

"We were going to make a million dollars manufacturing objects
we had seen in dreams that night."

--Charles Simic, 1989.

Editor's Introduction

This volume is the fourteenth in a series of annual *Samplers* featuring the best prose, poetry, & artwork published by Scriptor Press in the previous year.

2012 did not prove to be the end of the world which many had feared, & maybe some had hoped for. No, it came & went like every other year before it.

Yet there are countless numbers of ends & beginnings every day. All manner of beings are coming & going all the time. Nothing remains quite the same from one hour to the next. Sometimes we mourn this; sometimes are glad.

Every piece of Art will catch a moment of soul's pause or world's change, & so we keep something of it. In this spirit, I hope you enjoy the many good works in this volume.

Raymond Paulard Jr.
5/20/2013



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Edited by Raymond Soulard, Jr.

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Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Eulogy for James Michael Burke III March 18, 1953 – December 1, 2011

[Edited text of remarks given at St. James Church,
West Hartford, Connecticut, December 9, 2011]

As I write these remarks, I am traveling on a bus from Boston down to Hartford. It is a route I've been traveling on occasion since 1992 when I moved up to Boston, so about 20 years, & would return to visit friends, family, & old favorite places in Connecticut.

Usually waiting at Union Station in Hartford was my dear friend & brother Jim Burke. He'd pull up in whatever car he drove at the time, & would greet me with a hug & a handshake. It was always good to see him, to be hosted by him for a day or two.

Jim loved many things but I think Art, Nature, & family & loved ones were his greatest of loves. I wanted to share a few of his own thoughts on these things today from letters he wrote me over the years; to summon him not by my own memories, but by the enduring force of his being that resides among us today, a week after he died, & I believe will remain, changed the world because he so passionately participated in it.

Jim was a wonderfully good musician, inheriting this gift from his mother, & pursuing it obsessively on his own. He could play a light funny song or dive so deep that spittle, guitar picks, and strings would fly (we called it getting "art-stoned"). He wrote: "*I play the guitar & make the music & then realize I am the music.*" He described himself simply as being "*a musician who enjoys the challenges of being a father,*" & I think this summed things up for him. For those of us who were lucky enough to hear Jim sing & play, the gift he offered was to allow us witness to a mortal being merging with the eternal, become for a little time a confirmation of open passage between the two, that the mortal & the eternal are, in essence, connected parts of the whole.

Jim also imparted to others his profound love of Nature. From Nature he derived evidence of truths that most of us at best intuit consciously in rare, shining, inexplicable moments. Nature is what "*should be,*" he wrote, continuing:



“the twigs on the tree and life from them remind me of infinity. Their language is a mystery until you stop listening—perpetuation is the key. Freedom is obtained through non-action & least resistance. And, after all, what is a tree, without a twig?”

Lastly, but not least, his loved ones. Jim’s love for his daughters, Belinda & Natalie, was, I think for him, the human side of this equation that includes Art & Nature. With them, he did not have to ponder deeply or stretch for a higher note. He woke every morning, lived every hour, & slept every night, with the most awe-inspiring love for them. Simple & complete. He loves them still.

And I say that not to imply that I know where he is now, if in realms of timelessness & perfection, or simply at one with his beloved Nature, or still vibrating here & wherever there is a guitar ringing out for truth & peace & love. I do not know. I can say, however, that as I arrive in Hartford in a short time & see the faces of his girls, & later the faces, your faces, gathered to honor him, I know that he is here & hereon & forever in the ways any good man might be in this mysterious world & Universe we dwell in.

I’d like to close with a poem I wrote for Jim shortly after I learned of his death. I woke from a dream with these lines in my head:

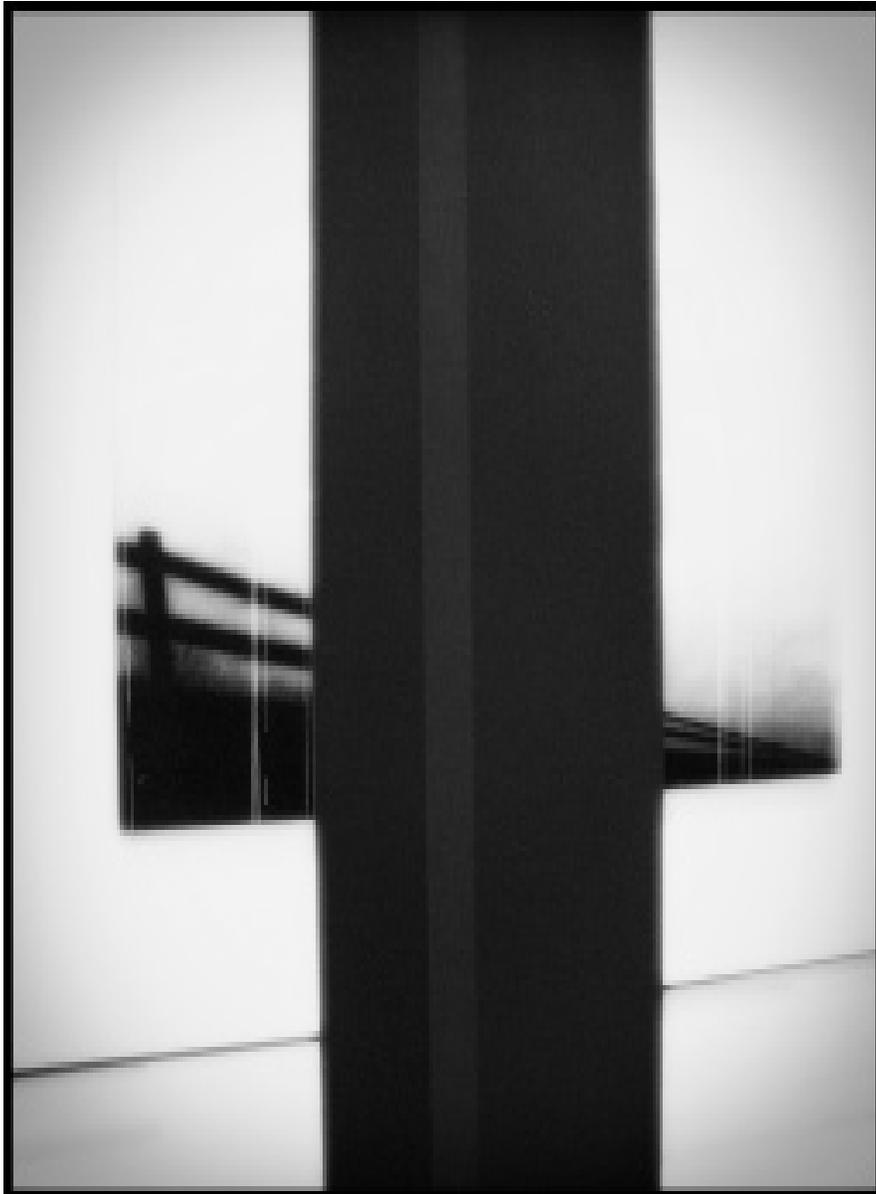
Peace Love Dove

*You’ve become an open handful of light
 You’ve become a curled finger of ash
 You’ve become the star you always were
 A blue eyed wink, & you are gone,
 & you stay, & you stay, & you stay.*

