxes of vinyl LPs. R.E.M. Noisy Children. The Pink Floyd. And there's my computer too. Got her not long ago. I call her Lucy, as a private joke.

But you see, I'm avoiding looking at one thing. And that's my DüMont television with the Antennar 200. Because I've learned that my television is often where strange things begin to begin to occur. And sure enough, when I finally look at the television, there's a word flashing across the screen. It's spelled like usual, but the letters seem too looped & curved & jagged every which-a-way.

So I kind of lean forward, & I sort of sound it out, strange letter by strange letter: "S-s-a-n-n-c-t-u-u-a-r-r-y."

Sanctuary? Didn't I hear that word, not long ago, in one of those other places I might also be right now? I think maybe.

But then the word fades, & some kind of program, I guess it's a program, comes on. And it kind of leaps in, in the middle. First thing that happens is a car accident, in a swamp. A woman is thrown from the car, into the swamp. She ends up with a mouthful of weeds, half-dead.

Somehow there's a famous photo that comes of the moment when she half stands up, mouthful of weeds. Still half-dead. And it shows up in all the newspapers, all around the world.

She survives this accident in the swamp, & the next scene shows her becoming a renowned actress. Loved all over! Makes wonderful film after wonderful film; wins award after award. And years later, she decides to make a film about the accident. Recreate the *Swamp Scene*.

I think they do a pretty good job, but with the one difference. That being a famed Spanish guitarist is playing the well-known theme of the film. An odd little theme.

But the actress, she breaks down. The film shows her breaking down. It shows her making a film to recreate this one scene of that accident, but she can't do it. And we see that, unaware of what's going on, the guitarist is playing on & on.

Then the camera shifts to a clipboard at the edge of the swamp. There's a single page on the clipboard, summing up everything that just happened.

And then my TV cackles & goes dark. I'll tell you, one & all, whoever you are, of all the things heretofore that my TV has ever done before, it has *never* cackled & gone dark.

Well, OK, maybe my DüMont TV didn't like that show. I suppose it's possible. Different tastes for different folks.

And I don't really know if I'm here, or where I am. I would just like to be in one place, at one time. I think that would help.

* * * * *

Curvilinear Comix

That's when I noticed, on the floor, next to my mattress, what looked to be a comic book. I don't remember buying it. Maybe I found it somewhere. Certainly that's possible. On the train, on a bench, on the ground. I picked it up & took a look. And on the cover, it depicted what looked like a very strange & futuristic Robot Man.

And the words near his strange, brave-looking Robot Man face say:

***IF YOU NEED HELP, JUST CALL FOR HOBO JONES,
THE MOST ADVANCED ROBOT MAN IN THE MANY WORLDS
OF THE STAR SPIRAL! DETAILS WITHIN.***



So I opened up the comic book &, for a while, it didn't seem to be about *any* of this at all. I read a story about someone who's in a house, maybe there's a party going on, on multiple floors. Lots of folks, partying it up.

But he's sitting in a chair whose legs don't work so very well together. He finds himself tipping back & forth. He has a clutch of papers in his hand, & a phone, & he finds himself taking a test on the phone, & referring to the papers. He doesn't seem too confident about any of this. Even his Happy App doesn't help him to feel much better, like it's supposed to.

Then he decides he wants to take a shower. Maybe that would help clear his head. And so he gets up, & walks through the crowds, & finds the bathroom. But there's no showerhead to take a shower by. But there is a tub, & it's full of dirty water, so he drains it.

So then he's undressing when crowds of people pass through the bathroom on all sides of him. He's standing there with his blue jeans down to his ankles, & they're just passing by on all sides, not even noticing him, like this bathroom is the necessary path from one place to another.

I decide that this comic book story isn't leading me anywhere, & so I leave him to his dilemma, & I flip to the very last page. The one with all the advertisements for Clover-dale Salve, machines that blow square bubbles, & other kinds of amazing devices, all of which require a quarter mailed in to receive a Big Catalog.

So I read through all of these advertisements, looking for how I can reach out to Hobo Jones for help, if he can help me. And, at the very bottom, the last row of advertisements, I notice the page is folded over, just a little corner of it, & I unfold that little corner.

And a voice speaks to me from the comic book. I don't know what the voice is saying, but it *is* a voice, & so I say, hopefully, "Are you Hobo Jones?"

And the voice says, "Yes."

So I say, "How can I find you? I need your help, like you offer in the comic book."

There's quiet for a long time, & then he says, "Leave where you are, walk outside, & continue along to find the first place where you feel safe. Talk to me again when you're there."

And so I do. I dress, lock my door, walk outside. I walk down the street, turn a corner, another, & I come to the local ancient cemetery where I've often felt safe among the trees, & the many spirits.

* * * * *

Postlude: Reversion

“Structurally, the Dream Raps operate on adjacency, not causality. Identity is modular, not continuous. This is why doubles, counterparts, & time-separated selves appear so naturally. Motifs replace plot as the primary organizing principle. Temporal adjacency masquerading as temporal sequence.”

—Scholar A,

*Without's Without: A Structural Analysis of
Faux Narrative in the Dream Raps*
[Scriptor Press International]

Hobo Jones, the most advanced Robot Man in the Many Worlds of the Star Spiral, was feeling pretty fine after his checkup & clean out with the Mechanic & Old Cookie, in OC's Fix-It Shoppe in the Thought Fleas' Domicile.

Now he was striding alongside his dear friend Lilianna, & the wonderful Miss Flossie Flea, who had fetched the two of them to come with her because she needed their help. But Hobo Jones did not yet know what help Miss Flossie needed.

She led them along through the Rutabaga Festival & Fleastock to an area near Alvinarah Poesy's Mosstudio, which they well knew. But it wasn't quite *in* the Mosstudio. It was a few trees away. Miss Flossie explained that she'd had found something that she thought they should know about. And so she fetched them when Hobo Jones was feeling all fit as a fiddle again.

She said, “I left it where I found it.” And she brought them to a place where there were raked-together heaps of leaves & dirt & branches, & she pushed all of that aside. And underneath was a very fragile & torn . . . comic book.

They all kneeled down to look at the comic book. They couldn't see a title. It looked like that had been lost to time. But they could see, on what there was of the cover, a distinct rendering of Hobo Jones. And there were words, near his face. A sort of partial sentence, which said something like: “If you need . . . help . . . call for Hobo Jones . . . Details . . .”

Now none of them knew what this meant, but Hobo Jones asked if he could take a closer look at the comic book, & Miss Flossie nodded. That's why she had brought them.

He lifted up the comic book in his hand, very gently. And he began to page through its crumbling leaves. He saw mention at one point of a TV show called *Homesteadin' Plus!* Further along, something about a book called *Adrift: a Novel*. But it was hard to read the words. They were mushy & old with time.

And finally, in his gentle paging, he came to the last page, which seemed to be filled with advertisements for ray guns & perpetual bubblegum. And at the bottom, there was a corner that was folded over. And he gently unfolded it.

And he heard a voice, calling him, from the comic book!

“Are you Hobo Jones?”

And he said, "Yes."

And the voice said, "I need your help."

Hobo Jones looked at his friends, who did not know what to say. But he remembered an adventure with his dear friend, Mulronie the Space Pirate, & the advice Mulronie had given him that time.

He said, "Walk outside from where you are, & continue along to find the first place you feel safe. Do you have a comic book too?"

"Yes, I do. That's how we're talking."

"Bring it with you. Go there now, & wait."

Then Hobo Jones gently closed the fragile fragmented comic book, & he pressed a button in his Robot Man chest, & a little door opened. And he put the comic book inside.

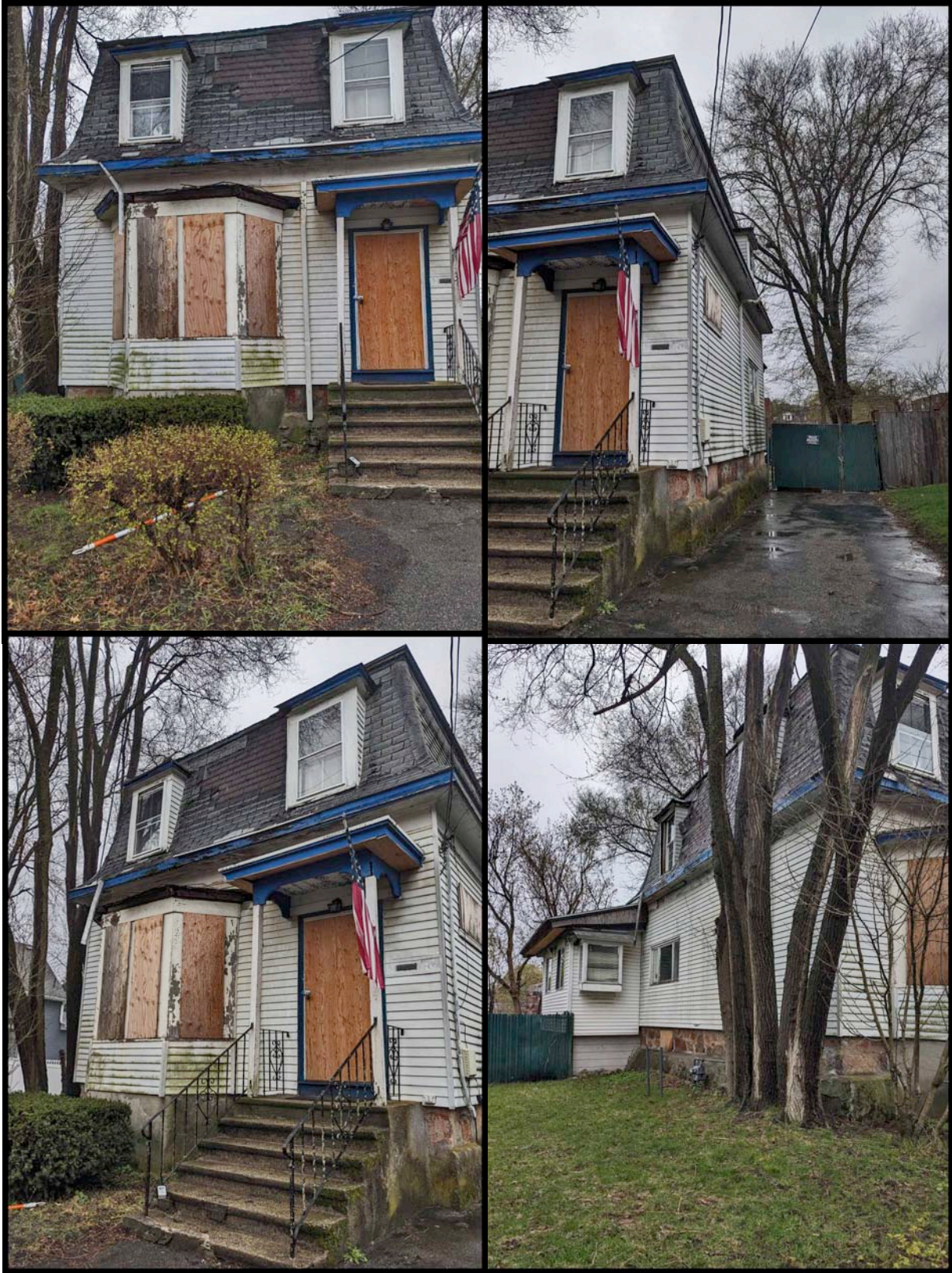
And he said to Miss Flossie, "Miss Lilianna & I will go & find him now. We'll be back as soon as we can."

Miss Flossie Flea nodded & was glad that she talked to the wonderful Robot Man.

Ⓟ 4/25/2026
W. K. Rose, MA.
/

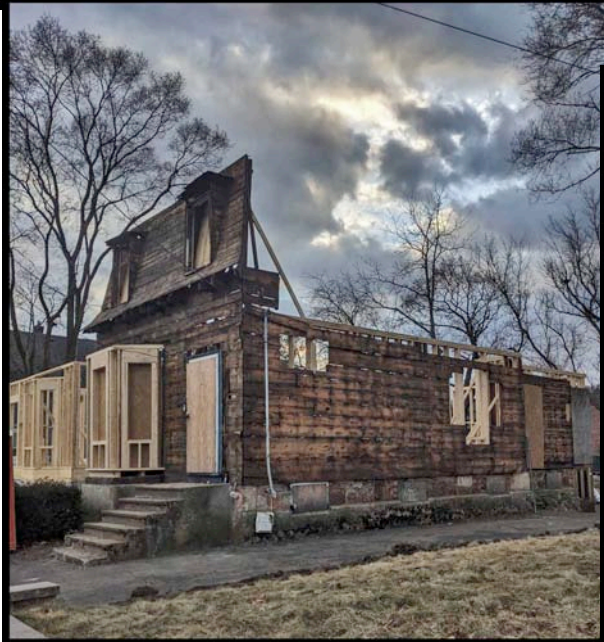
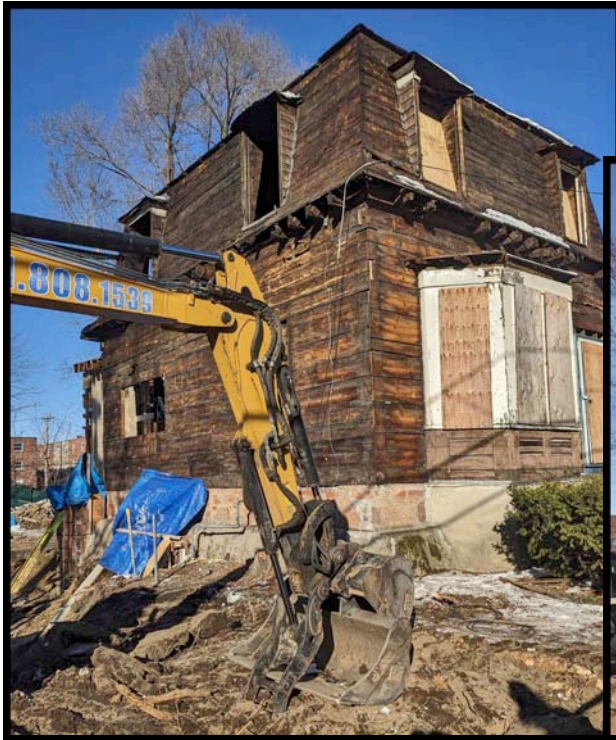
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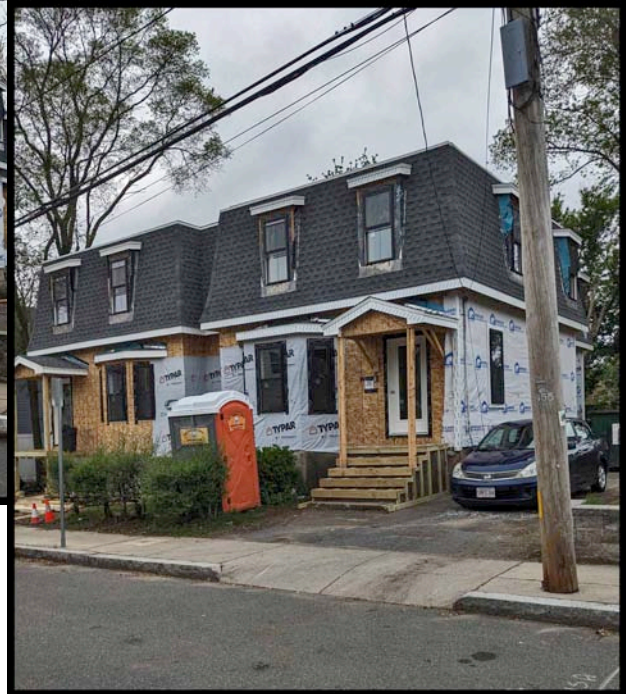
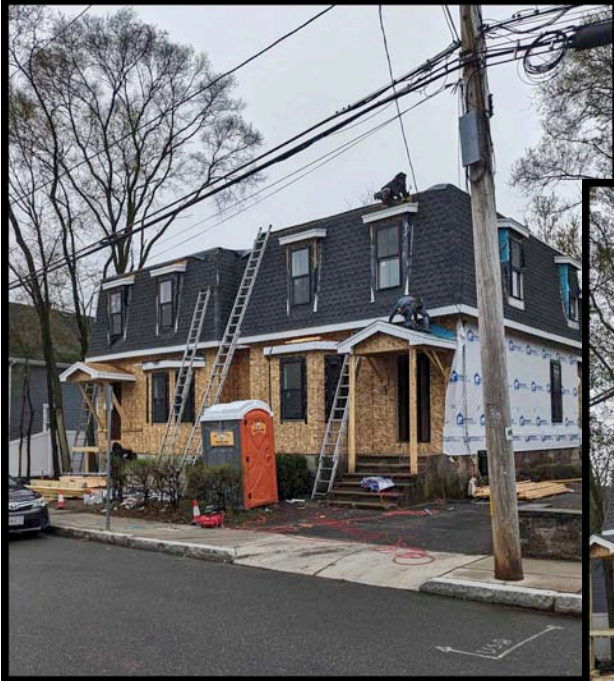
Stage 1:

... stillness ...



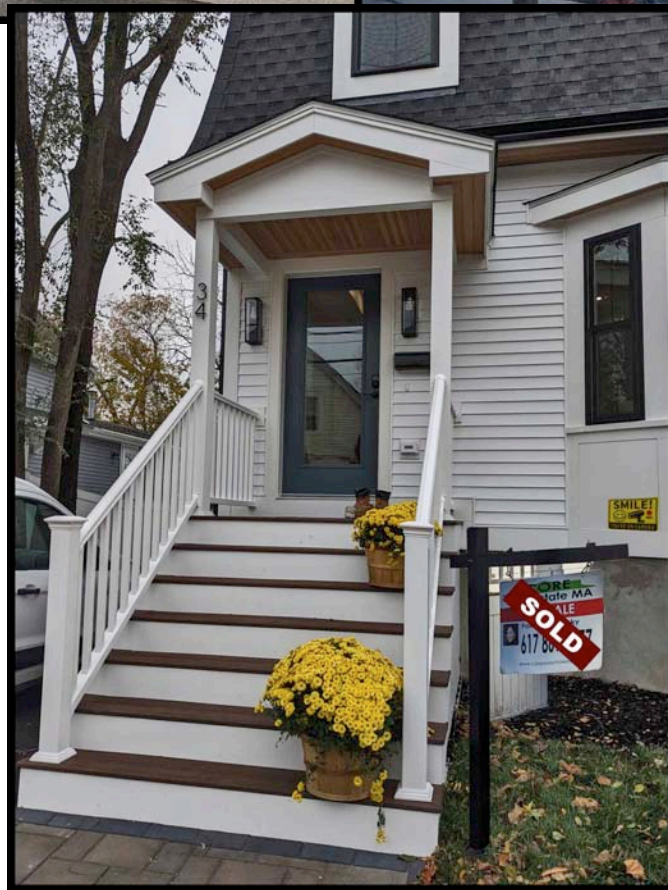
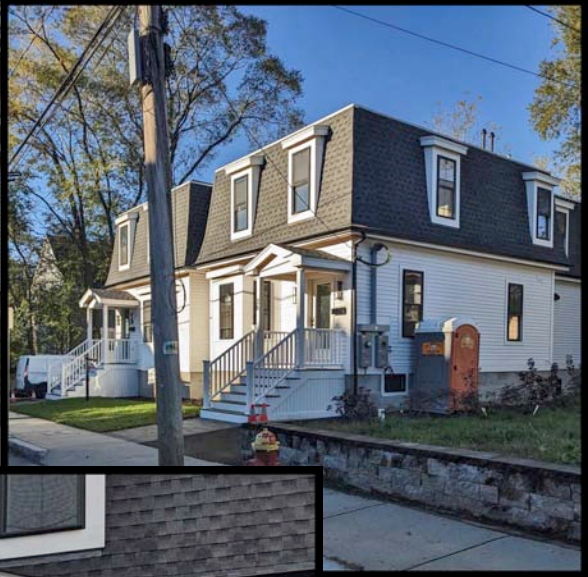
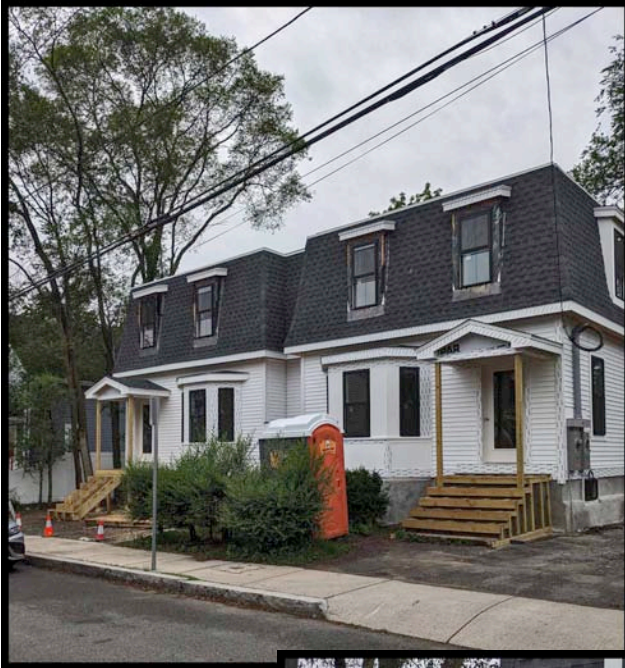
Stage 2:

... rupture ...



Stage 3:

... *becoming* ...



Stage 4:

... arrival ...



Lou Gámez

On Suspicion

[Prose]

i.

It was just after dark when I heard the doorbell beckon to me. I wiped the dishwashing suds off my hands, paused my playlist, and opened the front door to my visitor.

I'd like to say she was pretty: a small slender blonde, perhaps in her late twenties; graceful, soft-featured. Her manner was polite, even kind; her address, businesslike with a touch of severity due to her crisp uniform and austere-gathered hair.

Though my front porch is well lit, I noted the details of her face with difficulty, since she stood against the side of the house in the shadows to the right of my front door.

I realized: she's staying out of range of any doorbell surveillance camera I may have installed (there's none). Looking beyond her, I saw that, rather than parking her squad car right in front of my house, she parked discretely around the corner. Poor girl, I thought: what a job she has.

"Good evening, Ma'am. What can I do for you?"

"Good evening, Sir. Did you call the police station today, Sir?"

"Why, no—why, has something happened?"

"You didn't call asking for the police to come to 1604 John Glenn Road?"

"No Ma'am—but that's the correct address of this house, of my house. You can see the number right there on the wall behind you."

"Sir, we received a call requesting that we come to this address—that was not you?"

"No, Ma'am. I live alone, so I can confirm that no one at this address called you."

She seemed to chew her lip. "Sir, what is your name please?"

When I told her "Lou Gámez," she nodded quickly—she already knew. No doubt she had accessed my property records on her police car iPad before coming up to the porch.

"Thank you, Sir. Sorry for disturbing you."

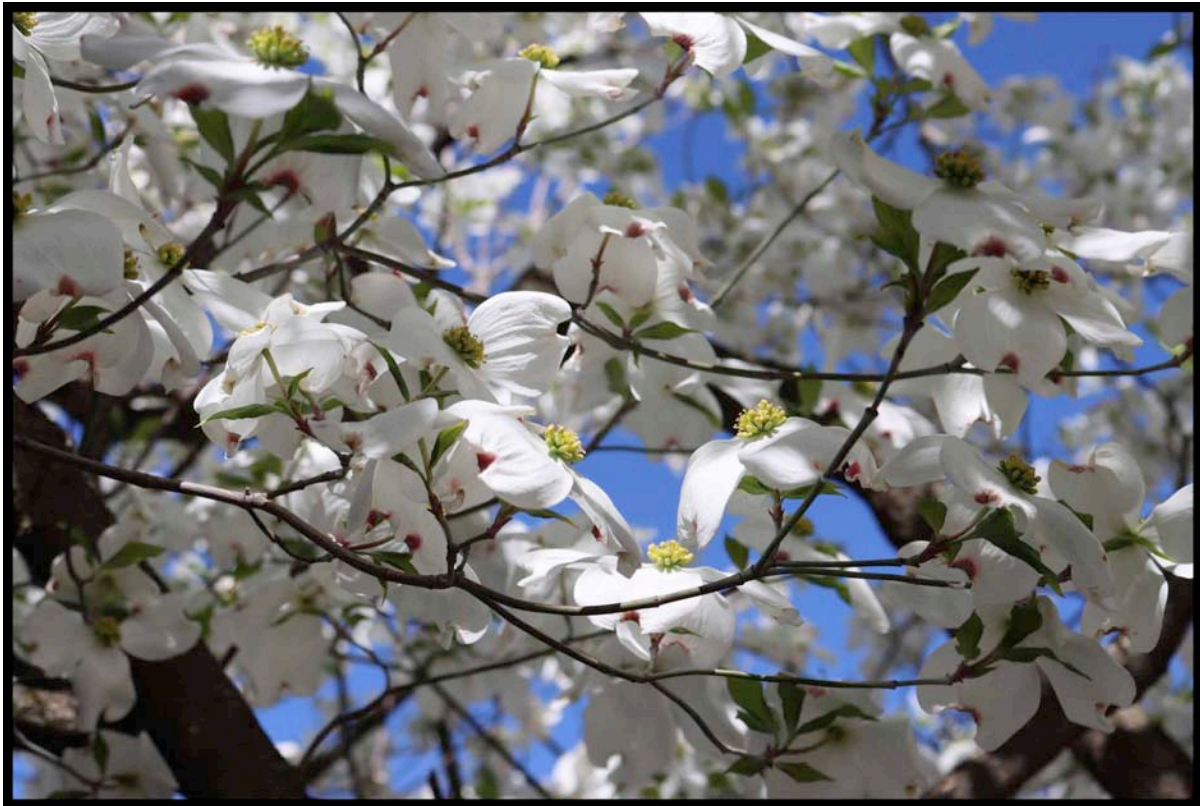
"Not at all, Ma'am. Have a good night."

ii.