And finally, to paraphrase his favorite rock band, The Who:

*Long Live Jim Burke III!
 12/8/2011*

PS—As evinced by his last letter in *Cenacle 77* | April 2011, Jim was a passionate opponent of the death penalty. On April 25, 2012, about five months after his death, Jim’s adopted home state of Connecticut became the 17th US state to abolish capital punishment.



another morning
hummingbird finds nectar
and so will i

lizard still
on stucco wall
aroused by nothing

a glimpse of light
through the mist
long lost friend

neighbour dog
flat on dry grass
listens for flies



Gateway Mexico
[Journal]

rain passes
far from my lemon tree
dry leaf sigh

soft bird tune
gently greets morning
no longer alone

bean sprouts!
sudden need for attention
and now i'm awake

perhaps now
flamenco dreams
will strut my mind

Real de Catorce has two claims to fame. One is that it was a silver mining town in the 1880s, with 20,000 inhabitants, and then the silver ran out and the population went down to about 800, so for the most part it's a ghost town. The second is that it's near the place in the desert called Wirikuta where the Huichols go on pilgrimage to collect their peyote. So he wanted to travel there, and then fly out of Mexico to Ecuador, where Nate hoped to meet a shaman he could study with.

The second ride he got out of El Nopal dropped him in a larger town called Jesús María. The residents were Coras and *mestizos*. He got to chatting with a *mestizo* cowboy his age and the cowboy offered to let him stay at his place. He loved country and western music, and wanted to know everything about the United States.

The next day, Nate washed his clothes by hand in the river and then spread them out on some rocks to dry in the sun. He sat down to write in his journal. A big pig drifted by, foraging and, it seemed, smiling at him. When the pig was gone, he looked up and found that the big new pink bar of laundry soap he had used to wash his clothes had vanished. He read the list of ingredients on the empty wrapper. The soap had contained lard.

That evening, he was invited to go on a Huichol peyote pilgrimage by the local director of a government agency that was organizing transportation for it. They were drinking beer on a bench in front of the office of the agency—the director wanted to impress his young girlfriend and, in a grandiose gesture, he invited Nate along. The Huichols' peyote pilgrimage was famous. Even before Tritemio told him about it, he had read about it. Maybe he could meet the *patrones* and learn from them. He accepted, of course. He was thrilled.

Later the same evening, they all went to a party, and a man whose face Nate couldn't see in the darkness asked him if he wanted to work for him transporting opium along the highway. He politely declined.

In the morning he told his host about the Huichol pilgrimage. The cowboy was happy for him and told him he was welcome to stay until it set off.

But over the next week, the Huichols who trickled in from their village postponed the departure date again and again, using various nonsensical excuses. He was frustrated, adrift, mystified. He ate *tacos de chorizo* every day, spending more money than he had budgeted, just to cheer himself up. He remembered Jacinto saying he would die if he didn't finish his shamanic education. He wrote anxious letters to Lily. Finally he gave up on the Huichols and hitchhiked out of Jesús María on his own, ending up in Real de Catorce a few days later.

He got off a bus on a sunny street with his backpack, in the shadows of some prickly pear cacti that were growing atop a ruined wall, and immediately met a pretty woman from the States. They got into a conversation. She brought him back to the hotel where she was staying with her Mexican husband, Mario. "Well, he's not actually my husband," she amended. "We just say we're married so we don't get any problems with the people around here. They can be pretty conservative."

The hotel was a collection of run-down buildings around a courtyard. One enclosure off the sunny courtyard held a gigantic pig that was being fattened up for Easter. Lisa brought Nate over and they looked over the gate at the beast. It needed to do nothing but eat all it could and lie in the sun. Like the pig that had eaten his soap, it seemed to be smiling. *He looks like he knows what the deal is, Nate thought, and he's OK with it.* The pig made him think of one of those young Aztec men who were treated as living gods for a year and then sacrificed.

"We woke up one morning to horrible screams," Lisa said. "I thought for sure someone was being murdered. But it turned out they were castrating the pig. There was blood everywhere."

Lisa's boyfriend Mario appeared. As the men were introduced, some tension in his forehead and voice showed he was jealous about Nate chatting with his wife. But after some begging on Nate's part (which was larded with the word *hermano* and the observation that they were both hippies), he disappeared and reappeared with a peyote button for Nate to eat. Thanking the Mexican, the gringo held the small, round cactus in his hand, examining its jade-like body in the sunlight and silently sending it greetings and blessings. As he bit into it, he saw Mario beginning to roll a joint.

The cactus's flesh was exceedingly bitter. Nate couldn't chew it without involuntarily grimacing. It gave the impression of intense freshness and vitality. *Pe-YO-te*. He spoke the word silently as he chewed. It was onomatopoeic. A soft green stone that was alive like the *anás* and thinking about him even as he thought about it. No wonder the indigenous people called it Grandfather Peyote. Mario licked the rolling paper, sealed the joint, and placed it on a stone to dry in the sun, then exchanged a few words in Spanish with Lisa.

Nate sat on the warm stones of the sun-soaked courtyard in the company of these two friendly companions as the joint with its delicious, pungent smoke went around again and again. The ganja takes effect. His perceptions change. The moment becomes timeless. Mario and Lisa are his enlightened companions in eternity. The joint is a kabbalistic squid with tentacles of smoke that shrinks as it uses human hands to fly through the air. Nate replays the events of the past week in his mind and realizes that back in Jesús María, the Huichols simply waited him out. They were right to: they didn't want a stranger along on their sacred pilgrimage. *Ah, I've been a fool again*, he reflects with a smile. He flashes back to the Fool tarot card, a young wanderer skipping close to the edge of a grassy cliff while his white dog barks and the hot sun shines. Nate remembers that it's said that the fool is protected by his own innocence. The gringo closes his eyes and leans back against the warm brick wall. In his mind, he smiles up at the sun and sees that it's full of ecstatic people working to create heat and light, glad that he's become aware of them.

The next morning, he met another man from the US looking for peyote. This was Jack from Las Vegas, a hippie of his parents' generation. Nate decided to join forces with him. They planned their strategy.

Real de Catorce is at the edge of the hills, right next to a desert as flat as a kitchen table. That desert is where the peyote grows. One has to search for the dusty green fleshy mounds under low, scrubby creosote bushes. So on the following day, the two gringos would take one of the ancient deathtrap taxis described in Nate's guidebook down the dangerous incline from Real de Catorce to another village, Estación Catorce. There were places to stay there, and a railway station. Nate had the address of a hotel from Mario. The gringos would strike out into the desert in search of their quarry.

That evening, Nate was eating alone in a chilly, drafty restaurant, when two other travelers came in. In Spanish, he invited them to his table, which was the most sheltered from the wind. "We won't bother you?" asked the younger, dreadlocked one, who looked like an Italian version of Bob Marley. "We'll see if you do or not," said Nate with a smile. He was pretty sure they wouldn't.

He was wrong. The older Italian, Mauricio, cropped-haired and thinly mustached, started ranting about Jews. "They deserved what happened to them in World War Two," he said. "They're dishonest. Plus, look around Latin America. They never travel alone, always in big crowds."

That seemed to be a good time for Nate to step in. "Look at me. I'm a Jew traveling alone," he told the older man. "And there's good and bad in every group. It's no reason to commit genocide. Are all Italians honest?" Mauricio didn't have much to say to him after that.

But the anti-Semite and his more personable dreadlocked companion Franco did accept Nate's invitation to join his and Jack's move to Estación Catorce the following day. The four travelers descended the steep road together in a rattling black taxi, ready to jump out if the brakes failed. They didn't, and the travelers checked into the tiny hotel that Mario had recommended.

The hotel was run by a merry old lady with blue eyes named Señora Sabas. She was ready to put the four of them up in one room with two double beds because she thought that like her Mexican clientele they would want to save money that way. It seemed to surprise her that it was not their custom to sleep two to a bed, but she accepted it. Jack and Nate shared a two-bed room. Peyote seekers had covered the walls with graffiti. "*Muerto estarás mejor,*" noted one scrawl, next to a sketch of an object that was part skull, part peyote cactus—"You'll be better off dead." Jack, stretching out on his warm bed near the sunny window, remarked, "This is better than the Hilton." Equally pleased, Nate took out a felt-tip pen and wrote on the wall, "Better than the Hilton."

Also on the wall was an electricity meter labeled "*Wattthorímetro Thermofascio.*" It dovetailed with something Nate had been thinking about: how strange it must have seemed to the Coras that someone from the distant, incomprehensible United States wanted to learn to be a shaman. It was as if a young man from outer space, insanely wealthy, eight feet tall, and as pale as a sheet of paper, appeared in Brooklyn and went to the Lubovicher Hasidism, saying that he felt he needed to become a rabbi. The gringo thought he could write a science fiction story about this. The visitor's name would be something that sounded as weird to them as his did to the Coras: Wattthorímetro Thermofascio. The Hasidism would think it bizarre that Watt wanted to be a rabbi, but seeing that he was serious about it, and willing to share a pinch of his vast fortune, they would take in the young space traveler and study Talmud with him.

Jack and Nate encountered a friendly Mexican guy in his late 20s scrubbing a pair of jeans in an outdoor sink. He introduced himself as Alberto. He said he had a general idea where the peyote grew because he'd been here the previous year. As they talked, it emerged that he'd been present near the sun dance that Nate had attended in Ajijic. Instead of staying with everyone else, Alberto had spent the week alone, eating peyote in a cave on the same hill.

At midday, Jack, Franco, Alberto, and Nate headed out into the desert on foot. Mauricio the anti-Semite stayed behind to photograph a cemetery.

A car was coming from the village and Alberto flagged it down so they could hitch a ride. There was no room inside but Alberto got them to agree to let the four men stand on the back bumper and grip the smooth roof as best as they could. When the car started up again, Jack immediately fell off. The driver

stopped. Jack got back up and gripped Nate's arm to help stay on, literally whimpering with fear. He nearly yanked him off as the car gathered speed. But Nate was feeling all right and his palms had a good grip on the roof. He figured the road must be very flat or Alberto wouldn't have asked to let them ride back there.

Ten minutes later Alberto tapped the roof. The driver stopped to let them off. They headed out among the creosote bushes, peering around. After a while, Jack found a single peyote cactus. He knelt and cut it as Alberto stipulated: just the top, so the root would regenerate. He gave it to Nate out of gratitude for letting him hold onto him on the car. Nate silently greeted Grandfather Peyote, chewed his bitter emerald jelly flesh, and gauged the blue of the sky to see if it would intensify later. The men kept on walking and searching, searching and walking. Nate had been fasting that day: nothing but a glass of water in the morning. The peyote diminished his hunger and thirst.

After two and a half hours the men stopped to rest under a solitary tree. Between the four of them they had found nothing but that one button, and they would have to think about heading back into town before long so as not to be out in the desert when night fell.

This day and night would be Nate's only opportunity to go on a mental journey with peyote because he had to take the train out of Estación Catorce the following morning, and make his way back to Guadalajara and then Mexico City, en route to Ecuador.

Under the lonesome tree they shared an orange that Franco had brought along. Then Alberto rolled a joint, lit it and passed it around. Suddenly high, as Franco passes the joint to Jack, Alberto and Nate half-smile at each other, each recognizing the other as a kind of zen sage-in-training. The great moment in international communication transpires when it occurs to the four that potheads in every country have special names for the butt end of a marijuana cigarette. In English, it's a roach; in Spanish, *bachita*; in Italian, *cicca*. They wonder how many curious names there are for it in other languages across the world, names coined and employed by people like them in altered states, vocabulary from a language of dream.

Their talk returns to peyote. Nate, who even here is a little ashamed of his weirdness, screws up his courage and says, "Look, I've been studying the Indians' traditions, and they all say that the peyote lets you find it if it wants you to. And they try to pray and get in tune with their environment, and they talk to the peyote with their hearts and tell it why they want to find it. So what would you-all think if we prayed and meditated a little?"

They all agree. Franco blows slow, soft notes on a Bolivian cane flute.



Nate summons his memories of Nezahualcoyotl, James, and Tritemio, then speaks in the direction of the sky: “God! Dios! Elohim! Allah! Mother Earth! Great Spirit! This is your grandson Nate. I’m here with your other grandsons Jack, Alberto, and Franco. We’ve come here from far away. We’ve come here with pure intentions, wanting to find some peyote to help us get a vision of how we can proceed with our lives. Great Spirit, we’re hurting in many ways. Sometimes we get frustrated, not knowing what to do, how to behave, how to live correctly. We want to walk on your path. We want to be better men. Please, if it is your will, share with us some of your sacred medicine and help us learn how to heal our hearts and live in the best possible way for ourselves, for you and for all your creations. *Ho.*”

The four remain still for a few minutes, feeling the earth pressing up underneath them, smelling its dust, listening to the wind whispering in the branches, feeling it on their skin, in their hair.

They stand up and stretch. Barely ten seconds later, Alberto exclaims, “Ah, *aquí está.*” He’s noticed three peyote buttons growing together in a clump, and he bends to cut them. After that, they begin to find the cacti all around, as many as they wish, and they kneel to cut them, delightedly, carefully. Nate bites into a button, savoring the tough, bitter flesh, rejoicing that the spirit world is real, loving, and responsive.

It’s Franco who finds the largest button. This specimen looks so much like the face of a smiling clown that Nate takes a picture of it. He is mistakenly convinced that this will prove once and for all the existence of the spirit world and the validity of shamanism.

They’re walking on the road in the direction of Estación Catorce when Jack remarks, “You know, it sounds crazy but it almost seems like praying helped us find the peyote.”

Through a mouthful of cactus, Nate mutters, “Yeah.” *Duh.*

A little later, Jack remarks, “I wish we had a ride back into town.”

Nate says, “Why don’t you pray for one?”

Jack says, “Hm.”

Five minutes later a pickup truck stops and they climb in the back and head toward Estación Catorce.

Nate has read that peyote can amplify one’s sense of balance, and he finds this true. As they speed down the road he stands in the back of the pickup without fear, not holding on to anything, just chatting with his new friends, keeping an eye on the smooth road ahead. The people in the cab wave at him to sit down. Disappointed, he obeys.

Back in town they find Maurice looking very civilized, having a chicken

dinner at a tiny square metal table outside a tiny restaurant. Jack and Nate buy cheese and tortillas and return to the hotel while Alberto and Franco stay in town to try to buy marijuana.