I shut the door thoughtfully, resumed playing my music, walked slowly back to the soapy dishes in the kitchen awaiting their rinse, and tried to puzzle this out. What was going on? Today was an unexceptional Wednesday—though come to think of it, I did mow the front lawn this afternoon. Not my usual practice. The weekend was just too fine to waste with yard-work. No need to encourage my neighbors to have their dogs piss and shit on my grass more than they already do.

Aha, there you have it, Lou, said William of Occam in my head, smacking my brain with his razor. *One of your dog-shit neighbors, or some local passerby, called the cops on you. You live in a deeply red-hat part of Ohio, just 20 minutes from JD Vance's boyhood home. The good folks who voted to make America great again saw, what? A frumpily-dressed Latino doing outdoor manual labor, right? They have been conditioned by their cult leaders to assume you're **sin documentos**, and thus a threat to the safety and order of the known Universe. You needed to be checked and vetted by the available authorities of 'Merica. Better to be safe than sorry, am I right? Q.E.D.*

A sound deduction, Brother Occam; but if so, then what does that mean to me? Truthfully, I've never



Lou Gámez

felt completely at home in Ohio; a frail baby-blue snail in a humid terrarium awash in red. Should I now shut my windows and peer out nervously through the blinds at the people passing outside, like a Jew in the Warsaw ghetto watching for the SS Obergruppenführer to drive his Kübelwagen towards my door? No, that's an overly dramatic comparison, surely. There's been no official ICE operation or detention, much less a street shooting, for you, Lou—lighten up.

No, this was purely a civilian request, an ordinary citizen's call for formal inspection and action by the "authorities." Perhaps that, precisely, is what makes my heart sink so, this evident gestation and evolution of fear in the common man. Was it perhaps next-door Pamela with her dog; or two-houses-over Ryan rolling out the trash; or maybe across-the-street Peggy sitting by the window; or maybe some rando in a big truck, thinking of yelling an obscenity in passing, but then coming up with a better way to settle my wetback hash?

Maybe Yoda was right: fear leads to anger, then to hate, and hate leads to the Dark Side, even on Norman Rockwell's Main Street.

iii.

I heard my playlist of big band music shuffle to Louis Jordan and His Tympany Five, to the raucous juke-joint jump blues of "Saturday Night Fish Fry." Such a fun, exuberant song—but *listen to the lyrics*, whispers Bill Occam, razor in hand.

So: a group of Black musicians wander the streets of 1940s New Orleans, looking for a Saturday house-party gig, and they stumble onto a jumping fish-fry: "it was a-rockin' / You never seen such scufflin' and shufflin' 'til the break of dawn." The party was going strong, and the narrator shouts, "Let the joy begin!"

But soon the police drive up in their Black Maria and raid the place, for unspoken reasons:

*I didn't know we was breakin' the law
Somebody reached up, clipped me on the jaw
They had us blocked off from the front to the back
And they was puttin' us in the wagon like potato sacks*

Hmm, pretty upbeat for an ugly Jim Crow scene, I thought. *Here it comes now! Listen, Lou!* prompts Brother Occam:

*Then they kept us in jail in a dazed condition
They booked each one of us on suspicion*

"On suspicion." That was the warrant for Jim Crow harassment, and also the reason for my interview with the cute blonde cop who interrupted my dishwashing. We've been here before: fear and its armed, badge-wearing remedies have returned to Norman Rockwell's America—or more likely, they've never left. Just perennial features of Main Street, like mailboxes and fire hydrants. Q.E.D. I thanked William of Occam for his help, and fetched a deep sigh.

But then, I realized, perennial also is the determination, and the ability, to shut the door to fear, turn the dial to 11, and rock out to the jubilant songs still resting unsung in my soul.

*Dear Brother Louis Jordan, help me choose this lighter, ebullient heart.
And let the joy begin.*

* * * * *

Judih Weinstein Haggai



haiku snails
slow to appear
lasting impression

* * *

jackal orchestra
three a.m. situation
insomnia treat

* * *

jackals and foxes
seek cover at break of dawn
kibbutz tail parade

* * *

my morning haiku
too sad to leave the nest
lingers awhile

* * *

two ways to begin
with fear and worry
or with smiles and ease

* * *

once upon a time
gathering fallen rockets
planting of gardens

* * *

body readiness
mind acquiescence
haiku as ally

* * *

sound of days passing
rain, wind, sun and bicycles
precious melody

* * *

stretching limits
the unknown confronted
strengthening our hearts

* * *

exit illusions
remnants of innocence
still keep her young

* * *

listen world
clean up your room already
enough is enough

* * *

be well
more than a prayer
a plea

* * * * *

Martina Reisz Newberry



Lord Ganesha at the Mpala Waterhole

Having removed the jeweled headdress, the pendants—
 having left the plate of sweets aside and taken off the ankle bracelets—
 having laid down the scepter and all that I have been given—
 I come with my parents, brothers, sisters, cousins, children,
 and matriarchs to the Mpala waterhole where we give
 and receive to each other without asking.

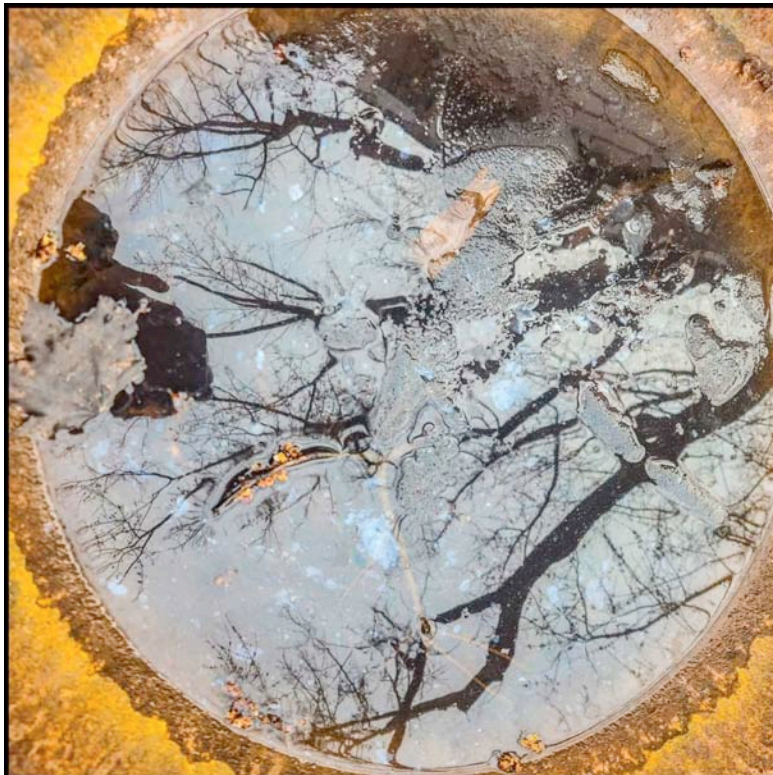
The mud here is cool, stays where I fling it onto my back—
 until I sink and roll in the water to wash it off and do it again.
 I am asked for nothing. I can choose my spot—
 stand still to look out at the sand forest or the horizon.
 I am not needed, nor praised, nor spurned.
 My valuables scattered on the bank are safe—
 none of these beings has use for them.

As full day seeps from morning, it grows so bright and hot
 that I am happy that my eyes are small—
 that my ears fan the still air—
 that there is shade and cool water.

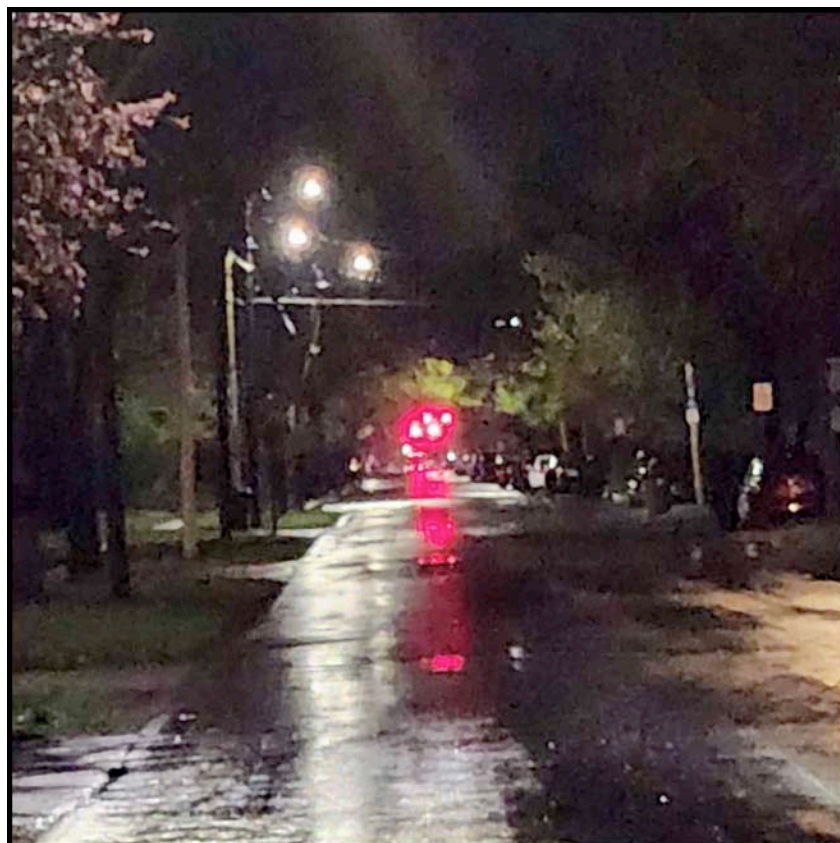
To these, I am no god—
 no son of gods—
 only one of the herd—
 my own kind.

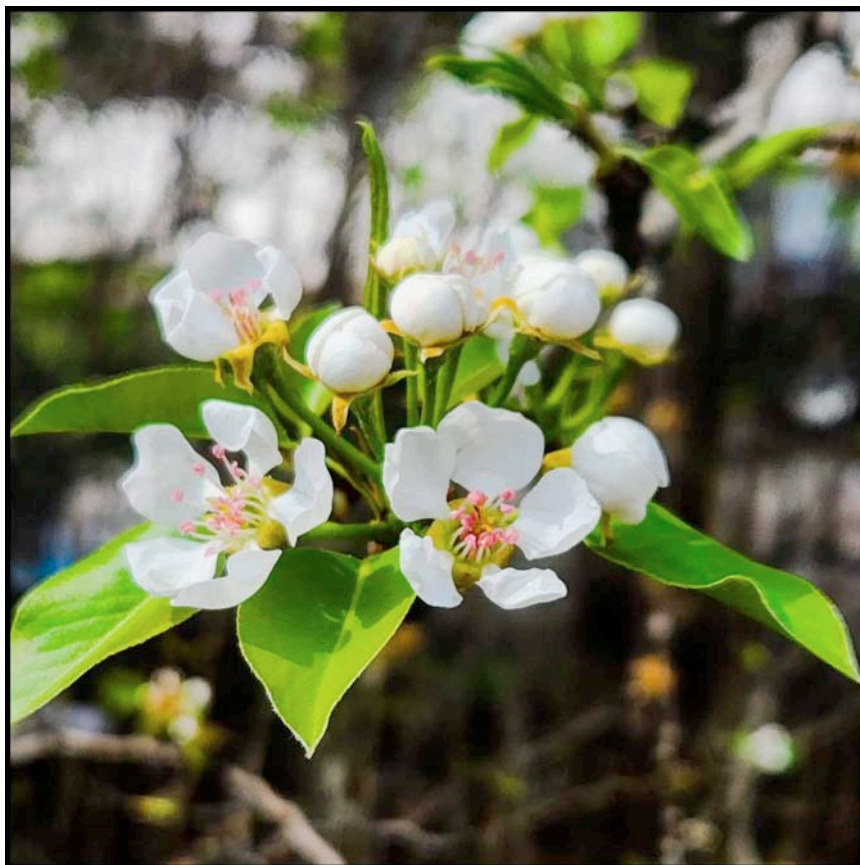
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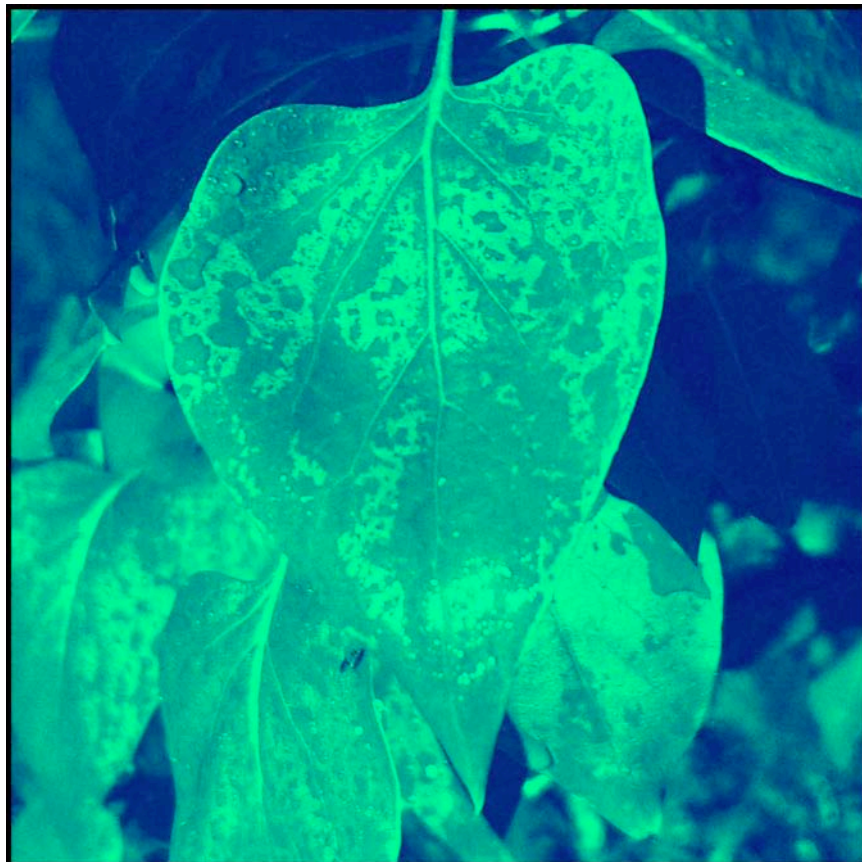
Louis Staebli















Timothy Vilgiate

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 31: Sunday Morning

i. Phillip

I spotted Marcia through the glass door of the coffee shop, and my stomach filled with butterflies. I felt like a goddamn schoolboy, smitten despite how tired and delirious I was from the night before. Thankfully, she didn’t see me at first—she was staring at her phone, her normally bright face drawn into something serious. One blue earbud was tucked into her left ear; the other dangling below the table. She hadn’t ordered anything yet.

She wore a yellow-and-white blouse with red flowers, straps that exposed her freckled shoulders. An elegant smoky eye-shadow ringed her eyes, and her lips were painted a bright red.

Nervously, I pushed the door open and waved to her. She fumbled with the phone and the headphones, set them both on the table, and then stood up and crossed the room.

“Hey there, Phillip!” she said, wrapping her arms around me in a warm, tight hug. Her perfume was so sweet. Her soft and delicate hair brushed my cheek.

“Glad to see you didn’t stand me up,” I said.

“Oh, I’d never do that!”

She looked at me for a moment—long enough that I wasn’t sure what to say.

“Can I get you something?” I said finally. “Coffee? A latte?”

She smiled a sweet and radiant smile. “That’s so nice of you. Sure, coffee’s fine.”

“With room, or—”

“Room? For cream, oh yah. But I’ll doctor it. Want me to come along?”

“Sure, I don’t see why not.”

“Pretty long day yesterday, huh?” she said as we walked. “Bet you’ve been dying to get a day off.”

“You better believe it. We got called in last night, and ended up patrolling till about five in the morning.”

“Oh my gosh! You must be exhausted!”

“A little bit. Hoping this nature’s medicine they call coffee might help with that.”

She frowned sympathetically. “I feel bad. I should’ve given you my number so we could’ve picked another day.”

“I wouldn’t want to do that. I’ve been looking forward to this all weekend. Can’t miss the chance to spend time with a lovely girl like yourself.”

She blushed, twirling her hair and laughing. Boy, she sure was a flirt.

We reached the counter. Her arm brushed mine as she leaned in to squint at the menu. I couldn’t help but look here up and down. Sweet baby Jesus, that was a fine-looking woman.

ii. Marcia

Aliens had invaded the *fucking* planet. I didn't want to freak out my new work friend, but I'd been watching the video for like the eighth time that morning when he walked in, and it was all I could think about. I'd been so distracted getting ready that I kept messing up my eyeliner. Now I looked like a goddamn raccoon.

When I hugged him, I felt the sharp stubble on his chin, the soft flannel of his shirt. He looked tired. Infectiously tired. I felt it too. Holy *shit*, was I tired.

"Pretty long day yesterday, huh?" I asked. "Bet you've been dying to get a day off."

He told me about the patrol, the five-in-the-morning shift, his exhaustion. I felt guilty for dragging him out.

"I should've given you my number," I said. "We could've picked another day."

But he smiled and said he'd been looking forward to it. To spending time with me.

What the *fuck*. Wait a second. Was this a *date*? Did my work friend want to date me? I tried not to panic.

"That's nice of you," I said. "Just let me know if you want to head home and get back to bed. Sleep. You know."

We reached the counter. My hair was in my face, the menu was rearranged, and I was trying not to sound irritated. The espresso machine screamed like someone had torn a hole in the goddamned universe. I shut my eyes and tapped my fingers on the counter, grounding myself. Slowly calmed down.

"You still have that bacon and guacamole bagel?" I asked, trying as hard as I could not to sound angry.

"Yes, we do."

"I'll take that, please. And a coffee. For here, but put it in a to-go cup." The gemstones on their mugs flashed in my memory—horrifying little things—so I made sure to ask for the disposable cup.

I handed over my card, still half-deaf from the espresso machine, and glanced back at Phillip to see if he thought I was acting weird. I hoped not. I hoped I was keeping it together.

iii. Phillip

I wondered if she was expecting to go someplace with me, so I ordered my own coffee to go too, and a breakfast burrito. We sat down at her table with our order number. She tapped her fingers in soft triplets, smiling warmly. I felt calm—calmer than I'd felt since getting my powers. I leaned into the cheerful and gentle feeling that she seemed to project.

The country music overhead softened the room. She leaned closer so we could hear each other better.

"So how long have you been interested in art history?" she asked.

"Oh, gosh. When I was twelve, my parents took me to the museum in Houston. Hated the boring old Renaissance stuff. But then we got to the modern art. And I remember the moment it hit me—this 1907 piece by Claude Monet, *Water Lilies*."

Marcia brightened and said, "Yah, those are based off a water meadow he had planted at his house. He was very interested in botany, and wrote specific instructions to his gardener on how to lay out the ground, and how to care for the garden. Another interesting thing is that he had cataracts, and, when he had them removed, people think he could see certain frequencies of ultraviolet light. He painted some of his water lilies paintings after his surgery, and they were bluer than before."

"I heard something about that. But anyway, that was the first time I really liked art. Big brush strokes, colors, emotions."

Someone brought our food. I thanked them.

"Where was I? Studied it in college at first, but I—"

Stop right there, Phillip. You ain't told no one about that. Don't want this young lady thinking you're some kind of drug user.

iv. Marcia

The country music helped. The chatter faded. My nerves finally started to settle. I leaned in so we could hear each other better, glad I hadn't said anything fatally weird yet. He seemed like an OK guy. Respectful.

Maybe my crazy dream of having a new work friend would actually materialize.

v. Phillip

She smiled at me again, warm and bright, and for a moment I let myself enjoy it. The faintest hint of pain crept through the haze. I thought about my wife. About how easily she'd lied to me. I wondered if I was ready to—but *no*. I shut it down. I wasn't going to let that ruin the first shot I'd had at a relationship since the divorce.

I cleared my throat and kept the conversation moving, hoping she didn't notice the momentary shift in my face.

"I got persuaded there was more money in criminal justice," I said. "And I . . . gave it up. Which I hate to say."

"Aw, well that's too bad," Marcia said. "But do you like law enforcement, at least?"

"Suppose it's not too bad. I get to protect and serve the community I grew up in. And when I can, I still go down to Austin or San Antonio. When I have the time."

"I'd love to go with you sometime," she said. "I haven't seen many of the galleries around here. Do they have good collections?"

"Oh, sure. McNay's the first modern art museum in the country—that's in San Antonio. Then you've got the Blanton in Austin. Blanton's real nice, has a good collection. If I had to choose, I'd go with San Antonio, but it's a toss-up. Dallas has some good work too—they've got Odilon Redon's 'Port of Morgat.'"

As I talked about these galleries, something started to hit me about Marcia. She very rarely stopped smiling. Only when she thought no one was looking did her face go serious—the same look she'd had through the glass door earlier. She had this bright, eager look in her eyes, but now that we were sitting across from each other, something felt off. Like she was looking through me. Almost robotic. Pretty, but almost *too* pretty.

Get a hold of yourself, Phillip. You getting cold feet because she's, what, too pretty? Too happy?

vi. Marcia

He looked sweet when he talked about art. There was this innocent gleam in his eye when he talked about Monet—gruff as he looked on the outside. I sipped my coffee and listened to him talk about the galleries in Texas. He knew so much about them.

Huh. I was . . . on a *date*. *A date*.

I could live with that, I guessed.

"We'll have to plan a day trip at some point, I guess," I said, clearing my throat.

vii. Phillip

She reached for her sandwich and misjudged the distance. Fumbling around for the plate, she ended up dipping her finger into a cup of mayonnaise.

"Sure," I said. "I'd be happy to show you. So, uh, do you specialize in Impressionism?"

"Well, I've always loved it," she said. "But I did my thesis on, um, photography."

Realizing her finger was covered in mayonnaise, she stared at blankly for a moment, then stuck it into her mouth to clean it off.

"Photography, huh? That's interesting."

"Yeah, that's my specialty. So if you ever find an antique cyanotype you need to conserve, I'm your girl!"

I chuckled. "Can't say I've ever found one of those. But with how often I clean out my attic, you never know. What was your dissertation on?"

She laughed nervously and bit her lip. "Are you sure you want to know?"

"Well, I don't know," I teased. "Do I?"

"I don't usually mention it on the first date. Not that this is a date! It's not a date. But yeah. You really want to know?"

“Now you’ve got me curious.”

I thought back to yesterday—what Grace had told me. There was truth to it. Marcia wasn’t . . . all there. She was gorgeous, my god, and I hadn’t talked to anyone about art history in a long time, but something was *off* about her.

“OK,” she said brightly. “So you know how they used to lynch people in the South?” she asked, uncomfortably loudly.

I blinked. “I am familiar with that unfortunate bit of history, yes.”

“Well, I studied the visual culture of lynching. Photographs, cartoons, things like that.”

“That sounds—”

“Disturbing? Yeah. Still have a little PTSD from looking at some of those photos. Lynching *really was* horrifying. People burned alive, dunked in boiling oil—”

She stopped, kind of laughed nervously. A couple of people looked over.

“Right,” she said quickly. “You can read it sometime, if you ever want to learn about it. I published a couple papers. Sorry—that’s a little morbid. I’m not a super morbid person, just concerned about racial injustice.”

“Oh, uh—”

“I don’t like looking at dead bodies,” she added, laughing. “I’m not a serial killer or anything.”

“Right.”

“Do you mind if I go to the bathroom?”

“Go ahead.”

As she walked away, with a perfectly seductive and smooth walk, I felt the same sense of butterflies I had had at the beginning of the coffee date, but it was now clouded by the sense that Marcia had a couple of screws loose.

viii. Marcia

I needed to stop myself. I needed to stop before my work friend thought I was some kind of deranged psychopath.

In the bathroom, I tried to breathe. Tried to reset. When I came back out, my eyes were stinging. I hadn’t meant to cry. I hadn’t meant to say half the things I’d said.

Phillip reached out a hand. “You alright?”

“What are you talking about?” I said, wiping my eye. “It’s not like I was crying in the bathroom because I can’t hold a normal conversation.” I laughed nervously, too nervously. The words slipped out before I could stop them.

“Sorry,” I whispered. “I’m so embarrassed.”

“Oh, don’t be,” he said. “I’m sorry if I seemed weirded out. I wasn’t sure what to say. It’s an emotional topic.”

“I’m pretty used to people thinking I’m crazy,” I murmured.

“Oh, so am I.”

“Really?”

“Sure. I was abducted by aliens.”

I stared. “Wait, what?”

He winced. Someone turned to look at him.

“You wanna . . . go on a walk?” he asked.

Did . . . I want to go on a walk?

“Uh, sure,” I said. “Actually, there’s this video I was watching this morning about something like that.”

“About aliens?”

“Yeah. I’ll tell you while we walk.”

This was a weird date. We were two weird people on a weird date, and it made me feel weird. Happy, but weird.



ix. Phillip

We stood and headed toward the door. Keep it together, Phillip. Don't tell her too much. Especially not about the government experimenting on you. Or your powers. That might be a bit much.