Jack wants to go to sleep early. Alberto and Franco get back to the hotel and they and Nate go into Alberto's room. They unwrap a piece of newspaper with plenty of ganja in it, and begin to roll joints. Nate lights a fire in the fireplace in the corner of the room, melts cheese over tortillas and feeds the three of them. Still eating peyote slowly and steadily, one button per hour, he passes up the pot most of the time. Alberto has a guitar and some photocopies of Beatles lyrics, so they sing in between conversations in Spanish.

Franco remarks, "I feel a little nauseous from the peyote and I wonder if I should make myself throw up."

Alberto says, "Sometimes it's best to just let it settle."

Nate counters, "No, it's always better to purify yourself. Even if you feel just a little nauseous when you're in the middle of the city, like on the steps outside a bank." Alberto and Franco double up in laughter. Nate mimes vomiting, and speaks to an imaginary passerby: "Terribly sorry, madam, I simply must purify myself, you know."

Franco stands up and stretches and inquires petulantly of the universe, "I wonder if there's any place in town that would be open to sell me a beer right now."

Of course there isn't. Alberto, who is ordinarily very laid back, erupts, "Half an ounce of dope on the table and all this fucking Italian can think about is beer!" They all laugh until their bellies hurt.

The gringo heads outside to look at the stars. Señora Sabas is standing at the gate. "What are you doing?" she quizzes. It's about midnight.

"When one eats peyote, one often has the urge to go look at the stars," he says.

"I never took peyote," she says.

"*Cada quien a su gusto*," he says. To each his own. They chat for a while. She tells him about her life in that town, and how her grandfather came from Germany, which explains her blue eyes, unusual for a Mexican. The conversation ends, neatly, by mutual consent, and she goes inside.

He goes out walking through the village. He stops to look up at the stars, wondering about his life. Where is he going to live? Should he live in Latin America? How will he earn his bread? What is going to happen when he gets to Ecuador? Can he ever heal himself? Will he marry Lily? Or someone else? Does he need a wife who is as spiritual as he is? Will he ever have children? What kind of father could he be? He thinks he might be able to start a family outside

the US, outside that network of energy that harmed him. Maybe he can live in Latin America and work as a shaman.

Unlike Nezhualcoyotl, he does want to predict his own future. Isn't it possible to do it by looking at the stars? He peers up at them, but they tell him nothing, just sway there sparkling in the cold velvety sky. He goes on walking.

Great Spirit, grant me a vision, he prays, and the power to heal. Illuminate the path I'm here to take. Grant me a vision so bright it will blow the shadows out of my soul. I don't want to live in darkness anymore.

He circles back and goes inside and sings and talks with Alberto and Franco. He eats one last peyote button. He's now eaten one button per hour for fourteen hours. That's enough, he decides. Fourteen hours, fourteen buttons, and fourteen is the name of the town: Real de Catorce, Royal of Fourteen. His guidebook says nobody knows what that means, though there are a couple of theories. In any case, a lucky number.

All of a sudden a carload of boisterous Mexicans shows up. They're friends of Alberto's. Señora Sabas is woken up and finds rooms for them. Soon they join the men in Alberto's room. They share out organic baked goods and discuss their plans for hunting peyote.

The room suddenly seems too loud and too full. Nate goes out walking again, this time heading from the road into the desert.

The night fog is in, moistening the plants. In the dimness, the stones on the road dart like mice as he looks at them. When he closes his eyes as he walks, he sees horrible visions: a soldier's bleeding face wrapped in barbed wire; children being crushed by tanks; skulls enveloped in flame. The solution comes to him: *Don't walk with your eyes closed, idiot.*

The night before, he dreamt he was walking out here and he found a vast corral where ghostly ranchers took care of herds of extinct mammals.

Were the ranchers the *patrones* that Tritemio mentioned?

Sitting cross-legged at the roadside, he closes his eyes and observes the glowing yellow outlines of a rectangular box. Within the box, several distinct energies are moving. One is a jagged blue line. When it touches and slowly rebounds off the invisible walls of the box, he hears a man's voice speaking polysyllabic words in a clear tone. Each word contains phonemes from three languages, Spanish, Italian and Huichol. The voice speaks these words forwards or backwards depending on the direction from which it meets the wall. He thinks about his brain as a recording studio that recorded the sounds and then remixed them.

He gets to his feet and walks on. A round hole a meter wide is floating in the air ahead of him and above him. Parallel to the ground like a skylight, it's

full of light, color, and rushing wind, a stunning contrast to the surrounding darkness. Ecstatic, multicolored people are standing up there looking down through it at him. Since he started reading about shamanism, he's wondered if, as the shamans claim, there are other dimensions. Now the answer is before him. "Come up and join us," the people indicate, speaking to him telepathically.

"Not now," he replies. He doesn't know if he would be able to return if he went there. Or how he would get up there in the first place. "Thank you. Maybe later, when I have a guide." He walks on.

Ahead of him in the fog, five or six coyotes begin to howl. He stops to listen. He's never heard anything so beautiful. Their artistry is breathtaking. He doesn't know what coyotes are anymore. These seem gods that have descended from the sky to teach and tantalize him with dreamlike yet hyper-real information.

When they fall silent he turns and heads back, aware of tall, thin, gray letters that glide past each other, spelling non-words in the darkness around him.



Jeremy Kilar



In Copley Square

It could be a sunny day like today—
gulls circling overhead, delivery truck idling in the alley,
northwest breeze bending the tops
of curbside lindens.

It could be a day like today
when death ambles up asking for
directions, some change, the time.
And you could respond, eye to eye—
whatever you want, I have,
wherever we're going, I'm ready,
however it happens, I'm here
to be led from something
I loved but never quite understood
to something I've never quite understood
but will love in the same way
I've been given this light and this world
to attend to, sit with, give away.

Trajectory

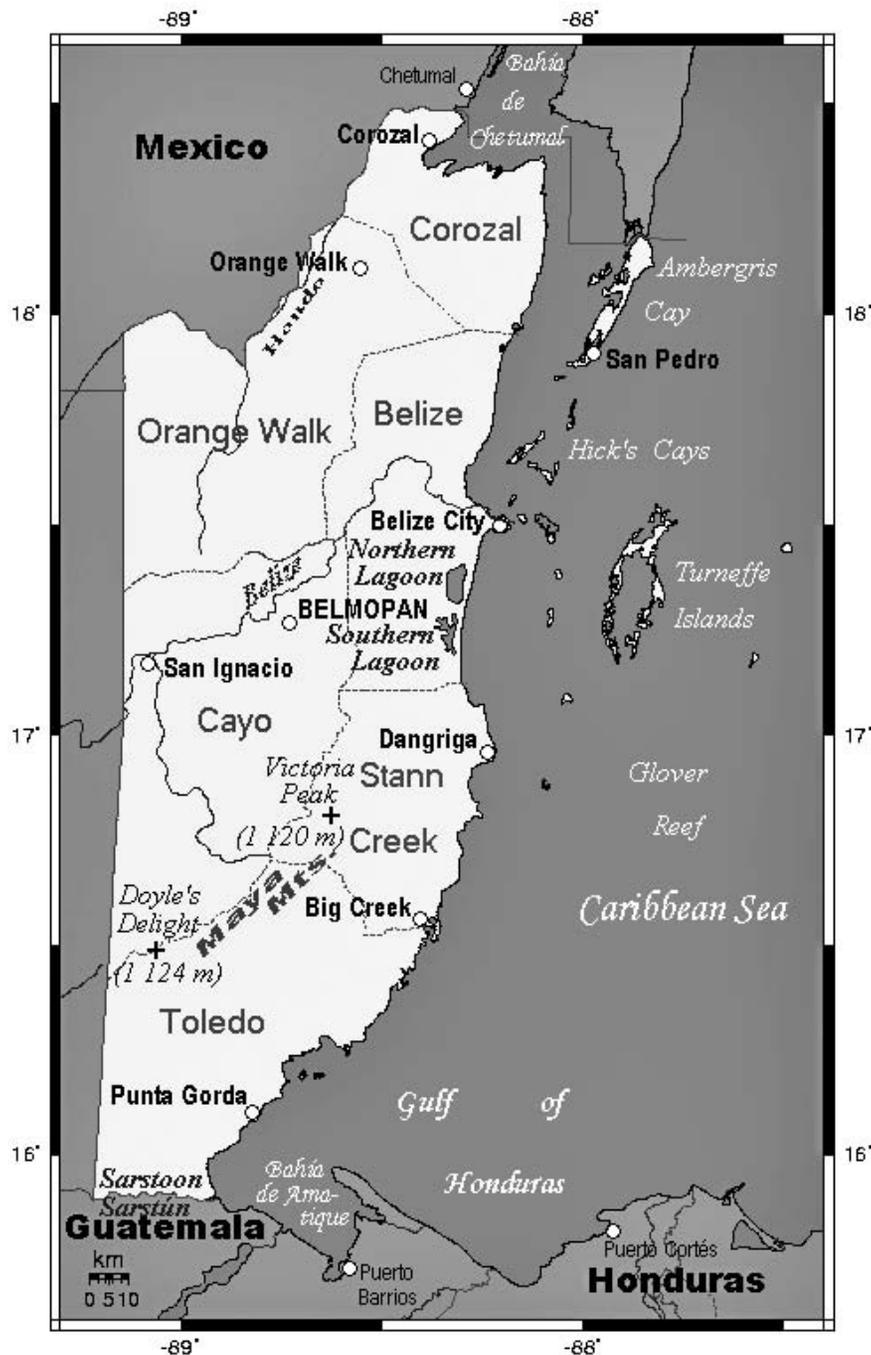
Reading old letters is like hitting an on-switch.
Sparks fly from a far, fierce distance,
fading red lines chart ecstasy, sulfur, bedrock.
And you're upended by the histories of new beginnings,
undone by the stars and hearts in the margins.
Unnerved by the faith and the fall-out,
broken open and revamped by words.
It's a movie being played backward
a shiver riding an odyssey
a jumble and branding of years and crossings.
It's the trail and trial of the most complete information
you had available at the moment.
You know the handwriting see the dates channel the places
hold the artifact squarely before you—
but how spectral this self
how potent yet unreal the shocks
that informed your ways then
strengthen your grasp now
as you gather these past lives
and welcome them aboard,
run together now as one good ghost
through a curved and back-lit country.

In A Native Mood

Facing East in prayer
big sun rising behind the hills
small birds chirping salute—
do not wonder about the source
do not wonder about the song
spilling out of your throat
bird throat sun throat
some kind of gratitude
moving you up taking you down
down to the purity of light at dawn
as a spruce self-combusts
its rings fly open
sparks in the air
diamonds on the moss
peace in the core of all beating hearts
that pull in so much pour out so hard
energy belonging to no one and all.
And now it has passed
how has it mattered
where has it gone
is the tree still smoking
bird flying on
sun taking note—
and if it comes facing East
will it come dying West
will it come more and more as days crack and glow
will it come even now as prayer is ascending
it will come
it will come
it will come.



A Travel to Belize [Journal]



Dawn as black as the inside of a body bag. Our bio clocks say we've slept enough. Roosters crow in the neighborhoods around us. Busses screech their brakes and accelerate as they maneuver the highway topes, collecting workers for the days labor on some dirt-and-brush project. Different bird talk comes randomly from the trees. Each sound is clear, distinct, unencumbered with the white noise that deadens sounds in the Northern urban. Soon a dog barks. Then another to answer that. And another to answer the second. Then a panic of barking, coming from all sides, from thirty yard-chained creatures, some desperate, some piteous, most angry, all in loud discussion of their plight and might.

The graying of the day finally. Stumbling amid our unloaded things from the evening before. There is no laughter, though there should be. No joy in the dirt and mud pit we find ourselves in. No cries of awe at the wonder of the muggy heat, the cloud of mosquitoes, the vegetation crowding all around, the glory of the jungle. The cats are now free. *Adapt or die, you little furry bastards.* Fifteen days crammed next to you in the truck has weakened our pampering pussy love. Weakened love all around. *You're on your own now, assholes* is the general attitude. With eyes as large as quarters, the cats tiptoe around this weird vegetated place, smells of monsters all around. The dog on a rope after the third time of going over and working the rich widow's chained dogs into a foaming lather with her plump city scent.

I find the little gas camp stove and get us some Mexican instant coffee hot in questionably clean cups. This feels better, but the bodily urges are stirred, an intestinal relaxing from days of truck cab compaction. It's the woods and shovel program. My venture is first through the spine-covered brush. How fast can this happen before the mosquitoes puncture my delicate parts. Not fast enough. A six-stab shit has me scratching in all the wrong places. I secretly relish the malevolent thought of Kim's perforating sojourn. How long can she hold it? A second cup of coffee is mixed to contemplate the day's labors ahead.

Presently, the dog erupts again in an apoplexy of barking. A tall skinny fella approaches us on the trail out of the jungle. We do not berate the dog its

sonic exclamation. This is what we want the dog to do. Terrorize everybody. Let them know there are gnashing fangs associated with this pile of white people stuff.

“Good morning-morning . . . sueahh.”

“Good morning to you,” we reply.

“Ahh comes heah every day to be right wit Jah. Dis is my jungle place.”

“Yes, well it looks like we’ve taken over this place.”

“Dis all right, I just sits heah.” He nestles into a dirt pile a dozen feet away. He is smoking a huge brown cigarette with the distinctive ganja smell.

“Ah sits here and watches the day goes by. Ah only wishes ah had some papers. Has to use dis banana leaf.” He puffs a few, a blue cloud of smoke enveloping his head.

“Ah ams Orlando. I de only ones wid da weed arounds heah. Dem das wants de weed gots to sees me.”

I offer him a cup of the Mexican coffee, which he accepts, then launches into a long mostly unintelligible dialogue about how he went over to gets some weed, but the lady and the man was a-fighting. Den she called the cops on de man and he was deported back to Nicaragua, and de woman stills a bitch but she unloaded the rest o de weed on Orlando, so he’s right wid Jah.

He opens the ubiquitous small black plastic bag of South America, which contains an ounce or more of some dark raw looking plant. He generously gives me a few grams. I take a puff off the banana leaf, to be ceremonious and assure him I am not a prig of some kind. Maybe it’s the overall exhaustion or the underlying stress of our situation, but the puff immediately disorients me, forgetting where my coffee cup is, what I was to do next. So I sit down with the guest, content to bullshit randomly in half understood language.