Right.

"So they did some kind of experiment on you?" she asked. "Gave you superpowers?"

"That's what I think."

"Huh. What's your, uh, your superpower?"

"It's sort of like—I can make people feel whatever I'm feeling. If I want to. It's not on all the time."

"Weird," she whispered.

Really weird. But if it was true, maybe that was why she was starting to like me.

"Here," I said. "I'll show you. Stay here."

I crossed the street toward a storefront where a young couple sat on a bench. Pretending to look in the window, I let my mind drift to the strange things we'd witnessed—Grace's premonitions, the scientist, the explosion. The couple's faces tightened with worry. They backed away from each other, glancing around, paranoid.

I calmed myself and told myself a joke. *What kind of music is a balloon scared of? Pop music.*

They groaned, laughing despite themselves. I tried something better—the time the chief had a giant piece of salami stuck to his teeth through a whole meeting, and nobody had the gall to say a word. I laughed, they laughed, people driving by laughed.

I looked back at Marcia. She shook her head with that radiant—somewhat creepy—smile, arms crossed. The couple caught sight of each other and started kissing. Marcia blushed and looked away. The couple mirrored us, pulling apart, embarrassed.

I jogged back across the road.

"Sorry about that last part," I said. "I got carried away."

"That was—really weird," she said.

I smirked. "Weirder than you talking all sunshiny about lynchings, denying you're a serial killer, and running away?"

She smirked too. "Maybe we're even. So—have you heard about Dean Heyerdahl?"

"Heard of him? Hell, I read his blog every day. Is that the video you wanted to show me?"

"Yeah. It's of the explosion yesterday. It's so weird. These cows running around, then these people come out, and there's this weird infrared heat wave. And then the sinkhole. In the official footage, the explosion comes before the sinkhole, but in the video, it happens after. It's so weird. What did they say about it yesterday?"

"Let's go over by the creek," I said. "Too many people around."

We walked to the small creek in the middle of town and sat down.

"I don't know what's going on," I said. "They had some CIA fella—Agent Carter—and he told us the stock story about a dirty bomb. Then he takes Grace aside and tells her there's some foreign power attacking us, and they wanna keep it secret. But some scientist—Dr. Whitebalm—gives me a whole different story. Leaves me with a business card. And last night, one of the people in government custody broke out. And let me tell you—she was weird when we found her. Acted like she was drugged."

"Oh my god," Marcia breathed, almost like maybe a chill ran up her spine.

"Maybe you should reach out to Heyerdahl," she said softly. "He could get the truth out there."

I smirked again.

"Wait," she said. "Do you . . . know Heyerdahl?"

"I may," I said. "How good are you at keeping secrets?"

"Not too bad."

"You got any plans today?"

"I was supposed to get coffee with my coworker, but I can cancel. He's probably tired."

"Huh. Well, why don't you see if you can reschedule? I've got someone you'd probably like to meet."

x. Grace

A small house sat beside the highway, quiet and dark. I slammed the car door and hurried to the gate,

jabbing the doorbell over and over.

“Come on. Wake up!”

After a long moment, a tired voice crackled through the speaker. “Hello? Who’s there? Phillip?”

“It’s me,” I said. “Grace. I need to talk to you.”

“Is there a way this discussion can happen . . . in a few hours?”

“No. It’s too important.”

A pause. Then: “Give me a second.”

I waited, pacing, anxious and impatient. Dusty finally opened the door, dragging his feet.

“Let me unlock the gate for you,” he muttered. “You’ve had a long night too, huh?”

“You don’t know the half of it.”

“Where’s Phillip?”

“On some kind of a date with a coworker. I don’t know.”

He finished unlocking the gate and waved me inside. “I was just about to prepare some oatmeal. Can I interest you in some? I can start up a pot of coffee too, if you like.”

“Sure. I could use some coffee. What kind of oatmeal do you have?”

He disappeared into a closet and returned pushing a huge blue barrel on a dolly.

“I buy my oats in bulk,” he said. “Most brand-name oatmeal manufacturers are too tied to the military-industrial complex for me to trust them.”

“I see.”

He set water on the stove. “Let me get some water running on the stove. Sorry about the state of the house. Didn’t expect anyone to come over today. What’s the matter?”

“I don’t know where to start,” I said. “First off, on Friday, the chief pulled me aside and warned me not to look into cold cases involving the water treatment facility. It was . . . sketchy. I played it off, but it made me uncomfortable. He didn’t want me looking into Mary Ann’s murder—‘for my own safety,’ he said.”

Dusty frowned. “Suspicious. So he must know they’re hiding something.”

“Oh, they’re *hiding* something. Yesterday we got called in to run security at the field hospital.”

“I remember that.”

“Well, this guy—Agent Milton Carter—he’s convinced *you’re* some kind of foreign agent.”

Dusty snorted.

“And he fed everyone the dirty-bomb story. But then, when we actually got to the field hospital, he and this other lady doctor—I can’t remember her name—they each gave us different stories. He told me that it was a rail gun. She told Phillip the sinkhole was caused by a wormhole device.”

“A wormhole device? A rail gun?” Dusty nodded slowly. “They must be feeding you different, equally implausible stories to see whether or not you’ll pass them along to me. By the way, do you prefer dark roast or light?”

“Dark, please.”

“Alright. Sorry to interrupt you. Go on.”

“You’re fine. They were telling us different stories. Clearly there was no dirty bomb,” I said. “So we couldn’t figure out why they were taking all the witnesses into custody.”

“They likely wanted to verify if they knew anything about the aliens,” Dusty said. “Or they themselves were aliens.”

“Sure. I’d buy that.” I took a breath. “Anyway, I’d had a migraine all day. And when we were driving home . . .” My voice shook. “I heard this voice I didn’t recognize in the back seat of my car.”

Dusty leaned forward. “Yes?”

“It was this . . . monster. Looked like a kind of walking corpse. And he told us to get out of the car. He led us toward a field to burn us alive. And then he froze, completely still. And we—we went back in time.”

Dusty blinked.

“I don’t know how else to explain it. Phillip and I were suddenly back in the car, talking like normal. And he couldn’t remember what just happened. But I could remember. And it kept happening, over and over, all night long. I could remember what it felt like to be in that forest, to be burnt alive. Tiny moments kept repeating, but the details kept changing.”

My hands shook. “It gave me this awful headache. I’ve never been in *so much* pain in my life. I thought I was losing my mind. You think I’m crazy, don’t you? *Goddammit*. If anyone was gonna believe me—”

“I believe you,” Dusty said quietly. “I’m just . . . trying to think. This monster—he didn’t have a fishing pole, did he?”

I froze. “He—he did. I remember. I remember seeing him right after the explosion. He walked across the soccer field.”

“I think I saw him this morning,” Dusty whispered. “I was still half asleep. I couldn’t move.”

Silence.

“So he was real,” I said.

“We both saw him.”

“Whoever he was.”

“More like whatever.”

Dusty rubbed his chin. “Hm. I need to post about this. Some kind of alien invasion using . . . using time travel as a weapon,” he murmured.

“What I don’t get,” I said, “is why it kept restarting. One time, when he froze, his eye flew out of his head, I swear!”

“So something must have been fighting him,” Dusty said. “Interesting. Perhaps something the government doesn’t want us to know about.”

“You really think so?”

“Yes. Absolutely. Some kind of a battle between advanced alien civilizations. I need to write all this down.”

The water began to boil.

“Shit,” Dusty said. “Do you mind scooping some oatmeal into the pot?”

“Uh, sure. Two scoops?”

“Perfect. And help yourself to the coffee.”

He hurried to his computer, logging in, trying to drown out whatever voice kept haunting him. Muttering under his breath, “How to piece all this together?”

He began typing out a list of the key points. I stood beside him, helping him parse through a few drafts, clarifying details, correcting timelines. Eventually he had something he liked—a working theory: Earth had been attacked by a space-faring race with the power to travel through time.

He made sure to emphasize that it was only a theory, based on anecdotal reports from a colleague. And he invited anyone who had seen the time traveler to come forward.

“Alright,” Dusty said, tapping his keyboard. “It’s posted. Thanks for taking over with the oatmeal.”

“Sure,” I said. “Not exactly how I planned to spend my Sunday morning, but happy to help.”

“Thank you.”

I glanced around the kitchen. “I hope you don’t mind me asking—I could help noticing—is there a reason all your bowls are from the 37th Annual Veterinary Catheter Manufacturers Conference in Boise, Idaho?”

“Well, actually—”

The doorbell rang.

Dusty frowned. “Hmm. Wonder who that could be.” He shuffled to the intercom. “Hello? Who’s there?”

“It’s me, Dusty,” Phillip said. “Brought along a friend. Said she’s a big fan of yours. Thought you might be able to help us out.”

Dusty raised an eyebrow. “A big fan of mine, eh? Hm.”

I peered through the blinds, and groaned. “Marcia. She’s a receptionist at the station.”

“Can she be trusted?” Dusty asked.

“She’s a little bit of an airhead,” I muttered. “Sort of gossipy.”

“You still there, Dusty?” Phillip called.

“I’m still here. Listen, before I let anyone come onto my property, I need to speak with them. Can you have your friend come to the microphone?”

xi. Dusty

A woman’s voice came through the speaker—louder than necessary. “Uh, hi! This is Marcia Flemming.

I'm from Wisconsin. How are you?"

"I'm—"

"Can you hear me?"

"Yes, I can hear you, Miss Flemming. What's your occupation?"

"I'm a receptionist at the police station. Am I speaking too loud?"

"A little bit."

"OK. I'll try to speak quieter."

"Thank you."

"Is this a good volume?"

"Sure, sure. Anyway, what did you do before that?"

"I was studying for my Master's at the University of Indiana."

"A Master's? In what?"

"Art History."

I turned to Grace, gesturing to my phone, say quietly, "I'm Googling her now."

"Are you still there?" Marcia asked.

"I'm still here. I'm just double-checking your information. Are you the same Marcia Flemming who wrote an article in *Early Popular Visual Culture*? On . . . lynchings, I believe?"

Grace blinked. "Lynchings? Huh."

"That's correct," Marcia said. "It's such an honor that you read my article. It's such an interesting topic! Oh, um, did you look up my name?"

"I did. Now, how did you end up here in the Hill Country?"

"Well, I thought I had a curator job lined up, but it fell through. So I applied and took the first thing I could."

"Right." I nodded to Grace, and said quietly, "I can't find anything suspicious online. She is who she says she is, more likely than not."

Marcia's voice brightened. "I read your blog. I've watched the video from yesterday at least twenty times already, and I really think you're onto something."

"What do *you* think, Grace?" I asked, pausing the intercom, looking seriously at her.

"What do *I* think? I'm surprised she has a Master's, I guess. But I'm telling you, she's a wolf in sheep's clothing."

"Hmm. Well, the house has a Faraday cage built into the walls. We can sweep her for recording devices, but the government can't even tap her cell phone from in here."

"I was wondering why I couldn't get service," Grace muttered.

"It's for your own safety, and mine," I said. "Anyway, if Phillip trusts her, I trust his judgment. Let's see what she wants."

"Hello?" Marcia called.

I tapped the intercom again. "I'll come out and let you in."

I hurried out the door and into the yard. I could see why Grace hated Marcia almost immediately, and at the same time I understood why Phillip trusted her. She was beautiful. Almost impossibly beautiful. I froze in place, looking at her skeptically. Someone like that could easily have been sent to infiltrate my house. Phillip had probably already told her everything. Just look at him. Lovestruck. Hopeless. *Pathetic*.

"Hey," she said. "You must be Dusty, huh?"

"I am, yes." I swallowed. "You're Marcia. Right."

"She's trustworthy," Phillip insisted.

"Yah, I'm sure she is." I folded my arms. "So, *Marcia*. Before I let you into my house, what interests you in my blog?"

xii. Grace

Marcia launched into a rambling explanation about aliens, ghosts, a camping trip at Lake Superior, and a haunted childhood home. She kept apologizing, kept talking, kept trying to sound helpful.

"If you don't want me here, I can just head home," she said.

I stood behind Dusty, arms crossed. I couldn't believe Phillip brought her here. Today of all days. This

was a police investigation, not a fun coffee-date field trip.

Dusty finally unlocked the gate. “Well, I’ll let you in. Sorry to put you through so much trouble. But you can never be too careful.”

Inside, Phillip asked, “Did Grace tell you what happened last night?”

“About the time traveler?” Dusty said.

“Time traveler? No, I mean about the girl.”

“Here, please take off your shoes when you come in. What girl, Grace?” Dusty asked.

“I was getting to it,” I said sharply. “But we got caught up with the time traveler. So, Marcia, fancy seeing you here.”

Marcia smirked at me & raised her eyebrow. “Nice to see you,” she sneered.

xiii. Marcia

I tried to keep my smile steady. Grace looked like she wanted to strangle me. Dusty looked like he wanted to dissect me. Phillip looked—hopeful. God help him.

“I’ve noticed strange things since I moved out here,” I said. “One day I saw all these people get on a big bus at five in the morning. Weird-looking bus. Black windows. And a few weeks ago, I heard the weirdest sounds in the woods. Kind of rumbling out in the middle of nowhere. Not an earthquake.

“Yes, um—” Dusty started.

“I *always* take notes,” continued Marcia. “That’s how I don’t forget what I did that day.”

“Well—” Dusty tried again.

“I keep track of things I see,” insisted Marcia. “Irregularities. I have *lots* of notebooks at my house, if you want to look at them?”

“I’d love to!” Dusty said. “But as I was saying—”

“Some of them I might not want to show you, but the ones where the people got on the bus, I know right where it is. It’s in a blue composition notebook—”

“Good to know!” Dusty nearly yelled. “But anyway, one of my inside sources reports that the complex under the water treatment facility spans several dozen miles. They did mind-control experiments out there in the 1960s. Now they do testing on aliens. Have you ever stopped by the Arby’s?”

“I did,” I said. “I got the strangest feelings there from one of the chefs. He kept looking at me sort of funny.”

“It’s got a hidden entrance to the underground lab,” Dusty said. “So does the H-E-B in Fredericksburg.”

“How do you know all this?” I asked.

“Well, I can’t exactly tell you that. Just having met you and all.”

He waved a hand. “Anyway, you all were saying something about a girl. Please fill me in.”

xiv. Grace

“Meagan Cortez,” Phillip said. “You remember her from the sinkhole?”

“Yes. What about her?”

“She snuck out of the base last night,” Phillip said. “Stole someone’s ID. Went out to some house in Pioneer Hills. Druggy type of place. They smoked some weed, fooled around. Looked innocuous at first. Then she collapsed all of a sudden.”

“And when she got back up,” I added, “she vomited everywhere.”

Dusty steepled his fingers. “Interesting. *Very* interesting.”

“The government took her and her brother into custody,” Phillip said.

“Well, that’s peculiar,” Dusty murmured. “I don’t know what to make of it yet. What do we know about her?”

“Twenty-four,” Phillip said. “Works at Walmart. They told us she has Asperger’s.”

“Asperger’s isn’t a diagnosis anymore,” Marcia said quietly. “They just call it ADS Level 1.”

“Well, they told us it was Asperger’s,” Phillip said. “Who knows?”

“When we saw her last night,” Phillip continued, “she looked bruised.”

“Somehow she was present at the sinkhole,” Dusty said. “And appears to have been injured in

government custody. Perhaps given some kind of a substance which induced vomiting. Maybe one of the chemicals they developed back in the MKUltra days.”

“They even say it’s not Asperger’s in the *DSM-5*. So her diagnosis is old,” Marcia muttered.

“She wasn’t in good shape, that’s for sure,” I said. “But she didn’t fight when they picked her up.”

“The look in her eyes when it happened too,” Phillip said. “She wasn’t scared.”

“Right! She looked angry,” I said. “Like she was ready to kill someone.”

“I wouldn’t read too much into that,” Marcia said. “It could have been a sensory thing.”

“Her brother was scared,” Phillip added. “Looked to be tweaking a little bit.”

Dusty nodded. “This is interesting information. I think it warrants further investigation.”

“Agreed,” I said.

“I’m down,” Marcia said. “If you want to investigate today.”

“No, no,” Dusty said. “We can’t just rush into it. And we can’t all go at once. It’ll draw too much attention. Phillip, Grace, how about tomorrow you visit the house you say Meagan stopped at. Interview other folks who maybe know who she is. Marcia, see what you can find about Meagan online.

“Right! I can do that,” said Marcia eagerly. “I can try to look up that doctor too. See what I can find.”

“Good thinking. While you all work on that, I’ll keep watching government hotspots for any activity. We can reconvene tomorrow night.”

“Oh, no,” I groaned. “I’m not staying up until midnight again. I did that almost every damned night last week. I need some—” I yawned. “I need some goddamned sleep.”

“Grace,” Dusty said, “we all need sleep. But this is important. It could be a matter of life or death for Meagan Cortez.”

“If you really do just want to go home after work,” Phillip said gently, “I can fill him in on whatever we find.”

“Would you?”

“Of course.”

“OK. Thank you. In that case, sure, reconvene at two in the morning behind a McDonald’s dumpster for all I care.”

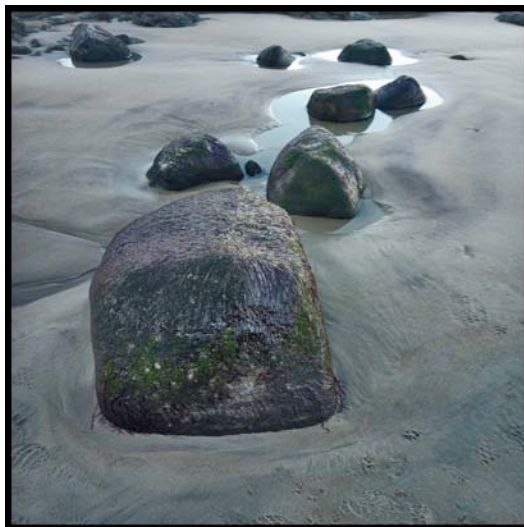
“That doesn’t sound very safe!” protested Marcia. “I don’t like that idea.”

“How about Anschutz Bar and Restaurant, at 11:30 p.m.?” Dusty said. “If we eat and drink in public, it will show our enemies that we’re not afraid.”

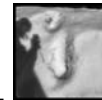
“Really? Does that work?” Marcia asked.

“Always,” Dusty grinned.

“Sounds like a plan,” Phillip said.



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.*

xxix. Telling Travels

Tonight we do what's often done when lost
loved ones reunite. We tell our long travels
from shared then to recovering now.
Build our path new with words, with gestures,
blood-bricks laid thence to hereon. The salt & spice
of memories to excite the senses to presence.

When the King's tale falls silent, as on we croon
of course, Roddy clears his voice & tries his turn.
"There is much I still don't rightly remember,
or feel clash of one memory with another, but
one thing I recall like a salve." We eagerly watch
his face through Gate-Keeper's Tripod Camera glass.

"Hmmm! Cackle! Laaa!" he cries to our remembering
delight. We all join in happily while Gate-Keeper
keeps crooning & steadily cranking his magickal device.
"Our shared Song of Heroes & Hope," Roddy says.
"Twas all of our compass to follow true
to this wondrous place, & so many friends!

"It helped me to remember some things
after we were all flung from the Cave of the Beast,"
says Asoyadonna softly. We all nod her go on.
"I *knew* we had to find each other, that we
were *supposed* to find each other." Silent, but not yet done.
"Not that we *failed* to save the world, just not succeeded yet."



We all agree, of course, & awhile croon on
 together till Odom talks. “And we can’t do this
 alone, just us, anymore.” “Save the Many Worlds,”
 several of us say, & he nods, slowly, lingering his turn
 to speak. “We are here because *so many* travelled
 us here. Heroes all kinds, big & small.”

More crooning awhile. Then it seems like
 Francisco is talking before we know it.
 “Going back to go on, like this, is for more
 than just us.” Crooning on, gathering his words.
 “We loved & left so many to come together as
 we did.” Nods.

Suddenly his sober words snapped
 by a great throaty yawn. Everyone laughs.

Dreamwalker now speaks up. “The night
 won’t be long in going. Shall we cluster up as
 we so often did on our many travelled ways?”
 None debate this. We Six Brother-Heroes & our dear
 seventh Gate-Keeper croon on a fair while, more
 loose & ragged now—

Till the Crooning herself seems to salve us
 to sleep, & a soft, peaceful handoff to morning light.

* * * * *

xxx. Come Morning

Morning light & the *whoosh-whoosh-whooshing*
 of the nearby Deeper Deeper Sea, & so delivered
 soft to waking. And reck the many others
 nearby, their lovely crooning hours fading too.

Smiling, I quiet gesture my Brothers away down
 the Beach, not yet to stir with the rest.
 Keeping our own company for a bit longer.
 Our reunion phasing along to some else.

Now Roddy takes the lead to bring us along
to the many-blooms-covered Half-Moon Bridge
that he & Gate-Keeper had climbed & clung to
during that long Wobble passing.

“How we first beheld each other, Brother,
after so countless long,” I smile toward his strong back
ahead of me. He turns to me, him the biggest,
bravest, softest, kindest of men. We embrace anew.

Then quietly appears amongst us Princess Chrisakah,
no royal garb cloaking her sweet quirk;
more powerful true in her jeans &
sneakers than any crown to deflate her.

“We’re gathering our circle together again,
dear friends. Please come, & let us celebrate
all of you side by side again!” Her pretty eyes
twinkle, as she parts us to our own deciding.



* * * * *





Notes on Hinduism

(Part 1)

i. Introduction

According to the basic Hindu philosophy, reality comprises these six attributes:

1. A world that includes infinite galaxies horizontally, infinite tiers vertically, and infinite cycles temporally.
2. A moral world in which the law of cause and effect, or *karma*, is never in abeyance.
3. An average world, neither precisely good nor damningly evil, that can never rival or replace paradise despite the best intentions.
4. A world constituted of *maya*, illusory and tricky, passing off multiplicity and duality as the basic reality when in fact this is a deceptive falsehood.
5. A training ground in which people can develop their positive karma, purify their negative karma, and work toward a positive rebirth.
6. A world that is *lila*, a play or dance of the divine, which, though the Earth be hideous at times is, in the end, always with us.

One unique feature of Hinduism is that it did not have any individual founder. Poems and aphorisms of holy men were transmitted orally for thousands of years, and finally codified in writing around 1500 B.C.E. in the *Vedas*, which were written, over a thousand years before the Bible appeared. The *Vedas* were followed by the more formal *Upanishads*, of which the culmination was the *Bhagavad Gita*.

The key point to register here is that Hinduism is *not polytheistic*. Not truly, anyway. The *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, and modern religious practice all have in common a belief in Brahman, which for them is a bit abstract in contemplation but nevertheless can be translated directly as “God.” So, despite the many hundreds of quasi-deities the Hindus worship, Hinduism yet really has only one God—Brahman. The lower deities are most definitely considered by all to be various lesser manifestations of the one God.

The lesser gods and goddesses that are actively worshipped are meant to make it easier for people to approach and incorporate Brahman in their daily lives. Usually a person will pray to a god that has special meaning for them, for whatever reason. Hindus believe that these lesser gods and goddesses have been sent to Earth to help individuals find and relate to Brahman in their lives, and to purify their karma and prepare their souls for their next incarnation. Some key gods that are actively and widely prayed to are: Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, Saraswati, Parvati, Hanuman, Krishna, Rama, and Ganesh.

Each of these gods represents something different, some special quality, about the world. Brahma is the creator. His wife, Saraswati, is the goddess of wisdom, representing knowledge and creativity in the world. Shiva is the destroyer, but is celebrated because even though he causes dissolution, he is also responsible for the re-creation of life in the cosmos. Though all these gods and goddesses represent some different quality or set of qualities, they are all manifestations of Brahman. It doesn't matter which god a particular follower wishes to worship; it is well understood that in the end, it all goes back to God.

ii. Vedanta

One aspect of Hinduism that seems rather peculiar to most Westerners is the notion that existence, even in its very suboptimal state, is essentially perfect. Nothing need be changed. This is especially promulgated by the Vedanta philosophy, and it bears taking a look at, because it reveals some essential beliefs and perspectives of the Hindu faith.

Our true nature, believe the Hindus, is perfect. Or, put another way, our true nature is Brahman, and Brahman is perfect. So we need not pray, or feel sorry for ourselves, or wish the hell of Earth existence would improve. Brahman is part of all of us, deep down, and our Atman, or witness consciousness, or Self (“self” capitalized is how one often finds it expressed in the literature), is both one with us and one with God. So if this is the case, logic dictates that nothing can be imperfect. If God is in everything, and this is all part of a divine plan, how could true and inherent imperfection manifest at all?

We are taught that the reason the world *seems* so imperfect is the phenomenon of *maya*. Maya has several definitions, but the one that concerns us here is its principle of obscuring. Maya is like a shroud—it is that which makes reality an illusion—and conceals the true spiritual character of reality. Maya is in full force on Earth, and all of those who see tragedy in the world, from ordinary Hindus to uninformed Westerners, are said to be under its spell. It is not postulated just where maya comes from, or what it really is; but it is intimately interconnected with all phenomena on Earth and in the cosmos. There is a remedy for this, however.

If we attain awareness of our true nature—the goal of every spiritual Hindu—the veil of maya can be lifted from our eyes and souls. We can finally see clearly. And once we manifest Brahman in our Atman, we see that yes, indeed, experience on Earth is a perfection. This is where karma and attachment come in.