Presently I become aware of the quick and heavy steps of the woman. If it were a plywood floor, it would be booming like a drum. This is the standard body language of the pissed-off woman. What can it be? Always the detective work to discern the mind of the female. Hmm . . . OK, I get it. Sloth. My sloth! But I’m just being cordial. Why couldn’t the ‘tude be about theft or murder? Why always these indecipherable picayune whims of improper moral turpitude? OK, OK, with a groan I rise and set to work getting the chain saw in operation.

Now early morning. The plan is to make stairs and get all the crap up on the 10-foot concrete platform by the end of the day. Now that the truck is empty, it’s off to the lumber store. Nancy’s it’s called. Orlando has newish plastic sandals, a Walkman which he is intently absorbed in listening to reggae music, a

clean newer shirt. He is saturated in ganja smoke and seems, for all intents and purposes, reasonably harmless. Then there is the dog, who I hope would spring to the aid of Kim if attacked with some malignant intent by our guest. Off to Nancy’s Lumber. The lumber here is not far removed from trees. Still green and cut generously but irregularly; a 2x4 looks more like a porch post. The truck is loaded with some boards as heavy and hard as concrete, and two huge beams for the stair sides. Back to the platform.

Orlando has been giving Kim a botanical tour of the surrounding jungle while the dog runs amok. There are cashew trees, lime trees, and dozens of medicinal plants that cure everything from malaria to cancer. Some are poison woods, whose sap burns the skin like acid, or worse yet, blinds you if you rub your eyes. The story is told of one white man who sat on a recently sawed poison wood stump for lunch. The acid burned a meaty abscess through his posterior and killed him. Oddly, the antidote tree always grows close by. A thin red barked tree, crooked and rarely bigger than your wrist, called Peely Bwana because of the red peeling bark, similar to paper. It reminds the locals of the burned red white man whose skin peels relentlessly. Orlando points out that the bark can also be used to roll ganja.

Setting to work with the square, felt pen, and chain saw, I lay out the stairs. My god, the wood is as hard as plastic and cuts about the same. It is tremendously hot. Sweat sheets off me, dripping as though I just stepped out of a lake, but without the cooling refreshing quality. My pants are soaked with the effusion, and I feel like I’m about to keel over, but still I must toil on. Must get the camp set up on the platform and all the crap up there before the night thieves pack everything away. Orlando sits in the shade, puffing endlessly. He helps only if I ask him with some ridiculously heavy part.

Late in the afternoon, the step supports are up and the steps nailed down. Finally on top. It is breezy and airy up there. Sweep the leaves and accumulated debris off the sides, set up the tent, and start hauling all the thousand things up. Orlando sets up one of the camp chairs on top and lights up a fresh reefer as we toil everything up the new access. Numerous people are passing by. Larry’s place is on the main trail cutting through the jungle. Workers from the rich widow come by and get emphatic about the poor connection of the top of the stairs to the platform.

“Bali wood no strong. Ita cracka. Must have support. Will crong bong down, a-smacha. *Mucho mas.*” I am polite, but not energetic to do anything about it.

I feel rather a-smasha already. In fact, I am roasting and semi-delirious. The largest worker fellow had been going on about the “T” brace that needs

to be under the stairs. Finally he rallies a few others and they build one, fitting it tightly under the middle of the span. I am most grateful. These people are alright, methinks. I try to take time to converse and be cordial. Kim is getting frantic to get all the stuff up on the platform. It is getting dark as it always does . . . too early.

“Kim,” I explain, “we don’t have to get every little thing up here. Just the most liftable. The most obvious. We do have the dog, which is barking viciously at everybody.” Finally, dusk descended, she acquiesces and sets about puttering on top.

Now dark, and the situation of how to dislodge our comfortable guest. He is apparently content to sleep in the chair in what could be construed as our new living room. Of course, the job falls to me, with the scowling woman in the shadows. Somehow I convey that we want to wash up and go to bed and that he should trundle off back into the jungle leaves whence he came.

At last, we are alone, our empire of American commodities secure, just us to contemplate where the hell we are. We wash in a bucket from “well” water, which is a rain water hole in the ground below us. I am fairly dubious of its microbial concentration, advising Kim not to get any in her mouth. Certainly not toothbrush quality. As a final act of glory, I get one of the LED lights hooked up to a battery and life is illuminated. The bedding has dried a bit during the day. The nest is an oasis of rest after a roasting day of labor. A mild feeling of contentment comes over us with this hard-won peace. Kim is smiling. The cats are on jungle prowl.

Morning comes with a troop of parrots squawking and fighting in the trees around us. Wonderful it is. And of course the morning dogs, answering miscellaneous roosters in the distance, to which our dog must answer, and soon the sweet talk of the jungle animals is drowned out in a cacophony of frantic barking dogs within a mile radius. The plan today is for me to go all the way back to the border to get the hovercraft. A necessary plan, though filled with worry about leaving Kim alone on the jungle trail. But after coffee, I’m off with the satchel of paperwork.

The country is beautiful though not particularly interesting. Reaching Belmopan before noon, I am surprised to find my boat license ready to pick up. I feel dreadful, hot and cold and weak in the legs. I pull the truck under a tree and sleep for almost two hours. Still feel awful when I wake, but must go on.

A few miles past the cutoff that bypasses Belize City, there are some uniforms that are waving me down. Not knowing what legality this is, I stop. A black uniformed thug opens the passenger door and jumps in. Another six clamber into the pickup bed. OK, this is it. I’m screwed now. This must be the

Belizean equivalent of the Mexican police mugging. I’ll be directed to some side road and whacked for everything, the swamp and vines overgrowing what is left in the mud.

But it turns out these are hitchhikers. I was passing the prison and these are guards getting off work. The frantic road waving is the Central American method of asking for a ride. No thumb. My surprising guests are friendly enough, as most are here. The half dozen settle around in the truck bed as though they were getting ready for the Super Bowl game on TV. I am roasting with fever now. My legs seem paralyzed. I have to lift my leg by the pant leg to step on the brake. On we go through the mundane flat land with my cargo of turnkeys. We come to a police check-point and are waved through, the uniforms recognizing their professional brethren. A few stops at side roads to let out passengers, and now dusk again.

I roll into the town of Orange Walk, about sixty miles south of the northern border crossing. Burning up now, stopping at the first hotel I see, Hu Wang’s. I can barely get out of the truck, and shuffle along the sidewalk, holding the wall like a drunk. The Wangs are barely able to communicate with me, but finally the paperwork is filled out and a bar of soap and a “wowel” is given to me. The room is upstairs, which is a lengthy process to ascend to, each step having to manually lift my leg. I am in psychic agony about the paralysis, something bizarre and unknown to me. Mrs. Wang is concerned, which is nice, but irrelevant.

The room about the size of a large closet, a ceiling fan paddling the torpid air, just a sheet for the bed, bars on the window, and the evening bedlam outside. I collapse in feverish exhaustion. The next twelve hours are a writhing of sweat and bizarre dreams, the secret bodily process trying to burn out the invading microbe or whatever dengue drudge that has assailed me. The morning finally comes, the body wrung out like a bucket mop. A shower in a space the size of a vertical coffin; no room to retrieve the dropped soap. A search for food in town proves hopeless until I at last locate a Mayan fruit seller. The wild oranges are reviving as my body chemistry greedily absorbs the vitamin C. On again now, to the northern border.

The road is a plague of bicycles going in all directions, but eventually they thin out as the cane fields begin to dominate the landscape. I arrive at the border around nine, thinking I’m an hour late. But not much to my surprise, the gate has not been opened yet. Eventually inside, looking for Leroy, or whatever the hell his name was. Nowhere around, although he claimed he was there every day. I eventually hook up with another customs agent and the customary hours of wait commence.

The papers are here, the papers are there, this official needs to sign them, that one needs to stamp them . . . how anything gets done here is unknown to me. I use the time to hook up the hovercraft trailer. Using my bumper jack, I draw a small crowd. The jack is the most coveted item in Central America. Some offer to buy it from me on the spot. No more tossing it in the back of the truck; it is number one on the klepto list around here. Inside the hover is all manner of rotting putrid food. The cooler is like an overdue casket from Calcutta. Important papers are mixed with all this, moldy mountains of illegible text. Amazingly, there is a trashcan where I can donate all this biology. When done, the flies move on to sweeter pastures.

Around 11:30, the customs agent informs me that all is in order. I had thought that all was in order when I left three days ago, but evidently mistaken. The bureaucrats would hate to miss a chance to obfuscate the process. Now to the pay-out-the-ass window. I'm sweating if I have enough money—all is in Yankee dollars. I get out of there with about fifty bucks. The thieves have charged me about 900 US to bring the boat in. Then to the insurance guy, a minor fleecing for a day's insurance on the trailer.

Now the road in earnest. 6 hours of daylight and 6.5 hours of driving. It's pedal mashing time. I pick up no hitchhikers; I'm on a mission to get back to Kim. If everything is . . . as it has been going, she will be raped and murdered, lying among the few things that they were unable to carry off. I'm stressing. I'm stomping the gas, passing like any good Mexican, irresponsibly, trying to get to Punta Gorda before night. I don't make it.

Blackness envelops the myriad standing on the roadside, the bicyclists, and the dogs alike. I can't see spit. Some times I see a silhouette of some masses riding or walking beside and in the road, but often I only catch a glimpse as my headlight illuminates them instantaneously . . . four feet from my 50 MPH bumper. What the hell are they doing out here anyway? Shouldn't they be in their smoky hovels slapping around a tortilla for the thirty family members? Maybe this nocturnal migration is coming over for dinner? I am terrified of hitting one of these people, though so burned out and ripped off I would enjoy bouncing a few off the grille. I think my tires can take running over a bicycle; they have pretty thick rubber. What the hell would I do then? Flee? Not a really great way to establish residency in a foreign country. I slow the truck to around 30, giving me a small margin of panic with each dark phantom.

At long last I arrive "home." Parking on the road now and hiking in the quarter-mile to the platform and Kim's presumed remains. But I can't walk; though better, my best is an interminable shuffle. I'd lose the twenty-meter hobble at the geriatric Olympics. In fifteen minutes I get to the bottom of the

stairs and call out. Kim answers. She is fine. The dog barks. I crawl up the stairs pulling myself by my hands. Sweet home! Rest. Food.

I ask, "Are you alright? What has happened? Has there been a hoarde of visitors? People passing by? Has Orlando been here from dawn to dark?"

"No, no," she answers. "Nobody coming and going. I've been here all by myself. Moved the rest of our stuff up here. Just one visitor. What's wrong with you? Why did it take so long to walk from the truck?"

Paralyzed, I answer.

"Oh, that's too bad." Followed by silence. Not exactly the sympathy and massage I had in mind.

"Who was the visitor?" I ask.

"Chet Schmidt, the hostel owner. He says that we have to clear off of here by Monday morning. He has a crew coming to finish building on this place before Larry [the owner] shows up in a month. He says there will be six guys hauling cement and gravel up here, Spanish music blasting on the radio, a flurry of activity. Everything must be cleared off and out of here."

The bastard, I think. This place has sat here in the jungle, descending into an archeological ruin for two years with nothing happening. Now suddenly when we need rest and release from chaos the most, he decides to start building. It is Friday evening. Monday is not far off. And just where the hell will we go?

Saturday morning, a beautiful mosaic of sunlight through the jungle trees. A half-dozen parrots fly into the trees nearby, like a moving monkey fight, defoliating the tree in a raucous argument. Other unknown birds are also aggressively announcing their position in the canopy. The dog wanders off to get the neighbor's chained canines into verbal expulsion. We brew the coffee and sip with extreme relish. One teaspoon, add hot water. In this land of coffee, there is only instant from Mexico.

Around seven, a thin malarial white man comes walking through the jungle trail, approaching the rain of dog barking without fear. He talks rapidly in a monotone, giving a usual greeting, some compliments on our camping ability, then launching into a social economic monologue about how the workers must be kept busy or they'll return to Guatemala, how Larry has left him money to work on the place and he's done naught to date, how he made a bad investment that has cleaned him out (unrelated), and a few newbie stories of how the ground is swarming with deadly snakes and venomous bugs.

He is never still, flitting about the platform, snapping his head from side to side as though a rock had just whizzed by his ear. He says he has a place where we could move a block away and begins to talk of monthly rent and power bills. He said the workers left the city water on for two days and it cost

him 1200 dollars.

It's no use exaggerating to an exaggerator; I can smell the crap in that story. But city water sounds good. The cesspool dug in the jungle floor below us is not fit for the animals to drink. I tell him that we are robbed and penniless, but that I have skills and tools that I can use in trade with him. He seems satisfied with that as he jerks his head suddenly to the left. I'm wondering if ghosts are sneaking up on him.

We go over to the place a bock away. It is a construction site with the proverbial unfinished concrete building. Two stories, the lower level a dark morass of stacked construction supplies, but the second floor is of wood, with an expansive metal roof and some walls without windows. The back of this place is on level with a wall of flowering jungle trees, very airy and beautiful.

This will do quite nicely, I think. But don't tell him that. He is rambling on non-stop, about how this is not finished, that is done wrong, this is rotting from neglect, if then . . . then that could happen. We settle on my task of installing the sewage drain piping to start, then the toilets and water supply. Later still, the electrical wiring of the place. I'll keep a check on the Guatemalan water use and we'll worry about the electricity later.

Downstairs and in a hovel on the side is where the workers stay. An outhouse of disgusting factor 12.6 is in the yard. The filthy seat is loose on the rotted tilted throne. It is dark and decayed, the walls seething with black biting malignant insects. Who can imagine what's lurking in the hole, licking its incisors, waiting to clamp into a looming soft white ass? Apparently this is motivation to get a working toilet installed. Yes . . . I am motivated. Another five minutes on jungle *Streptobacillus*, mahogany wood, squalid workers existence, and loud Mexican music, then he's off in a panic to some other imagined appointment. So this is it. Evicted and re-housed all in one sentence.

I return to the platform, determined to do nothing for the rest of the day. Sunday we'll move. I tell Kim of our luxurious new living apartments. There is minimal excitement. Back to the Mexican coffee and bird calls, sinking in awe into an American camp chair.