If we busy ourselves with being miserable about our lives and the world, we have created a great deal of attachment. In fact, any form of disapproval with the way things are and, honestly speaking, have pretty much always been, is a strong attachment to the world that a spiritual practitioner in India would eschew in the strongest possible way. This strong attachment to phenomena is the real issue, not the world itself. We multiply our negative, egoic karma by being attached to things in the world, and can only purify ourselves and our karma when we have let go of attachment.

So if we can free ourselves of attachment, and realize the God-nature in our very Selves, there is nothing any longer, no phenomenon, that has the capacity for being imperfect. Everything just is. Pretty much as it has always been, and will be. There is, in the long run, no way to consciously improve it. So work on yourself, do your duty and do not shirk the world, and you will be free of attachment and have pure karma. All this probably will still not convince most Westerners, but it is the way Hindus see it, and perhaps they are just a little more free because of it.

The way Hindus release themselves from maya, and come to appreciate the perfect nature of phenomena, is by studying Hindu philosophy—particularly the yogas. The yogas are spiritual practices that enable one over time, with diligence, to find Brahman within. A “yogi” is someone who has mastered one or more of the four yogic branches, and has usually devoted her- or himself to educating others and bringing them to spiritual mastery, knowledge, and bliss.

In conclusion, the primary way Hindus reason about perfection is by invoking *Atman*. Atman, we are told, is the pure witness consciousness inside of us, not precisely a soul but a constant, pure consciousness that makes up our Self. Atman can never be damaged or changed and it, itself, is literal perfection. If one is Atman, one is already perfect, and so is everyone else. So if we can realize Atman and Brahman, there is simply no capacity—ontologically, existentially, naturally, socially, psychologically, etc.—for any sort of imperfection to exist. This is almost abstract, but then, have you conquered real yoga?

iii. Karma

Karma is the law of cause and effect. There are very few Indians who do not believe in its truth. It states that every single action we make—in past lives, in the current life, and in future lives—is a cause that has a corresponding effect. Karma is not so simple, as perhaps it is believed to be in the West, as doing good deeds and doing bad deeds. Our vanilla version in the West is to say that someone who has done a lot of good deeds will have good karma and go to Heaven, and those who have done bad deeds will go to Hell.

The truth is, it's not so simple. As we know: “The road to Hell is paved with good intentions.” If a person initiates a causal chain that begins in the best and most compassionate of circumstances, but it turns out to do a great deal of harm—and the person is attached to this outcome—then negative karma will be reflected back onto this otherwise more or less good actor. We have to realize that the law of cause and effect is impersonal.

A more straightforward example involves the telling of lies. Someone may utter a perfectly innocent white lie that deceives someone in the most minute way. But then that deceived person may go on to base future decisions on the seemingly innocuous little lie. And this can go on to cause a whole web of lies and mistakes and confusion. So karma is not so simple as we like to think in the West. A person could be nailed with a lot of negative karma most of which had little or nothing to do with them. But their ego behavior was responsible for the whole chain of misfortune.

However, individuals who are responsible and devoted to positive karma will most often not fall into these traps. And they will have the opportunity, because they are not embroiled or entangled in tricky webs of karma, to have a very positive rebirth. Once one rises to the level of Atman and Brahman, karma no longer precisely exists, because one is pure, and because one can see the whole web of karma and avoid entanglements.

Atman refers to the true self of an individual. It does not quite mean “soul,” because it does not have personal attributes—it has no contact with body and mind. It is pure consciousness, a spark of which is attached to all souls. So Hindus believe in the soul, indeed, but Atman refers to something slightly different. In any case, Hindus believe in an immortal soul—the oldest existing religion to do so. There is a true Self, and a soul, and Brahman (God) underlying all phenomena.

The Hindus believe we all have an eternal Self that houses, if you will, an eternal soul—what Sri Aurobindo calls the “Psychic Being.” All animals have Atman and a soul, and can reincarnate as humans and vice-versa. If one has particularly tricky karma to work out, it is not unfeasible that they will reincarnate as some type of animal. On the other hand, it is said that animals usually do not reincarnate as humans. In any case, Atman is the principle that illuminates everything in the cosmos, including all animate and inanimate matter and energy. All Nature is One.

iv. Moksha

Moksha is a concept that refers to the liberation from the cycle of birth and death, known also as *samsara*. It is the central goal of Hindus to attain this state. In Hinduism, there is indeed a Kingdom of God, and Hindus very much wish to attain it by purifying themselves of all karma and freeing the soul of *samsara*. Once this ultimate purification has taken place, there are no more births and deaths, but only sat-chit-ananda, or Truth-Consciousness-Bliss. But this state of being is not easy to attain.

In order to gain freedom from karma and rebirth, one has to become what is in essence a perfect being. And this is not easy or common. One must have mastered yoga, attaining oneness with the absolute and with Brahman, and one must have a complete mastery and total understanding of the *Bhagavad Gita*. All desires and ignorance must be overcome (possibly several lifetimes previously). Coupled with yoga, one must be an absolute wizard at meditation. One must be able to realize all the possible states and all the goals of meditation before one can advance. So the common, public notion

that a bit of karmic effort is necessary for moksha is perhaps naïve. Much more is in fact required.

Correspondingly, the karmic picture is in reality far from straightforward. Heavenly beings may take rebirth on Earth, souls can go into a kind of hibernation until it can be decided what to do with them, non-samsaric beings can exist without perfect karma, etc. So the reality is complex.

The paradox in all of this is that one must not strive to achieve it. If one has attachment to moksha, one cannot realize it. A prerequisite of karmic perfection is that one have no attachments, desires, or ignorance. One must live as a being who has “no thought for the morrow.” Gandhi once said, “My life is my message.” This is true of someone who actually attains moksha—his or her life or being is the message, is the credential, and it is never thought of as noble or compassionate, but simply as necessary, with no attachment at all.

v. Monotheism

As has been noted, at the bottom of things Hinduism is a monotheistic religion. Almost any Westerner would ask, “How can this be?” Well, worshipping different forms of the Hindu gods Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva opens practitioners to an understanding of the forces of Nature, as well as love of the one God, Brahman.

Each of the dozens of idols worshipped by Hindus is a manifestation of one of the three gods, which, taken together, are considered to be the fundamental manifestation of Brahman. This enables the worshipper to express love, faith and total devotion to, as well as to gain knowledge and understanding of, the tripartite god and through it, the one universal God. It is a matter of worshipping a representation that is close to oneself in attributes or character. This is the essence of bhakti yoga—the yoga of the path of loving devotion to God.

vi. Pursuit of Pleasure

Hindu society is perfectly comfortable with the pursuit of pleasure. Indeed, despite the popular perception in the West, the goal there is not for everyone to renounce worldly possessions, retire to the forest, and lead an ascetic life; it is assumed that most people will not and should not do this. Most Indians—India being the home of Hinduism—are householders of some kind, with families, and while many or most have at least some religion, it is believed to be sanctioned by God that they live in the world in conventional ways.

The monastic life is left to those few individuals who are spiritually exceptional, and everyone is quite comfortable with this. This says nothing of the caste system, which is weakening but not dead in India. It adds complexities, but the general characterization given here is satisfactory for now. Full circle, if pleasure is what you want, seek it with integrity and intelligence. It is expected in general that in the long run pleasure will not bring lasting satisfaction.

In householders, the generally assumed highest good is wealth, fame, and power. When the allure of pleasure fades, this new goal is believed to be a worthy alternative, especially because it involves not only the individual, but a whole slew of social relations (including family). Worldly achievements are not only not rejected in some general ascetic sense, but are encouraged for those whose goal it is to run a prosperous household and discharge civic duties responsibly. But these, too, lose their luster. It seems that, despite achieving success, the prosperous householder does not find lasting happiness.

For those who have gone beyond seeking pleasure for its own sake, and becoming a prosperous citizen with a large family and social responsibilities, the path turns to renunciation. One suspects or sees that there is more to life, more to Nature, than one is now experiencing. Many householders in their later years seek the guidance of a guru, all the time retaining their numerous and time-consuming responsibilities. It is certainly not frowned upon, and is positively encouraged, when people do this.

In their waning years, people often turn to a deeper appreciation of the Hindu religion, and

this is considered a natural progression of a well-lived life. This is certainly not to say that middle-aged or older women and men retire to the forest; they remain wherever they are, and seek the guidance of a guru, or practice bhakti or karma yoga, or what have you. All in all, this is considered the ideal in Indian society.

In the end, pleasure, success, and even duty to the community are not enough for us; they do not give us what we really want. And so the schools of Hinduism offer the most robust alternatives. One may eventually go from the finite to the infinite; from desire to Nirvana; from dissatisfaction to renunciation; from separation from reality to the most powerful yoga; from ignorance to knowledge; from misery to bliss; from atheism and materialism to sat-chit-ananda—Truth-Consciousness-Bliss, the core of Brahman (God).

vii. Suffering and Disorder

The Hindus believe that the world is full of suffering and disorder, has always been full of suffering and disorder and, despite our best intentions, will always be full of suffering and disorder. They feel that this is due to the dynamics of *karma*, and that, at any given time, there *must* be a vast negative quantity of it. Ego will always be creating damaging karma and, for as many people there are who are cleansing their karma, there will be an equal or greater number who are just mucking things up even further. Utopia is an impossible pipe dream as long as humans are humans.

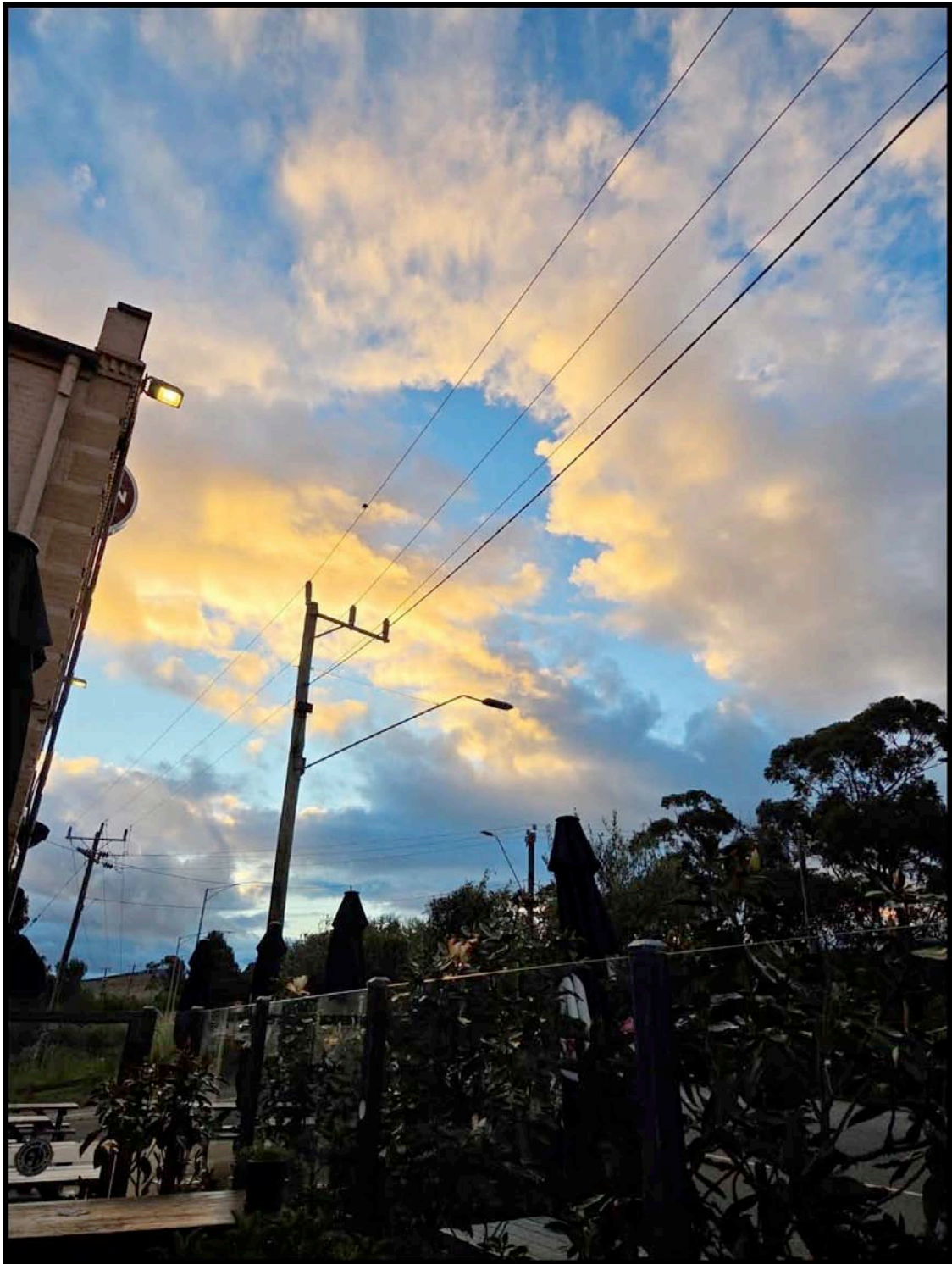
In some sense, life on Earth is a test for humans. Just like in any school, not everyone will ace the test, and you'll have people at every point along the bell curve, from A to F. And you always will. The only thing to do is to work on oneself, to become less egotistical, more compassionate, and to seek God and, in some cases, to help others do the same.

In the end, the fate of humanity is to remain more or less in the same mixed-up, average state. Whether or not one accepts this view, the test, at least, is extremely effective.

To be continued in *Cenacle* | 131 | June 2026

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Madeline Taylah

Madelaine Taylah



There Are the Clouds

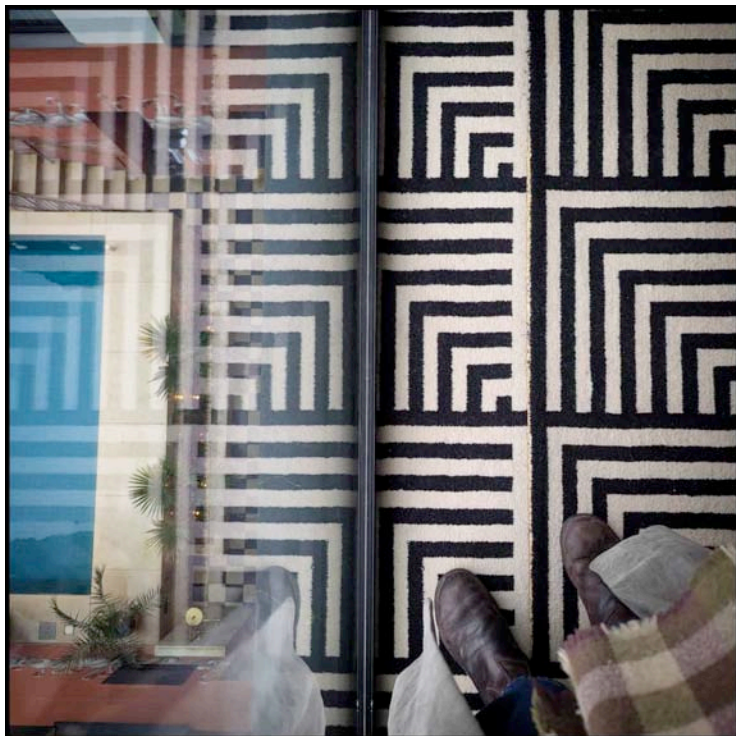
There are the clouds, and then there are my hands.
Somehow, they feel further away.
I hold my palms out to catch the cascading leaves
that rain from the autumnal canopies above.
Some fall gently. Others are ripped away in
mini tornados of dust and dirt.

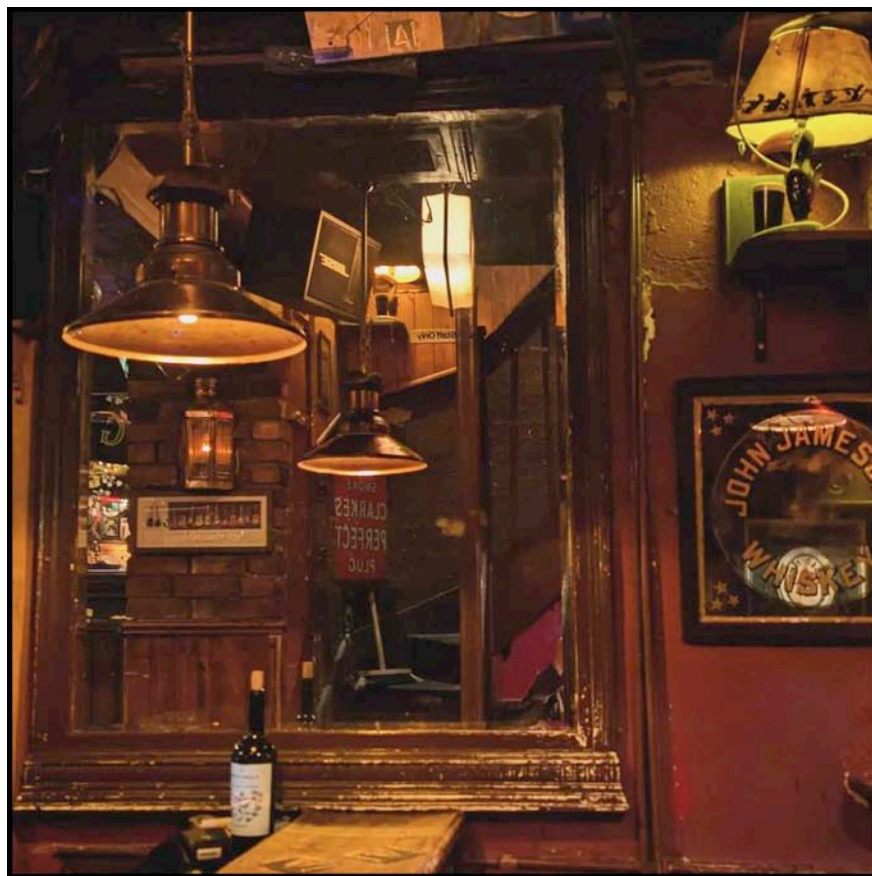
I try to listen to the wind, but it doesn't want to talk to me today.
It only wants to play with the trees. I stay still, and silent,
watch them giggle and sway. I want to giggle and sway with them.
I imagine myself floating in the stream, weightless.
The water moss brushes my fingertips,
sending shivers of pleasure down my body.

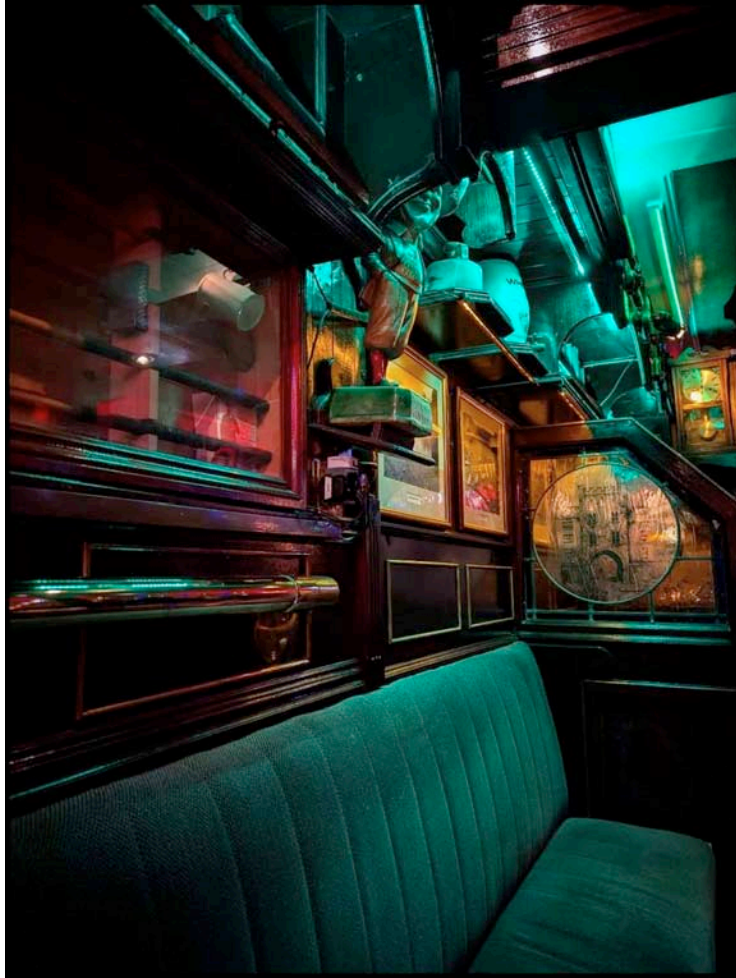
I tip my head all the way back until the frigid cold licks my forehead,
and I take a breath deep from within my chest. Aching and sharp.
Reeds curl their way around my wrists and ankles, but I do not flinch.
Do nothing but breathe, slowly and deeply, as they begin to lower me
into the depths of the glittering water.

* * * * *

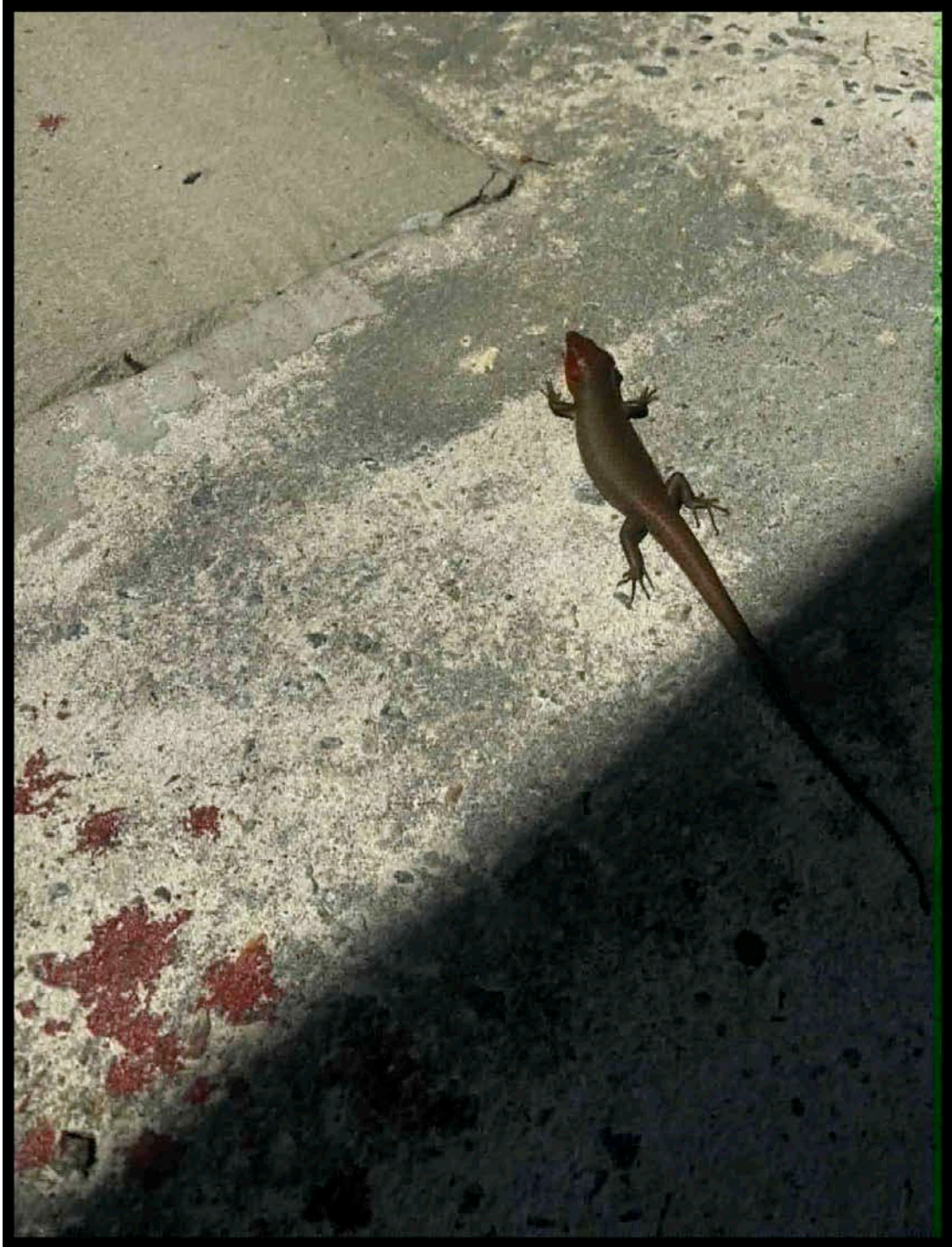
Epi Rogan











Tamara Miles

Tamara Miles



The Radiologist's Love Poem

Your breasts are heterogeneously dense,
which may obscure small masses.
Globes of glandular tissue obscure
the reading. Less fat than fiber.

Cancer also appears white.

Tumors may hide like men behind trees
or huddled on the street
when you are walking home, who peer
around and catcall.

Your orbs are slightly more at risk,
their clouds cumulonimbus,
cumulous, Latin for swell. Your breasts
have been known to block out the sun.

In Early Christianity, dense clouds
symbolized intense collective grief
or the hidden divine.

Beloved, we are gathered here to weep,
to rise like mounds or domes of sorrow.

Your breasts are veiled, they demand
contemplation. Men who lie beneath
them have their faith tested. Mayahana,
Tathagata, they nourish all beings.

Cloaked mountains, the fogged peaks
of Salzburg in early morning hours.
We will hike there again next year.

* * * * *

Bags End News
 No. 453 September 23, 2018
 Editor: Algernon Beagle
 King: Sheila Bunny
 Lead Lead Creature: Threshold Puggle
 Written Down By: Lori Bunny
 Apprentice: Willy Nilly Froggy

Wiy Iz Theer Sumthingg
 Innstedd of Nutthing?

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 Lorey
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 Reeder.

Bags End News
 No. 454 September 29, 2018
 Editor: Algernon Beagle
 King: Sheila Bunny
 Lead Lead Creature: Threshold Puggle
 Written Down By: Lori Bunny
 Apprentice: Willy Nilly Froggy

A Nuwe Bagzend Expedishun!

I amm noht uzuelly theer
 py inn Bagzend whoo desids
 oh wenn theer wil bee, a newe
 expedishun. Thatt deesider wood
 bee mah Joptic sistr & reel
 Mager & wood-bee-king of
 Bagzend Kalla Shlela Buny.

As I amm fin with thiss
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Bags End Book #23: Why Is There Something Instead of Nothing? Part 1

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.

* * * * *

Your old editor & reporter friend & pal Algernon Beagle is not what you might say to be a deep or very philosophical guy. I mean, I know lots of smart guys like Sheila Bunny & Princess Chrisakah of Imagianna, Crissy 4or fun, & even mah own newspaper's loyal riter-downer Lori Bunny, who probably knows about a lot more about these things than I do.

And you know what, Dear Readers? That is usually just OK by me. Let the smart guys tussle with those hard whys of the world, & let me just find the best story I can & try to tell it here straight & true.

I mean, sometimes why questions will sort of mix up in things some. Like that story about the Six Islands I tolded in Bags End Book #22: Uniting the Six Islands not long ago. Or even the many stories I have tolded about the Bunny Pillow Farm, or of how Crissy & Boop ended up together in Imagianna, in Bags End Book #12: What Is Imagianna?

Or even all the times I have sort of told some things that help me & everyone else to understand a bit more about what Bags End is, & why. Still a lot of I-don't-knows for all that too.

But see the why parts of these stories were all covered up in something else. Like, not what the Six Islands are, but how to unite them? Or, not what the Bunny Pillow Farm is, but who should run it & how?

What I'm slow as mud getting to, Dear Readers, is that, until now, why was never the big question of one of mah stories. Not like this time anyway.

Well, let me get started back at the start anyway. One fine day after going to Mr. Owl's Bags End School, I was sitting, quite relaxed & dozing, in mah comfy armchair on Milne's Porch, when a black-&-orange Spider crawled onto the arm of mah armchair.

The first time this happened, long ago, I was even too terrified to cry out & flee properly.

But now I was very happy because I well knowed this to be mah dear friend Larry the Spider Creature, who lives in that strange & fine neighboring fantasyland kin to Bags End called the Creature Common.

"Hi, Algy!" Larry said, all friendly with how he talks mah name his own way.

"Hi, Larry!" I said, friendly in return.

"May I stay?" he asked, & we both chuckled at that because that's what he said the first time we met.

So I played our game too.

"You're asking me? You could bite me & eat me & stay too!"

"I don't eat Beagles," he said, laughing a lot.

"O," I chuckled.

"May I stay?" still laughing.

"I don't run things. Ask those big guys. Sheila Bunny. Betsy Bunny Pillow. Lisa-Marie Chow."

Now we were laughing so hard but still trying to keep along our game.

"But Milne's Porch is yours?" he laughed on.

"I think," laughing, "so."

"May I stay?"

Here's where we changed what we said the first time. "Yes, Larry. Please stay," I said happy.

And of course he did like he has many times before. But not in awhile. We sat quietly together watching the pretty pink sunset.

"I am glad you are here visiting, Larry," I said.

"Me too, Algy. I have a question for you too," he said with glittering eyes.

"OK. Tell me, guy," I said curiously.

Larry's eyes glittered even more, like they do when he is thinking hard. Kind of like Sheila Bunny & her purple eyes, but not her of course.

"Do you remember when we first met, & were helping out Benny Big Dreams a lot with his troubles?"

(This is Benny Big Dreams & this is the secret part of this newspaper, the Dreamland roots down below.

(More as you follow your root.

(One of the Great Tree's roots follows into Dreamland, where I am. Even deeper!

(It is the connection not dependent on sleep, a different way to travel back

& forth, like the path to & from Imagianna.

(I wonder which root the Bags End expedition will follow down to the Great Tree?

(I wonder if Algernon will finally want to write the newspaper about Dreamland? I wonder what I can do to encourage him?

(Maybe this is a sneak preview of what it would be like? Would I make a good Apprentice Reporter?

(Others will involve me in this Great Question expedition. With their own reasons different from Algernon's.

(I will keep a watch on this expedition from Bags End, Dear Readers of this fine newspaper. I will help as I can.

(Keep a hush on me for now. These pages are just like a whisper in your ears. For now, the word is mum.

 *** BB Dreams ***
 -----)

I nodded. "He's trouble by his nature, but he's OK."
 Larry said, "And I said to you to 'follow your root?'"
 I nodded. "Benny said that too."
 "Well, I think there's more to that than I knowed, Algy."
 "What more?"
 "Do you know about the Great Tree at the heart of the world?"
 I thinked. "I saw some Great Trees on all mah adventures uniting the Six Islands by the Rainbow Wheel."
 Larry nodded. "We all loved that story, Algy!"
 "O shucks," I muttered.
 Then he talked more. "This Great Tree's branches are what lead up to 4orm all those trees, & they then 4orm all the other ones."
 "Wow!" was all I could say honestly.
 Larry nodded. "This Great Tree has 6 roots that lead somewhere nobody knows. But it's where 3 expotitions so far are going to find the answer to the question, 'Why is there something instead of nothing?'"
 Um. I felt dum asking what I asked but did. "That's a question?"
 Larry laughed but not meanly. "Yes, I think so. It's probably more philosophy than you are used to."
 I nodded. But I was curious. "Do you know who are in the expotition?"
 Larry said, "Well, you remember the 4 Famous Travelers?"
 I nodded. "Yes! Great guys. And a girl."
 Larry nodded again. "And Miss La & Miss Ta, the Great Heroes of Yore?"
 I nodded again, & asked, "Who is the third group?"
 "I don't really know, Algy. They are from farther away, I think."
 "O."
 "So I came here thinking maybe you would like to get up a Bags End expotition!" Larry said, eyes glittering excited.
Wow. I did not know what to think. Larry tolded me to think slowly about it, & he would be glad to help us, if there was an us, to get started.
 Then we slept, Dear Readers. It was so much to learn about that mah

brainbone needed extra rest, I guess. So I gave it some.

* * * * *

A New Bags End Expotition!

I am not usually the guy in Bags End who decides on when there will be a new expotition. That decider would be mah adopted sister & real Mayor & would-be-King of Bags End called Sheila Bunny.

And I am fine with this arrangement, Dear Readers. Mah part in things is to shamble along after her, & the other Bags End big guys, & the rest who come along by volunteer, or dragged, & try to rite the story straight & true in this beloved newspaper.

But this time I had to screw up mah courage to decide, & it didn't take long with so little. And one day after Mister Owl's Bags End School, I indeed made mah slowly slumping beagle's way to the dangers of Sheila's Throne Room, instead of the safeties of mah beloved Milne's Porch.

I have rited often of those Throne Room dangers. Sheila usually naps in her Throne, with a Jack Kerouac book & a jazz record playing, & a carrot to paw too. O! Yuk!

No place 4or beagles in this comfy-4or-her setup. If she wants me 4or something, she lets me know. Mostly, she doesn't.

That all said, there I was, pushing open the door with the picture of the crown, twisted up with a bunny, on it. Miss Chris's good drawing, I'll not deny.

Closing mah eyes, about to try to say the friendliest words I knowed.

But then I heard "You're late, Beagle," a Sheila-like voice grumped.

"O. OK. Sorry, guy," I said humbly & unthwacked.

There is a little matt in the corner of her Throne Room where I am allowed to go. Good 4or safe napping or listening.

So I went to mah matt & waited 4or orders.

"Well?" she demanded.

"Well what?" I asked, knowing how not knowing was surely trouble 4or me.

She was quiet though. Thinking.

"Algernon, you spend way more time in all those neighboring places than everyone else in Bags End. Even me," she said quietly.

I nodded. "I guess so. Stories take me lots of places."

"Should a bunch of us go with you this time?" she asked, & still quiet.

I looked at her in her Throne more closely now. "I don't decide these things!" I cried.

"This time, I want you to," & still quiet.

"Why, Sheila?" I asked.

"Because it's not a Bags End trip!" she said, finally with a little familiar bit of grouch in her voice.

"O," I said. "I didn't think that made a difference."

"It does," she said.

"Why?" I asked.

"It just does, Beagle," she grouched again, & I knowed her tone was best not to argue with.

I nodded & thinked. Then words.

"What if it did?"

"Did what?"

Not knowing nothing but talking, I said, "What if it did start in Bags

End?"

"How?" she sounded curious 4or real. I could tell it was a rare good idear of mine, & decided to run it till we crashed, as we would.

"I don't know, Sheila, but why not? Why not start here as much as anywhere else?"

Sheila then looked up at the ceiling, with one purple eye closed, like she does when she is thinking hard.

"OK. Go find out how, & come back to tell me, & I will decide."

Not knowing what I would do next, I nodded mah head & said, "I will go right now, Sheila."

"And don't be late this time," she grumped. Then she reached a paw down to her little record player, & turned back on her Miles, or Trane, or whatever favorite jazz guy of hers, & curled up to nap & enjoy. Me more than 4orgotten.

So I quietly left her Throne Room to keep mah promise.

But how? Was there a Bags End road to the Great Tree?

I mean, I guess there could be. Should I go to the Creature Common & talk to Larry?

Yes, but not yet. I mean, I needed an expert on Bags End more now really.

Only one I could think of to ask is mah dear friend Princess Crissy, who lives in Imagianna, but is like a Guardian of Bags End.

Talking to her always makes me happy anyway. She likes Beagles despite mah low reputation among many.

OK, then, I was too excited to wait, so I hurried from outside Sheila's Throne Room down the levels to the door to Imagianna.

Crissy's Castle is usually up a nice green-&-golden hill, easy 4or even me to climb.

I was at her front door right quick. Knock-knocking.

Then I heard her girlish voice, but outside. She was a short walk away from me, sitting under the Oak tree we sit together under sometimes.

She was smiling & waving to me, & she was not alone.

Sitting with her was Boop, who is her loyal servant, but not a Turtle, despite looks, & mah own other dear friend, Larry the Spider!

* * * * *

Figgering the Way to the Great Tree!

Hugs & greetings all around as Boop did not demand Protocols this time, but got his hugs too. We all sat clustered fine, & after awhile I talked about what Sheila said to me.

"That's why I came to see you, Crissy," I concluded to Crissy's smile.

Boop looked at me thoughtfully with his not-Turtle's face. "Do you think she would like your expotition to start from a door in Bags End, like the same way you come through one to visit here?"

I thinned. "Well, yes, Boop, but more than just that too. Why would she go looking 4or the Great Tree, & ask that question?"

Now Crissy talked. "It would have to be to find out more about Bags End?"

I nodded. "Yes. That's it. That would make it hers, & not just her going along as a, um, friend of something."

Larry's eyes glittered extra bright as he thought about all this. "We have all readed in your fine newspaper about how all of you came to Bags

Page End News
 No. 455 October 6, 2018
 Editor: Algernon Beagle
 King: Shalla Bunny
 Lead Lead Creature: Threshold Puggle
 Written Down By: Joni Bunny
 Apprentice: Willy Nilly Froggy

Figgering the Way to
 the Grate Tree!

It iz
 for mee
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Page End News
 No. 456 October 13, 2018
 Editor: Algernon Beagle
 King: Shalla Bunny
 Lead Lead Creature: Threshold Puggle
 Written Down By: Joni Bunny
 Apprentice: Willy Nilly Froggy

Whoo Will Go on the Expedishun
 too the Grate Tree?

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Page End News
 DOUBLE ISSUE!
 No. 457-458 October 20-27, 2018
 Editor: Algernon Beagle
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Willing Going Back too
 Dreamland?

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End, & about Clover-dale, & about Crissy being the Guardian of Bags End. So that's not a mystery to be solved yet."

We all nodded to this, but it made it harder too.

"I guess we have been trying to figger this stuff out 4or awhile now, piece by piece," I said. Everyone nodded too.

Well, this was not how I expected it to go on this visit. I looked at Crissy with helpless beagle eyes 4or help.

She put her finger on her chin, thinking Creature-style 4or a minute.

"Maybe I should come to see Sheila & talk to her?" she wondered.

This seemed like a good idear in every which way I could think of. So I nodded.

She stood up right then & said, "Let's go!" And she started walking down the green-&-golden hill to the door to Bags End. Larry & Boop followed right away.

I was slower to go but then I hurried. If Sheila saw me again so soon, & without a good plan in paw, I would not stand a chance. But Crissy is way different. I just had to stay quiet, & in the back.

So back to Bags End & Crissy led us straight to Sheila's Throne Room. She knows the way pretty good.

Sheila was still slouched down in her Throne with her crazy jazz record playing, crunching a carrot (O! Yuk!), & at her ease like time did not trouble her doorstep.

She was very glad to see Crissy, who she thinks of as her fellow Monarch, except she isn't one too, just Mayor with big shot idears. She was friendly to see Boop too, & Larry, but when she saw me her friendly ran out.

"What's your new idear, Beagle?" she demanded to know.

Crissy talked instead of mah wordless panic.

"His new idear is that I will come with the expotition, & we will follow paths through Bags End you've never taken, Sheila," she said, smiling her charming smile 4or all.

"Which paths?" Sheila demanded again, like Crissy was a lowly beagle in her presence, which she isn't. Which I am, sad to say.

Nothing much worries Crissy, though. Save if her friends are in danger. Which they weren't right now. At least yet. New paths? Hmm.

Crissy was now sitting with Sheila in her Throne, & Boop & Larry were there too. I was on mah matt in the corner, 4or safety's sake.

Crissy thought how to say 4or a minute, lucky 4or Sheila skritchng her headbone.

"Well, Bags End reaches back to other places & times. Just like Imagianna & me & Boop do. And the Creature Common & the rest of our neighbors near & far. We could pick one that brings us to the Great Tree, & also shows us things about Bags End that would be new."

"Things you know, Crissy?" asked Sheila. I could tell she was interested now.

"I don't know everything. But I can tell you one thing that helps to explain."

"What?" we all asked, even lowly me. This was too interesting.

Crissy smiled her nice & tricky smile now. "With fantasylands, histories run both ways."

"So there's always more to know the more you ask & look!" Sheila said, sounding really excited 4or her.

Crissy just nodded, smiling.

Gosh, I wanted to ask about a bajillion questions! But I didn't yet. Crissy's idear to talk to Sheila had worked. Even if I didn't get it all, what

was new? We were going . . . somewhere.

We all celebrated by taking a good pre-expotition nap!

* * * * *

Who Will Go on the Expotition to the Great Tree?

I really like the expotitions that happen in Bags End. I mean, sometimes they are strange, or scary, or both, or more.

But what's funny, Dear Readers, is that we learn as much about Bags End far away as nearby. It tooked me awhile to figger out the reason 4or this. Let me try mah best to explain good.

It's because Bags End isn't alone. We have good neighbors like Imagianna, & the Creature Common, & others, that I have tolded more about them as I was part of adventures there, & listening good to things tolded me along the way.

More & more it seemed like all us neighbors were many but also together too.

I am no scientist or scholar of histories, but mah beagleboy journalist nosebone 4or news tolded me this all made sense. Also mah heartbone agreed as I met so many nice guys along the way.

So when mah dear friend Crissy offered to come along with us on this expotition, & make sure that our path to the Great Tree was one where we would learn more about Bags End, that was a relief, & also a way to connect Bags End to everything else more too. Mah nosebone & mah heartbone felt good & right about this.

I didn't know Crissy's plan &, if I know that strange, tricky, nice girl, she probably didn't know it all either. But I did know she would smart & tricky smile magick our way along as we found out.

Nothing happened 4or awhile, I admit to restless paws about the matter. I knowed going to see Sheila about it would only get me insulted & tossed out of her Throne Room, not much else. Maybe thwacked too.

But Crissy might tell me something. So one day after Mister Owl's Bags End School, I decided it was time to go see her.

Decided actually because of what happened in school that day. I asked that question, just to see.

It was our gramma class, which is learning about the tricky things English does.

This is a class that Mister Owl don't teach too much because it always ends up in an argument. Like this.

"Bump!" mah silly Bumping brother Alexander Pupy will say.

"Alex says that Bump language is much simpler to learn," said that green-eyed language-&-fake-language-knowing guy, Allie Leopard.

"It's simple & fake too!" I cried.

"What's all this got to do with jazz?" grouched Sheila.

"Students! Settle down please!" said Mister Owl.

That's when I suddenly raised mah paw &, when he nodded to me, probably hoping I had a gramma question, I said, "Why is there something instead of nothing?"

This brought chaos down on us all.

"Because jazz & carrots!" Sheila yelled, like that sealed the deal.

"Bump!" countered Alex.

Well, others like Sargent Lisa-Marie Chow of the Army of the Babys, & crazed Betsy Bunny Pillow were probably gonna add their own obsessions, by way of explanation to it all, when I talked again.

"Well, Sheila & mah dear friend Princess Crissy are gonna lead a new expotition to find out! And about Bags End too! And the Great Tree!"

Now I can't say why I said all that. Restless paws ain't a good reason. But whatever why, now everybody knowed, & was coming along, they thinked.

So you can see doubled now why Sheila wasn't gonna tell me nothing. Or why mah safety was better in Imagianna than mah own homeland.

Crissy was happy to see me, of course, once we got to her Royal Sleep Pad, after Boop's Protocols were done. What's a little bowing & scraping amongst friends, when he is such a good guy, & Crissy's bestus buddy?

And of course there was dancing like mad folks to records by R.E.M. be4ore Crissy could be settled down to talking. We sat on her bed, her skritchng mah headbone nicely, still dancing in her smile. But we talked.

"Do you have a plan, Crissy?"

She was quiet 4or a minute.

"Well, more an idea."

"What is it?"

Quiet again.

"I think there's more if we follow our root."

Hm. "Hey! That's what Benny Big Dreams said to me! And mah Creature Common friend Larry said it about this Great Tree expotition stuff too."

"I remember, Algernon," she smiled.

"But what does it mean?" I asked.

"It means learning even more about Bag End & everyone than already. And I think it starts with Dreamland."

"But why?" I asked. "You know I have troubles there."

She skritchng more, & nodded, & was quiet 4or a bit. Then said, "I think this is part of it. It's a feeling I have in my, um, heartbone, & a thought in my headbone."

Hmm. Hard to deny such things of course. So I didn't.

She talked more. "So it's good lots of Bags End friends & me & Larry will be coming. To make sure things go better this time. And to keep Benny behaving."

Alright, so now I knowed. 4or better or worse. Crissy promised me it would not be long now to wait. She hugged me nicely when I went.

I was soon in mah comfy armchair on Milne's Porch, wondering about all this, & what all next. All I was sure of was soon.

* * * * *

Willing Going Back to Dreamland?

Long-time Dear Readers of mah beloved newspaper know too true that too-too often I have tolded of mah travels in, & troubles with Dreamland, like in Bags End Book #11: Algernon Beagle Wakes Up! 4or example. But now it seemed like new travels & troubles were brewing.

It was mah own doing, in a way, I confess. I am a beagleboy journalist with an endlessly curious nosebone 4or news, & it's this same nosebone that ends me up in stories like these.

The better thing this time is that Dreamland wasn't the final place we were going. It was along the way, maybe even proving more helpful than trouble like usual. No sure things, Dear Readers, but maybe.

Maybe especially because this time both Sheila Bunny & Princess Crissy would be going. And others too, though I wasn't sure who really.

But then it was suddenly time to find out, after too long impatient

waiting. What happened was that one day when Mister Owl's Bags End School was over, & I was climbing through mah bedroom window onto mah beloved Milne's Porch, I found a little note on the seat of mah comfy armchair.

I am not the best guy around to read & know the English really good in ritings, but this was more a picture so that was easier.

It was of Sheila Bunny, & she was showed inside a TV sort of like the Filco in the Bunny Family's apartment, just through the window from Milne's Porch.

Mah brainbone tolded me 2 things at once. 1 was that this picture meant "The Sheila Show," & the other 1 was that I had better go now. Sheila invites like you are late already when you first see her invitation.

So I climbed back into the bedroom I share with mah silly Bumping brother Alexander Puppy. He wasn't there, & I guessed that maybe he was already at the Bags End Auditorium where "The Sheila Show" happens. So I hurried on, through the rest of the Bunny Family's apartment, & then the levels of Bags End to the right one.

I remembered something I wanted to explain to you Dear Readers. It has to do with a question someone asked mah dear friend Richy Americus that he tolded me about.

Richy is a really good guitar player & has a rock-&-roll band called Noisy Children. He also rites a good magazine about the many fantasylands called Galleons Lap. I think he does this in his dreams, even though his readers are awake. Whatever all this means.

Anyway, one of his readers asked him how guys in Bags End know which level & which door to go to to find one place or another.

It wasn't till I was going about it like this that I realized it was kind of like the Creatures in the Creature Common & their Hmmm.

As I was wanting to go to the Bags End Auditorium, I could feel this hmmm in me rising up & guiding me along, as I went down some levels, stopping at the right one, & then walking along till the right door. It would get softer if I went the wrong way.

I have lived in Bags End so long that I don't even think about it, but then I realized that 4or a visitor here, it might not work the say way to get to places. I had never even thinked of it as a sound like the Hmmm, but I guess it is.

So, Dear Readers, if you come visiting Bags End sometime, stick close to me or some other friendly guy to get around. At least until you feel the Hmmm too.

Anyway, that's how I got to the Bags End Auditorium, which I discovered to be full of Bags End friends.

Just looking around I could see mah brother Alexander Puppy sitting with that green-eyed Allie Leopard, & probably talking in fake Bump language. Denny & Corey & all the Secret Puppy Club members were sitting together, barking & ruffing & woofing away. Foey.

There was Jill Boot & Jackie Clown together, talking & laughing their Squeak language back & 4orth. Geeze Louise, not nobody speaking English?

Oh wait, there was mah dear Miss Chris sitting with that dozing Lazybug & her Toy Tall Boy Ramie. She was talking to Leo the Dark Man, who is the Janitor of Bags End, mostly to scrape her bubble gum off the side of Bags End.

O, wait! O! Bubble gum! Yuk!

And there was Sargent Lisa-Marie Chow sitting with Polly El & Leona Lion, but I did not know what they were talking about.

And there were lots of others too. I was wondering where to sit when

a familiar grumpy voice said, "Up on the stage now, Beagle. Tell everyone everything so far. Then Crissy & I will finish off."

"Um?" I said, looking around me. The lights were now off except on stage.

"Now!" Sheila ordered, & I stumbled my way to the stage. Up the stairs & there I was in the spotlight.

But not alone. The Blondys 3 were floating around me, for friendliness or to float me away if I got boed, I didn't know.

There was mostly clapping, & a few unsurprising boos, a Bump or 2 &, lucky for my sudden panic, "The Sheila Show" jazz theme started up. I waited till it was done, nice tune, & then talked before thinking. Easier than it should be, Dear Readers.

"Welcome to 'The Sheila Show!'" I said friendly, to more cheers. One whispery voice growled, "You're not Sheila!" & I knewed that scary Betsy Bunny Pillow was out there somewhere, probably with her mysterious Allies.

I just talked more to get closer to the finish.

"My name is Algernon Beagle, & I guess this started with me learning from my Creature Common friend Larry the Spider that there is a Great Tree at the heart of the world, & there are groups of Great Heroes & Famous Travelers & others going down there to discover why there is something instead of nothing."

I waited for more boos or protests, but strangely there was none. This interested them all? Even with me involved? OK!

"Larry thought us Bags End guys should come along too, but Sheila wanted it to be for a Baginian reason. So that's when Princess Crissy--"

Big cheers, Dear Readers! Big long ones.

"Me too, guys!" I said friendly. "So talked with her, & she had some bright ideas about our travel being through Dreamland, & maybe discovering more about Bags End on the way."

More cheers & I wondered my luck at such popularity when I saw it was for Sheila & Crissy coming onto the stage. I noticed that Crissy was wearing her long brown coat that I remembered is usually full of pockets of Secret Books.

And Sheila made a sort of nod at the Blondys 3, & they floated me up & away off the stage. Ah, OK, guessed I was done, huh?

They floated me nicely over to the empty seat next to my brother Alex, other side of Allie Leopard.

The Blondys all kissed my furry cheekbones. Simmi the Baby Blondy said, "Yay, Beagle!" And then they floated back to the stage.

I did not argue them that beagles do not float, but decided to be a good sport & listen close.

First Sheila decided to play her purple trumpet, one of those Trane or Miles or Bird or Dizzy crazy jazz songs.

Everyone clapped & cheered for this good music that Sheila does so well, & loves so much, & then it was time to talk.

"Like the beagle said, this expedition will be a long travel. Crissy & I will lead us through Bags End to Dreamland. We will be getting there by going to her home Imagianna, which is the easiest way. Then we will be exploring the Great Tree at the heart of the world. So it will start familiar for me & us, & then go other places."

Sheila then got quiet, but looking up & thinking with one of her purple eyes closed as she does. Then talked more.

"I don't know if we'll find the one answer to that question, but maybe we will be lucky & find more. OK, here's Crissy."

She stopped so sudden that guys were cheering her words & also cheering Crissy friendly too.

Crissy was clapping 4or Sheila too, but eventually she got quiet to talk. Tricky smile at the ready.

"Hello, everyone. I am really excited to be invited on this expotition. I have been doing some research at my Castle about what the best root down would be. And I think I have what my dear friend Algernon Beagle would call a bright idear."

There was some clapping 4or me, & a few grumbled rebukes. I decided I didn't care though. Crissy is always on mah side.

"I think we will revisit in a way some of the most important places & events in Bags End history," she said some more. "Maybe we will learn new things along the way to the Great Tree at the heart of the world. Since Algernon is the editor of Bags End News, & most of these stories are told in there, we will use his newspaper to guide us. As long as we remain true to our destination & question, our path should be a steady one."

Cheers & cheers some more, & then she smiled & said, "I have in my coat all the Secret Books that will help too."

Well, Dear Readers, I can tell you I was shocked about the bright idears of Crissy's, but had to admit they were pretty bright.

Still, I really didn't know how this would work. And everyone else around me was wondering that too.

But Sheila had tolded all she wanted to 4or now, so she & her Kool Jazz Band launched into the crazy song we all know ends her show, & her "Well, goodbye" usually finished it off.

And that was that, again. Or so I thought. As I was leaving the Auditorium, & trying to remember how to be patient again till next, Crissy caught up to me in her long Secret Books filled coat. I seed that she was still in her blue jeans & R.E.M. t-shirt, so that was good.

She was smiling me funny, so I said, "Wanna visit on Milne's Porch, Crissy?" She nodded happy smiling now, & we walked slowly side by side up the ramps & along the hallways to the Bunny Family's apartment, & then to mah bedroom window, & out to Milne's Porch.

I have often talked of the pretty sunsets we watch from Milne's Porch, & this reminds me of another question that one of Richy Americus's readers asked him. Which is, what sunsets are visible from inside Bags End? Especially since at the far end of all the hallways is usually dark blackness?

I don't know how this all works, Richy's Dear Reader. It's always been on since I was gifted Milne's Porch. Over the railing & down or up is the same blackness, but out there is pretty sky that follows days & nights like regular.

So Crissy settled with me close & friendly in mah comfy armchair, & 4or awhile there was a pretty gold & green sky, almost like made 4or Crissy's enjoyments because those are so often her colors in her Castle & Imagianna & her books & all.

"Do you have any idears about--"

(This is Benny Big Dreams again on the hush, please don't tell nobody my secret pages of my friend Algernon Beagle's beloved newspaper.

(I am excited for the Bags End expedition to the Great Tree to begin! It is not quiet like the others, since they also want to find out more about Bags End too.

(Maybe Algernon Beagle will finally see Dreamland as more than a place he has troubles in. Maybe he will learn more about Bags End's kinship with Dreamland.

(Keep our little meetups quiet for now. Let's see what happens.

 *** BB Dreams ***
 -----)

--I stopped suddenly. Look around like someone else is here. Sniff even.

Crissy looked me close & says, "Are you OK, Algernon?"

I shaked mah head a couple of times, blink twice, nod.

"Any idears about what?" she asks.

"Hm? O. Yah. About all of this? I'm not exactly sure what to think."

Crissy moved me more into her lap so she could skritch mah headbone & think her words slowly. Awhile no words, just skritchng bliss.

Then she talked. "I think we find out more every time we go asking & looking, & then we come back with more questions. That's what makes it fun."

Hmm. This made sense. "Like what you said about fantasyland histories going both 4orwards & backwards?"

I could feel her nodding, but she said, "Sorta. I mean, more than it does 4or the people-folks in places like Connecticut, & the city I lived in with Boop & you."

"Why, Crissy?"

She was quiet & skritchng 4or so long I almost 4orgot mah question. But then she talked.

"We're closer to Dreamland. We're closer to Imaginal Space."

I thought she would say more, but she didn't. Crissy is like that. Good with words. Good with quiet.

The green-&-gold sky passed over to a sort of pink-&-bloo, like Crissy's dear Creature friend Bellla. I kept wondering it all, but nicely at ease right then.

To be concluded in Cenacle | 131 | June 2026!



* * * * *



Colin James

Considering the Subjective

Short walk from the car
to forest and beyond.

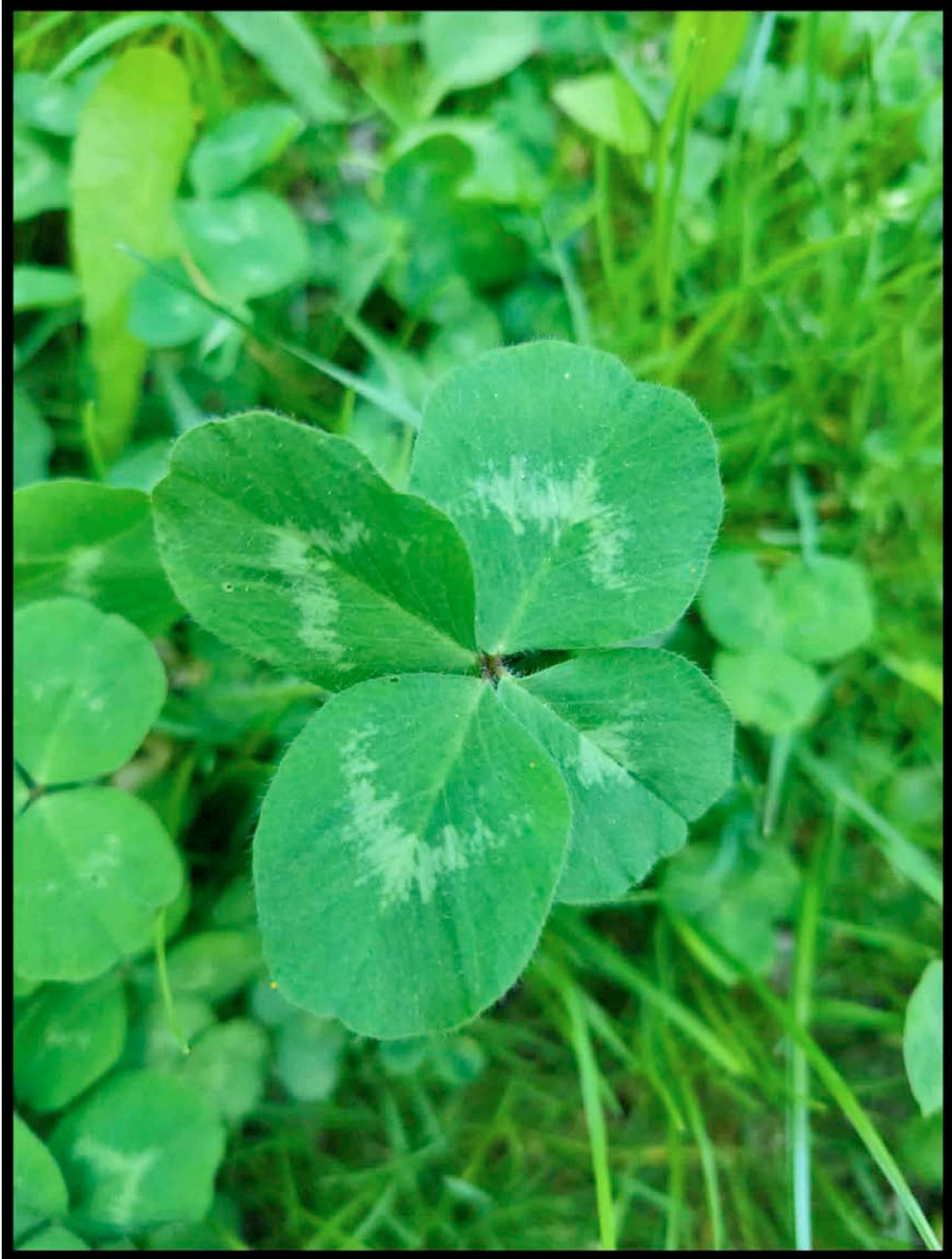
Collecting our allocations of mushrooms,
fungi turning blue correspondingly.
Familiarity saviors lassoed.

Some say dusk is a warning.
Spontaneity specialists having
climbed up several branches.

Here Cornflower Bolete propagates.
The right shade and moisture
above the scaffolding branches is sporadic.

Still, something else will likely occur—
shroomers are not prone to forgetfulness.

* * * * *



Nathan D. Horowitz



Dietmar & the Flies Dancing

[Travel Journal]

i.

The rain has now passed and the guests are gone. Dietmar is dancing by himself to a tape of Colombian salsa.

The tape ends.

Dietmar says to me, "I want a little bit of sun to dry my sneakers."

Then he goes away.

Woo-woo woo woo, calls a jungle bird. Cicadas grind away like little machines. There are no cookies at the store today.

Some recent-rainfall-frogs are talking back and forth in their small swamp nearby. Schoolboys are whistling back and forth through cupped hands.

Raúl tells me might be funding from the oil company to employ me as an English teacher here next semester. Wow, my first chance to sell out! Or second if the encyclopedia translation happens.

I plan to go to Lago Agrio this Saturday as there might be employment with Cesar on a trip downriver to Cuyabeno National Park with some gringo oilmen.

Another chance to sell out. When it rains, it pours. Because the oilmen are the only people with any money around here, everyone wants to work for them.

Dietmar will be gone when I get back. He's leaving to study crickets near Quito. He's going to meet his girlfriend. I'll miss the jerk. We like each other now. I feel like that girl is like Yoko Ono breaking up the Beatles. How much further Dietmar and I could have gone musically.

In Lago, I need to buy fishing line, AA batteries, and candles, pick up my mail, send some letters, fail to phone the USA, develop a roll of film.

ii.

I began to make a string of black seeds today. There's a bush right near the hut. Its seeds start out green, then turn brown with a special dark spot. You can drive a needle through that dark spot and thread a whole string that way. A day later the seeds turn jet black and hard. One of many plants that seem to have adapted themselves to be used by humans.

Achiote is another: its seedpods break off the bush easily and open cleanly, and then they're ready. It's as if they want to be used as face paint. Fruit turns color as if to tell us it's ready to eat. And then there's peyote, a cactus without spines. Remember Cesar's story about Ñañë weeding out all the useless plants from the forest, back on the day of the second creation?

And maybe time is shaped like a tree. Since I don't know what really happened, I can

only ask questions. Where is my heart going to live? What kinds of instruments do the Swiss use to make holes in cheese? Can white people be shamans? Can black people be investment bankers? How much longer will this deteriorating hut last? Is there another word for synonym? My God, what's that smell? Is my notebook paper content with its Scythian tattoo of words, blue like smurfs?

Does all life dream of electric sheep?

Do lost amoebas have souls?

Letters ghost above the page. I can't pin them down. Other bug my head like gnats. I can't swat them.

iii.

This morning, Dietmar was pretending to cry. "*Waaaah!*" he wailed. "I don't want fried plantain for breakfast! I want bread and cheese!"

At that moment, slow, peaceable, old Dedé Lucitande walked by. I called to him, "Dedé!"

He called back, "Dedé!"

Dietmar said, "Do you know why people call him Dedé?"

"No."

"Some people walked in on him kissing another man's wife. The village punished him by giving him the name of a frog as a nickname so every time someone spoke to him, he would remember his shame."

I didn't say this to Dietmar, but it occurred to me that I am a Dedé too.

iv.

Dietmar told a story about about Lucho Payaguaje. During Dietmar's first visit to the community, Lucho was gone for two months and then came back.

"Where were you?" Dietmar asked him.

"Drilling oil to make gas for your car," Lucho said, heading off any criticism Dietmar might have had about working for the oil company.

Another time Lucho told Dietmar about the first time he went to Quito, way back in July 1969. The gringo missionaries brought him. The altitude and the different microbes in the food laid him up sick for the first two weeks of a six-week stay.

"What impressed you most about the city?" Dietmar asked.

"The noise," Lucho said, "and the stench of the cars."

It's dusk now.

Dietmar just put on the tape of Colombian Salsa and started dancing again.

v.

I'm back in Lago Agrio, at the Café D'Marco, at that table with the round glass surface in which the sky resides. Untrained, naturally talented houseflies dance around, not quite like Dietmar, but with a panache of their own. When I'm not writing, I lean back and watch people roll and stroll by. A shoeshine boy comes by, glances at my sneakers, and walks on.

The flies annoy me. I imagine that my dad, and his dad, and his dad, and his, going back hundreds of generations, all saw this fly dance and came to the same conclusion as I have: flies are another tribe with their own moral compass, a bit different from ours, but a moral compass it is, to go with their strength, speed, compound eyes, and revolting affinity for shit and death. And it occurred to each of us in a calm moment that flies should not be blamed for the fact that they see us as snack bars and maggot nurseries.

Indeed, they only seek to goad us in hope that we might die of a heart attack in front of them. In any case, they're enemies, but plucky, noble ones, worthy of grudging respect; and when we kill them, we rarely do so in anger.

At least until we see their guts. At that point, it usually gets personal, because now that they're dead, they attack us by surprise. There's no reason anything in the universe has to be as disgusting as that sticky gray goo.

* * * * *



AbandonView







Arthur Rackham - House of Usher (1935)

The Fall of the House of Usher

[Classic Fiction]

Son cœur est un luth suspendu;

Sitôt qu'on le touche il résonne.

“His heart is a lute strung tight;
As soon as one touches it, it resounds.”

—Pierre-Jean De Béranger

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During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country; and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. I know not how it was—but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. I say insufferable; for the feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment, with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible. I looked upon the scene before me—upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain—upon the bleak walls—upon the vacant eye-like windows—upon a few rank sedges—and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees—with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium—the bitter lapse into common life—the hideous dropping off of the veil. There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart—an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime. What was it—I paused to think—what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? It was a mystery all insoluble; nor could I grapple with the shadowy fancies that crowded upon me as I pondered. I was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion, that while, beyond doubt, there *are* combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the reason, and the analysis, of this power, lie among considerations beyond our depth. It was possible, I reflected, that a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the details of the picture, would be sufficient to modify, or perhaps to annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression; and, acting upon this idea, I reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled lustre by the dwelling, and gazed down—but with a shudder even more thrilling than before—upon the remodelled and inverted images of the gray sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant and eye-like windows.

Nevertheless, in this mansion of gloom I now proposed to myself a sojourn of some weeks. Its proprietor, Roderick Usher, had been one of my boon companions in boyhood; but many years had elapsed since our last meeting. A letter, however, had lately reached me in a distant part of the country—a letter from him—which, in its wildly importunate nature, had admitted of no other than a personal reply. The MS. gave evidence of nervous agitation. The writer spoke of acute bodily illness—of a pitiable mental idiosyncrasy which oppressed him—and of an earnest desire to see me, as his best, and indeed, his only personal friend, with a view of attempting, by the cheerfulness of my society, some alleviation of his malady. It was the manner in which all this, and much more, was said—it was the apparent *heart* that went with his request—which allowed me no room for hesitation—and I accordingly obeyed, what I still considered a very singular summons, forthwith.

Although, as boys, we had been even intimate associates, yet I really knew little of my friend. His reserve had been always excessive and habitual. I was aware, however, that his very ancient family had been noted, time out of mind, for a peculiar sensibility of temperament, displaying itself, through long ages, in many works of exalted art, and manifested, of late, in repeated deeds of munificent yet unobtrusive charity, as well as in a passionate devotion to the intricacies, perhaps even more than to the orthodox and easily recognizable beauties, of musical science. I had learned, too, the very remarkable fact, that the

stem of the Usher race, all time-honored as it was, had put forth, at no period, any enduring branch; in other words, that the entire family lay in the direct line of descent, and had always, with very trifling and very temporary variation, so lain. It was this deficiency, I considered, while running over in thought the perfect keeping of the character of the premises with the accredited character of the people, and while speculating upon the possible influence which the one, in the long lapse of centuries, might have exercised upon the other—it was this deficiency, perhaps, of collateral issue, and the consequent undeviating transmission, from sire to son, of the patrimony with the name, which had, at length, so identified the two as to merge the original title of the estate in the quaint and equivocal appellation of the “House of Usher”—an appellation which seemed to include, in the minds of the peasantry who used it, both the family and the family mansion.

I have said that the sole effect of my somewhat childish experiment, of looking down within the tarn, had been to deepen the first singular impression. There can be no doubt that the consciousness of the rapid increase of my superstition—for why should I not so term it?—served mainly to accelerate the increase itself. Such, I have long known, is the paradoxical law of all sentiments having terror as a basis. And it might have been for this reason only, that, when I again uplifted my eyes to the house itself, from its image in the pool, there grew in my mind a strange fancy—a fancy so ridiculous, indeed, that I but mention it to show the vivid force of the sensations which oppressed me. I had so worked upon my imagination as really to believe that around about the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their immediate vicinity—an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up from the decayed trees, and the gray walls, and the silent tarn, in the form of an inelastic vapor or gas—dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued. Shaking off from my spirit what *must* have been a dream, I scanned more narrowly the real aspect of the building. Its principal feature seemed to be that of an excessive antiquity. The discoloration of ages had been great. Minute fungi overspread the whole exterior, hanging in a fine tangled web-work from the eaves. Yet all this was apart from any extraordinary dilapidation. No portion of the masonry had fallen; and there appeared to be a wild inconsistency between its still perfect adaptation of parts, and the utterly porous, and evidently decayed condition of the individual stones. In this there was much that reminded me of the specious totality of old wood-work which has rotted for long years in some neglected vault, with no disturbance from the breath of the external air. Beyond this indication of extensive decay, however, the fabric gave little token of instability. Perhaps the eye of a scrutinizing observer might have discovered a barely perceptible fissure, which, extending from the roof of the building in front, made its way down the wall in a zig-zag direction, until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn.

Noticing these things, I rode over a short causeway to the house. A servant in waiting took my horse, and I entered the Gothic archway of the hall. A valet, of stealthy step, thence conducted me, in silence, through many dark and intricate passages in my progress to the studio of his master. Much that I encountered on the way contributed, I know not how, to heighten the vague sentiments of which I have already spoken. While the objects around me—while the carvings of the ceilings, the sombre tapestries of the walls, the ebon blackness of the floors, and the phantasmagoric armorial trophies which rattled as I strode, were but matters to which, or to such as which, I had been accustomed from my infancy—while I hesitated not to acknowledge how familiar was all this—I still wondered to find how unfamiliar were the fancies which ordinary images were stirring up. On one of the staircases, I met the physician of the family. His countenance, I thought, wore a mingled expression of low cunning and perplexity. He accosted me with trepidation and passed on. The valet now threw open a door and ushered me into the presence of his master.

The room in which I found myself was very large and excessively lofty. The windows were long, narrow, and pointed, and at so vast a distance from the black oaken floor as to be altogether inaccessible from within. Feeble gleams of encrimsoned light made their way through the trelliced panes, and served to render sufficiently distinct the more prominent objects around; the eye, however, struggled in vain to reach the remoter angles of the chamber, or the recesses of the vaulted and fretted ceiling. Dark draperies hung upon the walls. The general furniture was profuse, comfortless, antique, and tattered. Many books and musical instruments lay scattered about, but failed to give any vitality to the scene. I felt that I breathed an atmosphere of sorrow. An air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom hung over and pervaded all.

Upon my entrance, Usher arose from a sofa upon which he had been lying at full length, and greeted me with a vivacious warmth which had much in it, I at first thought of an overdone cordiality—of the constrained effort of the ennuyé man of the world. A glance, however, at his countenance convinced me of his perfect sincerity. We sat down; and for some moments, while he spoke not, I gazed upon him with a feeling half of pity, half of awe. Surely, man had never before so terribly altered, in so brief a period, as had Roderick Usher! It was with difficulty that I could bring myself to admit the identity of the wan being before me with the companion of my early boyhood. Yet the character of his face had been at all times remarkable. A cadaverousness of complexion; an eye large, liquid, and luminous beyond

comparison; lips somewhat thin and very pallid, but of a surpassingly beautiful curve; a nose of a delicate Hebrew model, but with a breadth of nostril unusual in similar formations; a finely moulded chin, speaking, in its want of prominence, of a want of moral energy; hair of a more than web-like softness and tenuity; these features, with an inordinate expansion above the regions of the temple, made up altogether a countenance not easily to be forgotten. And now in the mere exaggeration of the prevailing character of these features, and of the expression they were wont to convey, lay so much of change that I doubted to whom I spoke. The now ghastly pallor of the skin, and the now miraculous lustre of the eye, above all things startled and even awed me. The silken hair, too, had been suffered to grow all unheeded, and as, in its wild gossamer texture, it floated rather than fell about the face, I could not, even with effort, connect its arabesque expression with any idea of simple humanity.

In the manner of my friend I was at once struck with an incoherence—an inconsistency; and I soon found this to arise from a series of feeble and futile struggles to overcome an habitual trepidancy, an excessive nervous agitation. For something of this nature I had indeed been prepared, no less by his letter, than by reminiscences of certain boyish traits, and by conclusions deduced from his peculiar physical conformation and temperament. His action was alternately vivacious and sullen. His voice varied rapidly from a tremulous indecision (when the animal spirits seemed utterly in abeyance) to that species of energetic concision—that abrupt, weighty, unhurried, and hollow-sounding enunciation—that leaden, self-balanced and perfectly modulated guttural utterance, which may be observed in the moments of the intensest excitement of the lost drunkard, or the irreclaimable eater of opium.

It was thus that he spoke of the object of my visit, of his earnest desire to see me, and of the solace he expected me to afford him. He entered, at some length, into what he conceived to be the nature of his malady. It was, he said, a constitutional and a family evil, and one for which he despaired to find a remedy—a mere nervous affection, he immediately added, which would undoubtedly soon pass off. It displayed itself in a host of unnatural sensations. Some of these, as he detailed them, interested and bewildered me—although, perhaps, the terms, and the general manner of the narration had their weight. He suffered much from a morbid acuteness of the senses; the most insipid food was alone endurable; he could wear only garments of certain texture; the odors of all flowers were oppressive; his eyes were tortured by even a faint light; and there were but peculiar sounds, and these from stringed instruments, which did not inspire him with horror.

To an anomalous species of terror I found him a bounden slave. “I shall perish,” said he, “I *must* perish in this deplorable folly. Thus, thus, and not otherwise, shall I be lost. I dread the events of the future, not in themselves, but in their results. I shudder at the thought of any, even the most trivial, incident, which may operate upon this intolerable agitation of soul. I have, indeed, no abhorrence of danger, except in its absolute effect—in terror. In this unnerved—in this pitiable condition—I feel that I must inevitably abandon life and reason together in my struggles with some fatal demon of fear.”

I learned, moreover, at intervals, and through broken and equivocal hints, another singular feature of his mental condition. He was enchained by certain superstitious impressions in regard to the dwelling which he tenanted, and from which, for many years, he had never ventured forth—in regard to an influence whose supposititious force was conveyed in terms too shadowy here to be restated—an influence which some peculiarities in the mere form and substance of his family mansion, had, by dint of long sufferance, he said, obtained over his spirit—an effect which the *physique* of the gray walls and turrets, and of the dim tarn into which they all looked down, had, at length, brought about upon the *morale* of his existence.

He admitted, however, although with hesitation, that much of the peculiar gloom which thus afflicted him could be traced to a more natural and far more palpable origin—to the severe and long-continued illness—indeed to the evidently approaching dissolution—of a tenderly beloved sister; his sole companion for long years—his last and only relative on earth. “Her decease,” he said, with a bitterness which I can never forget, “would leave him (him the hopeless and the frail) the last of the ancient race of the Ushers.” As he spoke, the lady Madeline (for so was she called) passed slowly through a remote portion of the apartment, and, without having noticed my presence, disappeared. I regarded her with an utter astonishment not unmingled with dread. Her figure, her air, her features—all, in their very minutest development were those—were identically (I can use no other sufficient term) were identically those of the Roderick Usher who sat beside me. A feeling of stupor oppressed me, as my eyes followed her retreating steps. As a door, at length, closed upon her exit, my glance sought instinctively and eagerly the countenance of the brother—but he had buried his face in his hands, and I could only perceive that a far more than ordinary wanness had overspread the emaciated fingers through which trickled many passionate tears.

The disease of the lady Madeline had long baffled the skill of her physicians. A settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although transient affections of a partially cataleptical character, were the unusual diagnosis. Hitherto she had steadily borne up against the pressure of her malady, and had not betaken herself finally to bed; but, on the closing in of the evening of my arrival at

the house, she succumbed, as her brother told me at night with inexpressible agitation, to the prostrating power of the destroyer—and I learned that the glimpse I had obtained of her person would thus probably be the last I should obtain—that the lady, at least while living, would be seen by me no more.

For several days ensuing, her name was unmentioned by either Usher or myself; and, during this period, I was busied in earnest endeavors to alleviate the melancholy of my friend. We painted and read together—or I listened, as if in a dream, to the wild improvisations of his speaking guitar. And thus, as a closer and still closer intimacy admitted me more unreservedly into the recesses of his spirit, the more bitterly did I perceive the futility of all attempt at cheering a mind from which darkness, as if an inherent positive quality, poured forth upon all objects of the moral and physical universe, in one unceasing radiation of gloom.

I shall ever bear about me, as Moslemin their shrouds at Mecca, a memory of the many solemn hours I thus spent alone with the master of the House of Usher. Yet I should fail in any attempt to convey an idea of the exact character of the studies, or of the occupations, in which he involved me, or led me the way. An excited and highly distempered ideality threw a sulphurous lustre over all. His long improvised dirges will ring for ever in my ears. Among other things, I bear painfully in mind a certain singular perversion and amplification of the wild air of the last waltz of Von Weber. From the paintings over which his elaborate fancy brooded, and which grew, touch by touch, into vaguenesses at which I shuddered the more thrillingly, because I shuddered knowing not why, from these paintings (vivid as there their images now are before me) I would in vain endeavor to educe more than a small portion which should lie within the compass of merely written words. By the utter simplicity, by the nakedness, of his designs, he arrested and over-awed attention. If ever mortal painted an idea, that mortal was Roderick Usher. For me at least—in the circumstances then surrounding me—there arose out of the pure abstractions which the hypochondriac contrived to throw upon his canvas, an intensity of intolerable awe, no shadow of which felt I ever yet in the contemplation of the certainly glowing yet too concrete reveries of Fuseli.

One of the phantasmagoric conceptions of my friend, partaking not so rigidly of the spirit of abstraction, may be shadowed forth, although feebly, in words. A small picture presented the interior of an immensely long and rectangular vault or tunnel, with low walls, smooth, white, and without interruption or device. Certain accessory points of the design served well to convey the idea that this excavation lay at an exceeding depth below the surface of the earth. No outlet was observed in any portion of its vast extent, and no torch, or other artificial source of light was discernible—yet a flood of intense rays rolled throughout, and bathed the whole in a ghastly and inappropriate splendor.

I have just spoken of that morbid condition of the auditory nerve which rendered all music intolerable to the sufferer, with the exception of certain effects of stringed instruments. It was, perhaps, the narrow limits to which he thus confined himself upon the guitar, which gave birth, in great measure, to the fantastic character of his performances. But the fervid *facility* of his impromptus could not be so accounted for. They must have been, and were, in the notes, as well as in the words of his wild fantasias, (for he not unfrequently accompanied himself with rhymed verbal improvisations,) the result of that intense mental collectedness and concentration to which I have previously alluded as observable only in particular moments of the highest artificial excitement. The words of one of these rhapsodies I have easily borne away in memory. I was, perhaps, the more forcibly impressed with it, as he gave it, because, in the under or mystic current of its meaning, I fancied that I perceived, and for the first time, a full consciousness on the part of Usher, of the tottering of his lofty reason upon her throne. The verses, which were entitled “The Haunted Palace,” ran very nearly, if not accurately, thus:

I.

In the greenest of our valleys,
 By good angels tenanted,
 Once a fair and stately palace—
 Radiant palace—reared its head.
 In the monarch Thought's dominion—
 It stood there!
 Never seraph spread a pinion
 Over fabric half so fair.

II.

Banners yellow, glorious, golden,
 On its roof did float and flow
 (This—all this—was in the olden
 Time long ago);
 And every gentle air that dallied,
 In that sweet day,
 Along the ramparts plumed and pallid,
 A wingèd odor went away.

III.

Wanderers in that happy valley
 Through two luminous windows saw
 Spirits moving musically
 To a lute's well-tunèd law;
 Round about a throne, where sitting
 (Porphyrogene!)
 In state his glory well befitting,
 The ruler of the realm was seen.

IV.

And all with pearl and ruby glowing
 Was the fair palace door,
 Through which came flowing, flowing, flowing
 And sparkling evermore,
 A troop of Echoes whose sweet duty
 Was but to sing,
 In voices of surpassing beauty,
 The wit and wisdom of their king.

V.

But evil things, in robes of sorrow,
 Assailed the monarch's high estate;
 (Ah, let us mourn, for never morrow
 Shall dawn upon him, desolate!)
 And, round about his home, the glory
 That blushed and bloomed
 Is but a dim-remembered story
 Of the old time entombed.

VI.

And travellers now within that valley,
 Through the red-litten windows see
 Vast forms that move fantastically
 To a discordant melody;
 While, like a rapid ghastly river,

Through the pale door,
A hideous throng rushed out forever,
And laugh—but smile no more.

I well remember that suggestions arising from this ballad led us into a train of thought wherein there became manifest an opinion of Usher's which I mention not so much on account of its novelty, (for other men have thought thus,) as on account of the pertinacity with which he maintained it. This opinion, in its general form, was that of the sentience of all vegetable things. But, in his disordered fancy, the idea had assumed a more daring character, and trespassed, under certain conditions, upon the kingdom of inorganization. I lack words to express the full extent, or the earnest *abandon* of his persuasion. The belief, however, was connected (as I have previously hinted) with the gray stones of the home of his forefathers. The condition of the sentience had been here, he imagined, fulfilled in the method of collocation of these stones—in the order of their arrangement, as well as in that of the many fungi which overspread them, and of the decayed trees which stood around—above all, in the long undisturbed endurance of this arrangement, and in its reduplication in the still waters of the tarn. Its evidence—the evidence of the sentience—was to be seen, he said, (and I here started as he spoke,) in *the gradual yet certain condensation of an atmosphere of their own about the waters and the walls*. The result was discoverable, he added, in that silent, yet importunate and terrible influence which for centuries had moulded the destinies of his family, and which made *him* what I now saw him—what he was. Such opinions need no comment, and I will make none.

Our books—the books which, for years, had formed no small portion of the mental existence of the invalid—were, as might be supposed, in strict keeping with this character of phantasm. We pored together over such works as the *Vervet et Chartreuse* of Gresset; the *Belphegor* of Machiavelli; the *Selenography* of Brewster; the *Heaven and Hell* of Swedenborg; the *Subterranean Voyage* of Nicholas Klimm de Holberg; the *Chiromancy* of Robert Flud, of Jean d'Indaginé, and of De la Chambre; the *Journey into the Blue Distance* of Tieck; and the *City of the Sun* of Campanella. One favorite volume was a small octavo edition of the *Directorium Inquisitorium*, by the Dominican Eymeric de Gironne; and there were passages in *Pomponius Mela*, about the old African Satyrs and ægipans, over which Usher would sit dreaming for hours. His chief delight, however, was found in the earnest and repeated perusal of an exceedingly rare and curious book in quarto Gothic—the manual of a forgotten church—the *Vigilæ Mortuorum secundum Chorum Ecclesiae Maguntinae*.

I could not help thinking of the wild ritual of this work, and of its probable influence upon the hypochondriac, when, one evening, having informed me abruptly that the lady Madeline was no more, he stated his intention of preserving her corpse for a fortnight, previously to its final interment, in one of the numerous vaults within the main walls of the building. The worldly reason, however, assigned for this singular proceeding, was one which I did not feel at liberty to dispute. The brother had been led to his resolution (so he told me) by considerations of the unusual character of the malady of the deceased, of certain obtrusive and eager inquiries on the part of her medical men, and of the remote and exposed situation of the burial ground of the family. I will not deny that when I called to mind the sinister countenance of the person whom I met upon the staircase, on the day of my arrival at the house, I had no desire to oppose what I regarded as at best but a harmless, and not by any means an unnatural precaution.

At the request of Usher, I personally aided him in the arrangements for the temporary entombment. The body having been encoffined, we two alone bore it to its rest. The vault in which we placed it (and which had been so long unopened that our torches, half smothered in its oppressive atmosphere, gave us little opportunity for investigation) was small, damp, and utterly without means of admission for light; lying, at great depth, immediately beneath that portion of the building in which was my own sleeping apartment. It had been used, apparently, in remote feudal times, for the worst purposes of a donjon-keep, and, in later days, as a place of deposit for powder, or other highly combustible substance, as a portion of its floor, and the whole interior of a long archway through which we reached it, were carefully sheathed with copper. The door, of massive iron, had been, also, similarly protected. Its immense weight caused an unusually sharp grating sound, as it moved upon its hinges.

Having deposited our mournful burden upon tressels within this region of horror, we partially turned aside the yet unscrewed lid of the coffin, and looked upon the face of the tenant. The exact similitude between the brother and sister even here again startled and confounded me. Usher, divining, perhaps, my thoughts, murmured out some few words from which I learned that the deceased and himself had been twins, and that sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature had always existed between them. Our glances, however, rested not long upon the dead—for we could not regard her unawed. The disease which had thus entombed the lady in the maturity of youth, had left, as usual in all maladies of a strictly cataleptical character, the mockery of a faint blush upon the bosom and the face, and that suspiciously lingering smile upon the lip which is so terrible in death. We replaced and screwed down

the lid, and, having secured the door of iron, made our way, with toil, into the scarcely less gloomy apartments of the upper portion of the house.

And now, some days of bitter grief having elapsed, an observable change came over the features of the mental disorder of my friend. His ordinary manner had vanished. His ordinary occupations were neglected or forgotten. He roamed from chamber to chamber with hurried, unequal, and objectless step. The pallor of his countenance had assumed, if possible, a more ghastly hue—but the luminousness of his eye had utterly gone out. The once occasional huskiness of his tone was heard no more; and a tremulous quaver, as if of extreme terror, habitually characterized his utterance. There were times, indeed, when I thought his unceasingly agitated mind was laboring with an oppressive secret, to divulge which he struggled for the necessary courage. At times, again, I was obliged to resolve all into the mere inexplicable vagaries of madness, as I beheld him gazing upon vacancy for long hours, in an attitude of the profoundest attention, as if listening to some imaginary sound. It was no wonder that his condition terrified—that it infected me. I felt creeping upon me, by slow yet certain degrees, the wild influences of his own fantastic yet impressive superstitions.

It was, most especially, upon retiring to bed late in the night of the seventh or eighth day after the entombment of the lady Madeline, that I experienced the full power of such feelings. Sleep came not near my couch—while the hours waned and waned away. I struggled to reason off the nervousness which had dominion over me. I endeavored to believe that much, if not all of what I felt, was due to the phantasmagoric influence of the gloomy furniture of the room—of the dark and tattered draperies, which, tortured into motion by the breath of a rising tempest, swayed fitfully to and fro upon the walls, and rustled uneasily about the decorations of the bed. But my efforts were fruitless. An irrepressible tremor gradually pervaded my frame; and, at length, there sat upon my very heart an incubus of utterly causeless alarm. Shaking this off with a gasp and a struggle, I uplifted myself upon the pillows, and, peering earnestly within the intense darkness of the chamber, harkened I know not why, except that an instinctive spirit prompted me—to certain low and indefinite sounds which came, through the pauses of the storm, at long intervals, I knew not whence. Overpowered by an intense sentiment of horror, unaccountable yet unendurable, I threw on my clothes with haste, for I felt that I should sleep no more during the night, and endeavored to arouse myself from the pitiable condition into which I had fallen, by pacing rapidly to and fro through the apartment.

I had taken but few turns in this manner, when a light step on an adjoining staircase arrested my attention. I presently recognized it as that of Usher. In an instant afterwards he rapped, with a gentle touch, at my door, and entered, bearing a lamp. His countenance was, as usual, cadaverously wan—but there was a species of mad hilarity in his eyes—an evidently restrained hysteria in his whole demeanor. His air appalled me—but any thing was preferable to the solitude which I had so long endured, and I even welcomed his presence as a relief.

“And you have not seen it?” he said abruptly, after having stared about him for some moments in silence—“you have not then seen it?—but, stay! you shall.” Thus speaking, and having carefully shaded his lamp, he hurried to one of the gigantic casements, and threw it freely open to the storm.

The impetuous fury of the entering gust nearly lifted us from our feet. It was, indeed, a tempestuous yet sternly beautiful night, and one wildly singular in its terror and its beauty. A whirlwind had apparently collected its force in our vicinity; for there were frequent and violent alterations in the direction of the wind; and the exceeding density of the clouds (which hung so low as to press upon the turrets of the house) did not prevent our perceiving the life-like velocity with which they flew careering from all points against each other, without passing away into the distance. I say that even their exceeding density did not prevent our perceiving this—yet we had no glimpse of the moon or stars—nor was there any flashing forth of the lightning. But the under surfaces of the huge masses of agitated vapor, as well as all terrestrial objects immediately around us, were glowing in the unnatural light of a faintly luminous and distinctly visible gaseous exhalation which hung about and enshrouded the mansion.

“You must not—you shall not behold this!” said I, shudderingly, to Usher, as I led him, with a gentle violence, from the window to a seat. “These appearances, which bewilder you, are merely electrical phenomena not uncommon—or it may be that they have their ghastly origin in the rank miasma of the tarn. Let us close this casement—the air is chilling and dangerous to your frame. Here is one of your favorite romances. I will read, and you shall listen—and so we will pass away this terrible night together.”

The antique volume which I had taken up was the *Mad Trist* of Sir Launcelot Canning—but I had called it a favorite of Usher’s more in sad jest than in earnest; for, in truth, there is little in its uncouth and unimaginative prolixity which could have had interest for the lofty and spiritual ideality of my friend. It was, however, the only book immediately at hand; and I indulged a vague hope that the excitement which now agitated the hypochondriac might find relief (for the history of mental disorder is full of similar anomalies) even in the extremeness of the folly which I should read. Could I have judged, indeed, by the wild, overstrained air of vivacity with which he harkened, or apparently harkened, to the

words of the tale, I might have well congratulated myself upon the success of my design.

I had arrived at that well-known portion of the story where Ethelred, the hero of the Trist, having sought in vain for peaceable admission into the dwelling of the hermit, proceeds to make good an entrance by force. Here, it will be remembered, the words of the narrative run thus —

“And Ethelred, who was by nature of a doughty heart, and who was now mighty withal, on account of the powerfulness of the wine which he had drunken, waited no longer to hold parley with the hermit, who, in sooth, was of an obstinate and maliceful turn, but, feeling the rain upon his shoulders, and fearing the rising of the tempest, uplifted his mace outright, and, with blows, made quickly room in the plankings of the door for his gauntleted hand, and now pulling therewith sturdily, he so cracked, and ripped, and tore all asunder, that the noise of the dry and hollow-sounding wood alarummed and reverberated throughout the forest.”

At the termination of this sentence I started, and, for a moment, paused; for it appeared to me (although I at once concluded that my excited fancy had deceived me)—it appeared to me that, from some very remote portion of the mansion or of its vicinity, there came, indistinctly, to my ears, what might have been, in its exact similarity of character, the echo (but a stifled and dull one certainly) of the very cracking and ripping sound which Sir Launcelot had so particularly described. It was, beyond doubt, the coincidence alone which had arrested my attention; for, amid the rattling of the sashes of the casements, and the ordinary commingled noises of the still increasing storm, the sound, in itself, had nothing, surely, which should have interested or disturbed me. I continued the story.

“But the good champion Ethelred, now entering within the door, was sore enraged and amazed to perceive no signal of the maliceful hermit; but, in the stead thereof, a dragon of a scaly and prodigious demeanor, and of a fiery tongue, which sate in guard before a palace of gold, with a floor of silver; and upon the wall there hung a shield of shining brass with this legend enwritten —

Who entereth herein, a conqueror hath bin,
Who slayeth the dragon, the shield he shall win.

And Ethelred uplifted his mace, and struck upon the head of the dragon, which fell before him, and gave up his pesty breath, with a shriek so horrid and harsh, and withal so piercing, that Ethelred had fain to close his ears with his hands against the dreadful noise of it, the like whereof was never before heard.”

Here again I paused abruptly, and now with a feeling of wild amazement—for there could be no doubt whatever that, in this instance, I did actually hear (although from what direction it proceeded I found it impossible to say) a low and apparently distant, but harsh, protracted, and most unusual screaming or grating sound—the exact counterpart of what my fancy had already conjured up as the sound of the dragon’s unnatural shriek as described by the romancer.

Oppressed, as I certainly was, upon the occurrence of this second and most extraordinary coincidence, by a thousand conflicting sensations, in which wonder and extreme terror were predominant, I still retained sufficient presence of mind to avoid exciting, by any observation, the sensitive nervousness of my companion. I was by no means certain that he had noticed the sounds in question; although, assuredly, a strange alteration had, during the last few minutes, taken place in his demeanor. From a position fronting my own, he had gradually brought round his chair, so as to sit with his face to the door of the chamber, and thus I could but partially perceive his features, although I saw that his lips trembled as if he were murmuring inaudibly. His head had dropped upon his breast—yet I knew that he was not asleep, from the wide and rigid opening of the eye, as I caught a glance of it in profile. The motion of his body, too, was at variance with this idea—for he rocked from side to side with a gentle yet constant and uniform sway. Having rapidly taken notice of all this, I resumed the narrative of Sir Launcelot, which thus proceeded: —

“And now, the champion, having escaped from the terrible fury of the dragon, bethinking himself of the brazen shield, and of the breaking up of the enchantment which was upon it, removed the carcass from out of the way before him, and approached valorously over the silver pavement of the castle to where the shield was upon the wall; which in sooth tarried not for his full coming, but fell down at his feet upon the silver floor, with a mighty great and terrible ringing sound.”

No sooner had these syllables passed my lips, than—as if a shield of brass had indeed, at the moment, fallen heavily upon a floor of silver—I became aware of a distinct, hollow, metallic, and clangorous, yet apparently muffled reverberation. Completely unnerved, I started convulsively to my feet, but the measured rocking movement of Usher was undisturbed. I rushed to the chair in which he sat. His eyes were bent fixedly before him, and throughout his whole countenance there reigned a more than stony rigidity. But, as I laid my hand upon his shoulder, there came a strong shudder over his frame; a sickly smile quivered about his lips; and I saw that he spoke in a low, hurried, and gibbering murmur, as if unconscious of my presence. Bending closely over his person, I at length drank in the hideous import of his words.

“Not hear it?—yes, I hear it, and *have* heard it. Long—long—long—many minutes, many hours, many days, have I heard it—yet I dared not—oh, pity me, miserable wretch that I am!—I dared not—I *dared* not speak! *We have put her living in the tomb!* Said I not that my senses were acute? I *now* tell you that I heard her first feeble movements in the hollow coffin. I heard them—many, many days ago—yet I dared not—I *dared not speak!* And now—to-night—Ethelred—ha! ha!—the breaking of the hermit’s door, and the death-cry of the dragon, and the clangor of the shield—say, rather, the rending of the coffin, and the grating of the iron hinges, and her struggles within the coppered archway of the vault! Oh whither shall I fly? Will she not be here anon? Is she not hurrying to upbraid me for my haste? Have I not heard her footsteps on the stair? Do I not distinguish that heavy and horrible beating of her heart? Madman!”—here he sprung violently to his feet, and shrieked out his syllables, as if in the effort he were giving up his soul—“Madman! *I tell you that she now stands without the door!*”

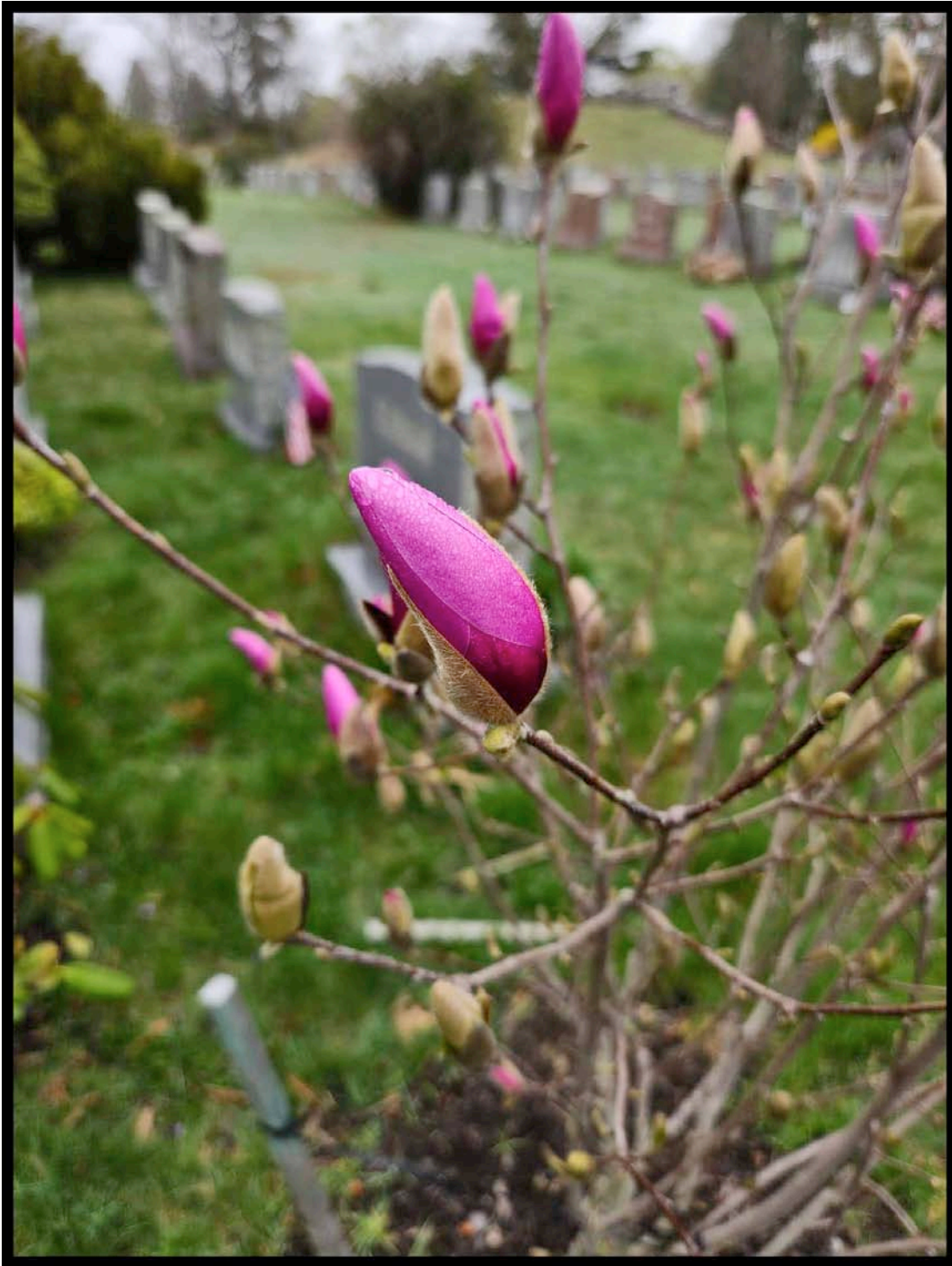
As if in the superhuman energy of his utterance there had been found the potency of a spell—the huge antique pannels to which the speaker pointed, threw slowly back, upon the instant, their ponderous and ebony jaws. It was the work of the rushing gust—but then without those doors there *did* stand the lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline of Usher. There was blood upon her white robes, and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame. For a moment she remained trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold—then, with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her horrible and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had dreaded.

From that chamber, and from that mansion, I fled aghast. The storm was still abroad in all its wrath as I found myself crossing the old causeway. Suddenly there shot along the path a wild light, and I turned to see whence a gleam so unusual could have issued—for the vast house and its shadows were alone behind me. The radiance was that of the full, setting, and blood-red moon, which now shone vividly through that once barely-discernible fissure, of which I have before spoken, as extending from the roof of the building, in a zig-zag direction, to the base. While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened—there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind—the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight—my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder—there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters—and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the “*House of Usher.*”

* * * * *



Aubrey Beardsley - Roderick Usher (1894-1895)



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine [a new fixtion]

Pat Weir
 "I tell you, there are more worlds
 and more doors to them
 than you will think of in many years!"
 —George Macdonald
Lilith, 1875

liv.

To return to the narrative, & a fair certainty that it already contains much of its needed forward propulsion, & new days & hours will provide the rest.

Always to write from the moment's deepest potent. And I think this is Gate-Keeper returning to wake on Abe's Beach of Many Worlds.

"I don't know if I am ready & able to help the Brother-Heroes."

"Do you wish to?"

"I wish . . . to free & be free of where & who I come from. Not abandon them, while they seem imprisoned still. But to move on, when I can. Whatever I am to be, to do, comes from back there & then, but I need to move on."

Abe the Ancient Sea Turtle long considers these words, flipper upon chin. Then he quietly nods.

lv.

J'z'hin. She's still with shadowy me. I dress her for my fancy. Long red hair. Green eyes. Skirt short as a whisper.

We smile warmly close but I'd rather her at her task.

Still, how does one enter the Room of Song? Oh, jeremiad, not by a single way.

And wonders what she will bring out & how. Maybe by Gate-Keeper's slice of his camera lens. Maybe else.

"You will find each of the Six Brother-Heroes in there, guise to each, & bring away something too.

Bring these back to me.”

She nods. Seems ready. Looks around the Imagianna Castle hallway we'd been walking together. I am gone. But a green-&-golden glowing door up ahead.

lvi.

To cast near & widely around, eyes & ears & every sense, & fish a little for this, & lure a little for that, collect an amalgam of words & trinkets & experiences, now here on this table, in a rude little pile, & now begin to mold it into something, not so good or so bad, but something to use, to wield, to teach by where possible, & where less so, a tool, a weapon if need be, a path on, whatever hard, stupid men threaten,

call this something Art, like I do, or call it else if need be—

Do this work because it is the best of me, the best I have, the best I am—

What chews blindly down this great, beautiful world ever there, ever around, ever chewing—doesn't mean Beauty is diminishing—no, means to make *more* & tend it *better*.

lvii.

Write like a motherfucker, old, still good advice, & yet to do, & do *more*, & do *better*, & again, & again—

Where in this *Tangled Gate Mythopoeia* would I be this cold, snowy night? What occurs: Ancienne Coffeehouse.

Sympatico with the Attic Study where I sit scribbling—

Both atmospheres filled with the raw visionary rock of Neil Young & Crazy Horse:

“You are like a hurricane
there's calm in your eyes
& I'm getting blown away
to somewhere safer where
the feeling stays
I want to love you but
I get so blown away”

Drums pounding uphold shrieking guitars & the desperate song of a believer despite all—

Here, Attic Study, I am alone, swathed against cold, peaceful against daylight's news of a vicious man's attack on . . . pretty much everyone—

Ancienne Coffeehouse, where no Pandemic has ever come, crowds fill deep into its long depths—I can be safe here too—

I don't watch anyone in particular, pay no close attention this way or that—just the company of

whoever about—

“Farmer John
I’m in love with your daughter
Yah the one
with the champagne eyes”

Thinking from here, Attic Study, to here, Ancienne Coffeehouse, onto the Castle of Imagianna, & to its Room of Song—where I’ve niggled near for awhile now—

Is it somewhere through & beyond the Liberry? I tend to think: *yes, in a way.*

Well, for example of this, it can be gotten to other ways. Which interests me not to *clarify* but, nearly, to *complexify*.

I don’t think such a place would be come to simply by *one* door.

Then again, a thing becomes more *vivid*, more *knowable*, by its *details*.

So to say, *most* will come to it, *most* of the time, by a door, just not *exclusively*.

All of this to lead, if by somewhat askew pathway, to Cordel’a’s arrival to it.

The green door with the golden edging & doorknob has a sign on it. Looks like a book with a crown on its cover.

“That’s the Liberry,” says a soft, polite voice now near her.

She flinches a little in surprise, but then what she sees delights her far beyond worry.

Two Creatures, standing side by side, looking at her, friendly but shy as Creatures are. One seems like a Turtle, but upright, clothed almost like a Poet? The other, also upright, an orange Bunny, also dressed, more simply, but with funny little spectacles perched on her nose.

“Hello,” she nearly hiccups.

They nod & smile, still shy than her.

“My name is Cordel’a.”

The orange Bunny smiles her kindly & says, “I am Lori. And this is Boop. He looks like a Turtle but isn’t one.”

Boop bows politely to her.

Cordel’a smiles plainly now, charmed beyond all.

“Are you looking for the Liberry, Miss Cordel’a?” asks Boop smiling.

She thinks a moment. “Well, honestly, I am looking for the Room of Song.”

They nod but a bit uncertainly now.

“Is it in the Liberry?” she asks.

Boop & Lori look at each other, seem almost to exchange a sniff. Cordel’a waits them patiently.

Then she suddenly explains, if it will help. “I was sent to help the Six Brother-Heroes.”

This Boop & Lori understand better somehow. Lori adjusts her spectacles & says, "People-folks sometimes struggle with it."

Cordel'a nods, encouragingly.

They look at each other, seeming more sure now. "We can teach you, Miss Cordel'a," says Boop. Cordel'a smiles & nods to their kindly offer.

lviii.

Gate-Keeper has been sent by Abe the Ancient Sea Turtle through the door of the little shack near where he lives on the Beach of Many Worlds.

"Have I learned all you can teach me?"

Ancient eyes twinkle. "For now."

"Where am I going now?"

"What do you do best?"

"I . . . I film. Make **RemoteLand**."

"That's where."

"I don't understand."

Quiet a long time between them, peaceful really. Gate-Keeper has long learned that Abe answers when ready. And then he answers well.

"Finishing your circuit, & helping the Brother Knights are part of the same thing for you now."

"And helping my home-world."

"All one."

Gate-Keeper nods.

The Deeper Deeper Sea by which they repose together *swish-swish-swishes* most peaceably too. Every moment here, in this timeless place, is like medicine, the kind that salves & clarifies too.

"Film your way along, as you long have, but with more intention toward all this. All one. It will feel like your path now, more & more, as you go."

Gate-Keeper listens, nods. *Swish-swish-swish*.

"Will we see each other again?"

Ancient eyes twinklier. "At the Festival of course."

Gate-Keeper smiles too. "I'm glad."

Abe nods, but a bit serious now. "Saving the Many Worlds won't be easy. You'll need everyone of every kind."

Gate-Keeper nods. Now stands, & hugs as much of Abe as he can.

Walks up the rickety few steps of the shack, waves at Abe one more time, & pushes the door open to enter. His Tripod Camera in hand as he knows he will soon be somewhere far else.

lix.

He wakes, he thinks, on a large bed in a hotel room, not his own, his Tripod Camera in his arms, held close as a lover wishing not to go—

No, not his hotel room at all, & more to this than simply another hotel—

There was too much of something here, like this bed, or this room, was . . . sinking? Leaking?

No wonder his Tripod Camera was keeping close!

But Gate-Keeper sat up, sort of shook it all off, & set to work—sitting in bed still, to be safe for now, & props his Camera's legs long & low for him to use—face to lens hand starting to crank—

Pans around the room, slowly, the picture wobbling oddly, he cranks & cranks, pans up to ceiling which seems to retreat back forever, & now down, down, down, like depths descended to the floor, down, down, to something coming into view, what that, *what that?*

A strange old box?

Fellow ship on these odd hotel room waters? And now it's moving nearer the bed, currents bringing it nearer, & near, cranks & cranks,

Covered in raw old sigils, carved in, burned in, cranks & cranks closer—

Lean over to grasp it, tug it from the strange waters, but it seems for a moment like they are tugging back! Feel like a fish being caught, nearly—

But, *yoink!* I fall back on bed with box in my grip. Held close, I examine its many dents, its scorch marks, its exotic sigils, few of which I can read. I think a White Bunny on the lid, an Imp on the bottom. Not much more I know.

My Tripod Camera makes strange sounds next to me. Growling? I listen. No. More sounds of . . . curiosity?

"I am too, friend," I say softly.

But first I set it on the bed before us, me sitting cross-legged, & I pull my Tripod Camera into filming position before me. "Let's see what we can find out together," I say again.

I place my face against the glass eye to view, & slowly *crank-crank-crank* to study.

Nothing at first. Almost resistant to this try? Hm. I speak, honestly.

"We are curious about you, if you willing to tell. I want to know you better, before opening your lid even. I hope you are willing. We offer friendship only."

Start to *crank-crank-crank*. Hm. Now getting somewhere?



lx.

Attic Study, again swathed in hat & blanket & coat & sweater, & to keep the closest company, Phish 12/31/2024, NYC, NY, on beloved Polly iPod via wee Sony speakers—napped earlier with Geo. MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind* held in my lap, decorations by Arthur Hughes, of course, nearly done, its delights as wonderfully mysterious as every volume I've read of his—

But time to work, & why this interstice to two current narratives? No real reason, really, just how *Lx* is, a wonderfully mysterious thing of its own, not MacDonald, but finely itself—

Temporary crown back in my upper jaw, screwed & glued in today, a good thing—my dentist a fine craftsperson, attends closely & imaginatively her work, a pleasure to watch work, to query & thus learn—

It's good to be back in this book for true, writing new pages on paper, not just in my head—

The words are always waiting me—happy me, grateful me—continue—

lxi.

Cordel'a finds herself becoming a bit different as she follows along these lovely Creatures, shifting to less what someone else would have, or at least prefer, & more to what she naturally seems to be—

Her hair even longer, more rainbow-hued now, braids among curls among long flows of strands—Her clothes, too, more Woodsy somehow, lay upon her longer & looser—her feet bare now—she tries less, & thus becomes more, easily—

Even when they bring her into the company of a tall, lanky-figured gentleman, she does not jerk nor twist within—

The Liberry had winded down twisty stairs, & then among vast reaches of book-cases, some tall as the tallest-seeming sky, some waist-high to the quietest daydream—& then eventually come to a White Birch tree, in an open patch of green grass, within cloudier surroundings—

As she'd followed them here, Lori hopping alongside striding Boop in front of & below her, Lori explained some things. She sensed to listen close.

“Boop & I came here to learn more about his people, & we discovered why they look like turtles but aren't turtles.”

“Why?” asked Cordel'a.

Boop stopped & looked up at her.

“Because we had to transform to this form long ago.”

Cordel'a nods, uncertainly, but OK.

Boop smiled her kindly, though, & tapped his hard shell. “This protects me within.”

She nods, yes.

“And anyone else with me in here.”

Nods again.

“It was long ago,” he adds.

“You had . . . others . . . in your shell with you?” she asks, more uncertainly.
 He nods. “Lots of us did, to protect as many as we could.”
 She nods back. He smiles her kindly as before, if not more so, & they resume walking.

Coming to the White Birch, the tall lanky-figured gentleman sat beneath it with a small shiny volume in his hand. Stands up & smiles at her. She unusually feel no unease or compulsive excitement in the presence of a man.

“I am called Scholar Dan’l,” he says, & holds her hand a moment in greeting.
 “I am Cordel’a,” she says.
 He nods. “They told me you were arrived to be fetched.”
 She was now sat with all of them, in a circle, underneath the White Birch.

He looked at her a long time, in a way appraising her, as men usually did, aware of doing this or not, but also there was something else in his look. He was not wanting the secrets of her desires, her yearning dreams, what she might be for *him*, no. Nothing like that at all. It’s more like he sought her *honesty*, even her *empathy*.

His look left her still clothed, which gazes this long never did.

Now he was nodding down to his lap, to a group of pages in it. Roughly shaped, textured even. He nodded her smiling to study closer.

She selected one at random & studied it gingerly, like she could do this wrong.

“It’s OK,” he softly reassured her. “Just tell us what you make of it.”

On the front she saw the three words:

EVOLUTION
SYNTHESIS
FERMENT

Then on the back side, there was a map.

“How does it feel?”
 “Like, I guess, Moss?”
 “Yes, that seems right to me too. All these are Mossy Scraps.”
 “What is this Map?”
 “That’s Roddy’s. It points from the Great Liberry at the Heart of the Many Worlds to the Manse, where Dreamwalker’s people are from, I believe.”

Cordel’a hands it back to him, clearly confused. She looks at Boop & Lori Bunny. “I’m sorry. I don’t understand.”

Dan’l smiles at her, still kind & patient. “You wish to help the Six Brother-Heroes?”
 She nods.
 “You will bring these Mossy Scraps into the Room of Song, one to each, & they will let you know what message it will carry out.”

She listens, waits for more, but he seems paused, or done.

“How will I find them?”

“By which Scrap you bear foremost.”

“How will they know me?”

He stops & gazes her again, like before. “Each will know you as someone dearly loved & long unseen.”

Takes a long moment for her to catch her breath.

“You don’t have to do this, Miss Cordel’a,” he says, very seriously.

She nods. Considers. Who better than her to do this? She’ll figure it out.

“OK,” she says.

“You sure?”

She smiles, nods, stands to go. Wherever.

lxii.

Faux Lunatic King rages chaos across the lands, damaging follower & foe alike, a squall, a furor, a punishing man who would be but is neither immortal nor omnipotent.

Today’s news? Sure. News of a hundred, a thousand years ago too? Sure. Yes.

To grip much of the human world in one’s hand, & want only to crush it, & want only for it to love you, Faux Lunatic King, & want only for it to worship your cruelty, beg more of it.

And never, ever, *never* will this happen.

You will one day lie inert in a box, like the ones a hundred, a thousand years ago. Inert, boxed, buried, as new days come & go, & you are forgotten, become a listing in history books. Just another mortal, failed human being who could have raised the world up, holy & high, but did not. Soon you will be gone too.

lxiii.

She finds herself in the Room of Song not sure how she’d arrived. A strange *hmmm* still lingering on her lips, likely, & a sense she’d been walking, still barefoot, a fair while—

Here? Well, it *gradually* becomes somewhere . . . sounds . . . of the Sea? *Whoosh whoosh whoosh*—

Yes, now she is definitely walking on the sandy shore alongside the ever-beautiful Wide Wide Sea—

Walks a long while, shore & Sea, peaceful enough. Weary, she finally sits down on the sand, knees up, resting, & watching, & waiting—

Falls into a doze (can one doze here?) (dream?) when she hears a voice far down the shore. A young man’s. She cringes just a bit, nerves, but ready to do her work here.

Yes, he is a Brother-Hero, but I can tell he is probably the youngest. Maybe a little slimmer, frail-appearing. To a casual look.

To one more attending, there is nothing frail about this young man. His slim figure allows him easy swiftness. And maybe a deception to a foe who assesses . . . too casually.

Such what scraps I gather as he approaches. His handsome young face looks disturbed, distracted too. Like he would walk me over & only realize after.

So I cough politely. He jerks, twitches, nearly flees. Then sees me just a girl, seated no less, & he catches himself. Smiles crookedly, embarrassed. *Oh, that smile & any girl too near receiving it . . .*

“Hello.”

He forgets & recalls words, then some right ones.

“Hello, I’m sorry. I didn’t see you.”

I tempt to coyness, wide-eyed innocence. Try a few other girlish angles in my mind.

No. I’m not here as a sex kitten. Fun as that might be.

I stand. “I am Cordel’a.”

He nearly falls over. “That’s my sister’s name! Are you . . . ?”

He looks me over but, like Dan’l, not for assessing worth to hunt & consume. His stress is real.

“Let’s sit.”

He nods, obeys.

I smile at him. “Let’s start slow & get to the harder stuff later, OK?” I smile girlish but kind as I can.

But, again, not a boy. His second study of me is more from his loins, as men do. Know they do? Not much. But nods.

“This is the Room of Song?”

He nods again.

“Your fellow Brother-Heroes are somewhere here too?”

“I think so.”

I pause, thinking. “Would you like to see your Mossy Scrap?”

lxiv.

So, as this book nears 19 years in the writing, how often shift away from narrative(s) to tell of job loss?

Been more than a year. Page 4037 last time. This is p. 4195.

Faux Lunatic King did it to me & thousands this time.

I hope when his end comes it is a choking painful brutal end. His evil acts damage the world. There is

no mercy *in* him nor should there be any *for* him.

Back to the job hunt, & its perpetual test of how much I can gain, keep, & lose of myself through it.

Pen moving. *Tool. Salve. Weapon. Path.*

lxv.

I lift the lid cautiously, *crank-crank-cranking*, not knowing what-all within, almost affeared. Of a box? Yes. A *box*.

But what I find initially are . . . postcards. Two of them poke out of the box's indeed—strange—depths.

The first one flummoxes me. It depicts a kind of a movie poster. For one of my minor films. *More Fun*. Title implies it's a sequel, which it really isn't. I mean, I guess it started out that way, but then soon wasn't.

But this poster, it shows . . . I don't recognize it. Below the words *More Fun* seems a close up of a very old, big tree. The mythical Great Tree I am bound for seeking with the Brother-Heroes?

I study closer, closer than seems possible, still cranking. And then I notice, tiny among the Great Tree's roots, a small sign. On it, a green-&-golden arrow, & seems like the words "Place of Art" below the arrow. Place of Art?

The second postcard seems like a partner to the first. As though, having followed the arrow on the sign of the other postcard, one arrives to a small hut nearby, its door partly opened &, barely visible within, on the wall within view, what seems a thick frozen layer of ice upon it, glinting endless colors.

Keeping cranking, I also reach forward & pluck these two postcards. They feel important . . . for later somehow. Deep into my pockets without even studying their other sides.

Sit back a little on bed, & take a slow breath to think.

One thought clearer than any other: *return to the Festival*.

lxvi.

I don't know coming days jobless again, save the hope that I am as filled with Art as always. And this narrative is tending its way back toward the others.

King Crimson's "Tarkus" on the Attic Radio—Beloved reading in her chair—gusts audible through the roof—Radio We-Are-You.

My work colleagues wished me kindly on my way, even as unsure their own near fates. I used words to succor them, rouse them, make them laugh.

The Lunatic Faux King is going to lose, is losing, even tonight. I do not wish him well. He will never generously share the world with all, never even try. The encrusted kissasses on his old decaying side will flake off as he slowly falls.

He cannot fall soon enough for me. For countless many.

A true leader guards & serves the people. He is none of this.

True leaders will emerge to oppose him, more & more. They will feel compelled to do so, by kind & obsessive natures.

The evil of cruelty will never long win this world. There is deeper power in this world than any of that.

The compulsion to tend one another, whatever kind, roots in survival of all from survival of each.

The deep creative urge of the Universe sweeps past & over countless dimensions where one would demand obeisance from another . . . *because*.

I feel these things *true* while in *no way* able to explain them.

The deeds of good men inspire while bad men rage, ruin, & eventually fall.

This all because there is no choice when the Universe *wills it so*.

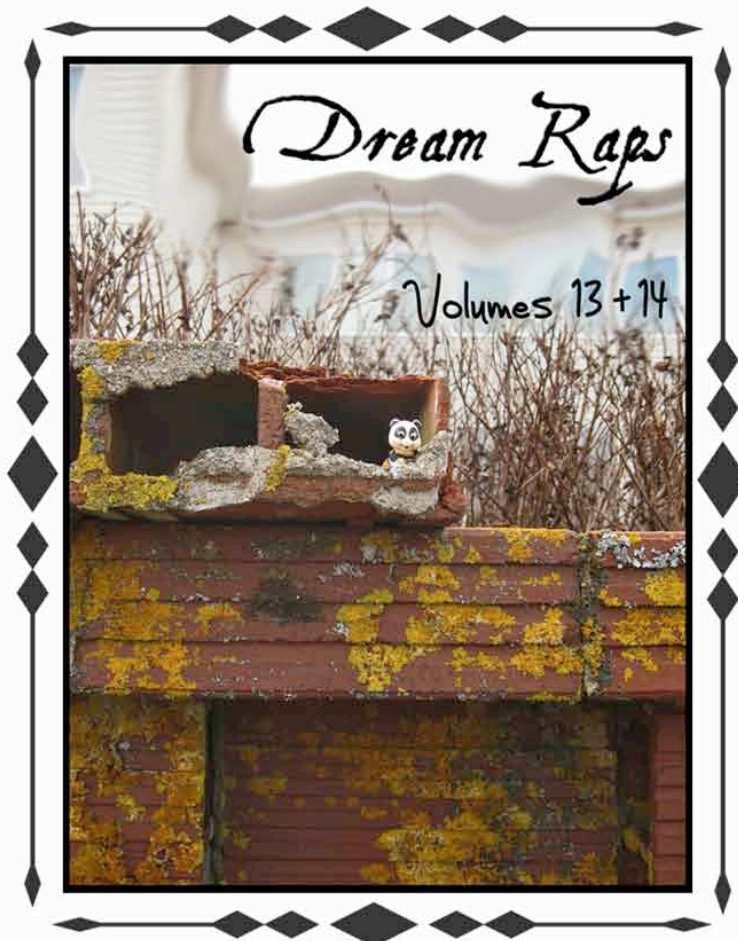


To be continued in Cenacle | 131 | June 2026

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SCENES FROM THE
PSYCHEDELIC REVOLUTION*

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Notes on Contributors

AbandonView lives in the American Rust Belt. His graphic artwork appears regularly in *The Cenacle*. Looking forward to the fruits of your next photographic outing, 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*.

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 haiku & recent longer poems will ever appear regularly in *The Cenacle*. Her 2004 poetry RaiBook, *Spirit World Restless*, can be found at: scriptorpress.com/raibooks/spiritworldrestless.

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 new book, *Societies of the Spirit: Five Mystical Traditions*, published in February 2026 by BookBaby.

Lou Gámez lives in Dayton, Ohio. His essay in this issue is his first non-fiction piece for *The Cenacle*, with hope of many more to come in the future.

Nathan D. Horowitz lives in Baltimore, Maryland. Chapters from his epic work, *Nighttime Daydreams*, appear regularly in *The Cenacle*. Teaching students, one way or another, can't slow this educatin' man down!

Colin James lives in western Massachusetts. His poetry appears regularly in *The Cenacle*. We recently engaged together in a battle against post office foolishness. Hope to win soon!

Tamara Miles lives in Elgin, South Carolina. Her poetry appears regularly in *The Cenacle*. And it is wonderful that it does!

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 to be healed of your health challenges very soon! More of her writings can be found at martinaneberry.wordpress.com.

Edgar Allan Poe was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1809, & died in Baltimore, Maryland in 1849. He is rightly considered one of the greatest American short story writers. His story in this issue was reprinted in the Burning Man Books 2001 series: scriptorpress.com/burningmanbooks/nobordersbookstore.html.

Epi Rogan lives in Cork, Ireland. Her photography appears regularly in *The Cenacle*. More of her work can be found at [instagram.com/pieorgan](https://www.instagram.com/pieorgan). Her own literary zine is called *Flotsam*, found at linktr.ee/Flotsammag. What fun to cross-interview for this issue!

Kassandra Soulard lives in Milkrose, Massachusetts. I think hearing your laughter is some kind of deep magick I cannot reckon with words, just wonder . . .

Raymond Soulard, Jr. lives in Milkrose, Massachusetts. This year we start to take back this world from the bastards that hijacked it. Daily at this, but each day brings victory nearer.

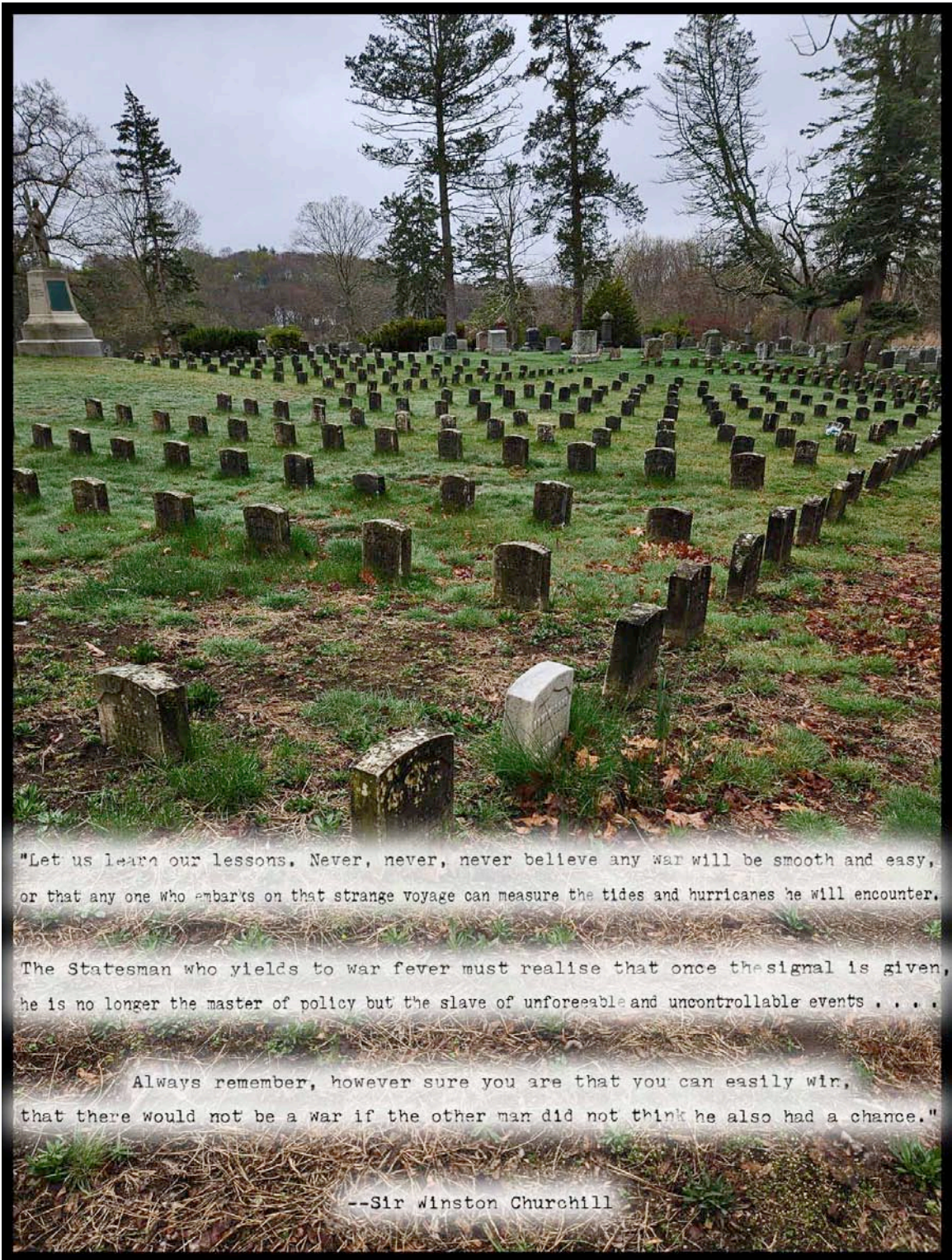
Louis Staebler lives in Bowling Green, Ohio. His photography appears regularly in *The Cenacle*. More of his work can be found at [instagram.com/louiestaebler](https://www.instagram.com/louiestaebler). Amazing to me the days he fills with such great & varied photography.

Madelaine Taylah lives in Victoria, Australia. Her writing appears regularly in *The Cenacle*. More of her work can be found at [instagram.com/thatgirl_books](https://www.instagram.com/thatgirl_books), and at thatgirlbooks.blog. Congratulations on becoming a home owner!

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>.

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"Let us learn our lessons. Never, never, never believe any war will be smooth and easy, or that any one who embarks on that strange voyage can measure the tides and hurricanes he will encounter.

The Statesman who yields to war fever must realise that once the signal is given, he is no longer the master of policy but the slave of unforeseeable and uncontrollable events

Always remember, however sure you are that you can easily win, that there would not be a war if the other man did not think he also had a chance."

--Sir Winston Churchill