Contemplating this land, so far down here at the last of the road. From here, one must take a boat to another country, this humanity hemmed in on all sides by the jungle. Here the Mayans have lived unmolested by the Spaniards and the rest of the world, and also unaided by any government, the British or the current Peoples Parties. Pirates used the coasts and islands to hide their treasure; slave ships unloaded Africans, Chinese, and East Indians here, Europeans mixed with the Arimi Indians . . . then this place was left alone. Forgotten by the world. Left here to stew in its poverty and interbreeding, becoming a semi-rebel land

populated by the unwanted. Have we gravitated here because we are such people also?

Sunday I get the hovercraft off the trailer and it runs well in spite of its holes and torn skirt. I'll use it to shuffle the mound of possessions across the rich widow's lawn to the truck on the street, then ferry it to the new digs, packing it all upstairs. This process takes a week; where we had unloaded in two hours, now it seems endless.

No workers show up on Monday, but the downstairs of the new place is a bustle of activity, making rebar frames for Larry's place. Mexican music blares from below. By Friday we are re-entrenched, our tent set up inside for bugless nights, some semblance of order to our discordant belongings, the LED lights emplaced, and the cats exploring every nook and cranny. Chet comes bustling in, blithering non-stop about the Hurricane. A force five tempest is heading straight for us. His place on the waterfront will surely be leveled, he exclaims. He must move all his twenty years' work of precious papers in the next eight hours. Also boats, furniture, household everything, his empire must be secured. He is frantic. We must figure where to go also, he says. Fill the truck with gas. Lock everything down and flee.

Flee? What do you think we've been doing for the last month? Flee where? This is the last place. If this is our burial mound under a pile of ripped apart lumber and concrete, then so be it. We ain't budging. A piddling hurricane versus what we've just been through? Its maelstrom is but a walk in a spring shower . . . with flowers. No way we're fleeing, we're digging in and gritting our teeth. Come what hell or fury you have to throw at us . . . Belizean hurricane, there's no way we're moving back into that truck.

The hurricane passes with no wind, raining torrentially over the next few days without cessation. I am grateful for the roof, drubbing like a jungle drum, but this storm is a punk. It will take a lot more than this to kick our asses.





Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Many Musics, Eighth Series
The Tangled Gate: One, Many, None

*“Neither death nor dream
are truly a remote land.”*

Remember some things. It’s what I’ve returned to the Island to do. I’ve lived long times at the Pensionne, tended its garden, visited with the White Tiger. When dreams came, as long they hadn’t, they were of the Island, the Architect asking me to return, to find him in the Tangled Gate. We argued.

“Why now?”

“You’re needed.”

“You wouldn’t let me when I lived there.”

“You’d been to the Gate many times, I knew this then.”

“What did you know?”

“I knew then, I know now, that the deepest truth of a human heart is its years. When you came to me, you were forbidden the Gate except in your dreams, & I only allowed you waking maps to study. These years had to pass, time bound you to the Gate by absence & wish.”

“Now you bid my return.”

“Ask the White Tiger.”

I never find him but he is before me, head low sunk for an embrace. Always the garden, I’ve never seen him elsewhere, or enter it, or exit.

He taught me in every way possible
what tenders most need to know:
kindness most binds. I often resisted
the far ends of his teachings, when kindness
seemed second to self-preservation, or revenge.
He insisted me. Pressed me again & again.

Of my dreams he would only say there are many
ways to heal, not just the tender's way.
"I have to leave, don't I?" Quiet growling
deep in his throat. "Come with me."
Silence. We would meet again in some way.
His last embrace made that clear.

My travels since have brought me to this road,
to an obscured understanding of what I am.
We approach a kind of temple now, it is
hardly dawn. A temple, a cave, I cannot
tell. I find my way forward in the crowd
is easy. A tall, feathered hierophant faces me.

There is silence. Does he expect words?
"I expect nothing. I wait your will."
"Will I find my answers in there?"
He shakes his head, as though I ask
the color of mine own eyes.

He steps aside, & I walk toward
the door leading in. Aside the door, a basin
of water, insisting a splash, a drink.
I think of the Fountain back there, nod,
splash, drink. Enter, not knowing if I will return.

For a moment, blind blackness, nor the feel
of ground underneath. I breathe slower,
do not cry out, something tests me.

I reach within, keep my balance, sniff twice.
Images emerge in the darkness & hang
about me.

I see the books of patterns my father & I
would study, deeper ways to contrive my dance
& sing of the waking dreams. What was this book?
I reach out to touch it, turn its pages,
there is something here I know,
these are gnatterings rudely writ!
I touch a page, fragile as a wisp,
& words like "there is no final thing
to know" lay upon my brow, clue & thread.

Follow the thread, half turn, & my brother,
whom I loved so closely, finding me
disconsolate that I would not see my friends
again, listening to me tell of their world,
their ways, never a denying word, just this:
"You will limp now as I sometimes do.
But not always. You will find each other."

Another half turn & my friend who claimed
my father's heart, made off. I see them
together in the chamber they alone used.
Her straddling atop him, dark hair down,
hips moving impossibly slow, head reared
back in snarl, in growl, teeth long
as she sucks him into her, deep into her,
till nothing seems to remain, leaving
the room, nude, him recomposing in the
blood & sweat falling from her as she
walks the empty corridor, him an old
splayed man & her gone completely.



I press myself harder into this darkness,
command to know, now I am small,
hardly made, singing to rags & flower vases
because they sing to me, we are alike,
I try to recall earlier but it's like
I wasn't born, never an infant. Created
like an animate statue, no couple loved me to be,
the King not my father, nor his dead first
Queen my mother. I tire. What do I do here?

There are wisps of song, of a kind with my
despairing, I reach toward them &
they settle on my outstretched finger like
a hummingbird. Singing, "many kinds of time,
several binds of time, & how it loses to air!"
I think of the Architect, & the singing molds
his face in the dark before me.

"You've come."
"You've led."

I feel soft pressings against my arms & shoulders.
My friends! I can feel soft fur, a tiny
imp's shape, a turtle not a turtle close.

"Do I finally learn what all of you are?"
"You created us. You do every time
there is a new world."

They crowd close to me, even the
Architect is not far.

"Why don't I remember?"

"You always say because failure is
an imperfect teacher, & hope
opens hands the best. We are your hints
of elsewhere, of others. All you will
allow yourself."

"Is this world failure then? Do I lead
the procession out there to a new one
again?"

“There is a choice.”

“What choice?”

“Stay. Fill the hole in the heart of the world.
Bind the Gate here, to serve as foundation
to all.”

“Why haven’t I chosen this way before?”

“I convinced you,” says the Architect,
with a deep heart’s whimper. “I believed
we could make a world without flaw.”

There is silence. I drift from my friends,
wander memories that seem departing.
The sweet, high music of the Traveling Troubadour.
The dark fanciful music of the One Woods
when all woke deep in the night &
cried out. My father the King on sleepless
nights, his spyglass upon the black water.
The demon tugging him back, away from
me, away from the Queen, willing
to sacrifice my brother, the snakebite
in his heart never letting him rest
until our Island home abandoned,
& all to war. Never seeing her slip
back into the sea as his boats raised
their sails.

My blue bag. The many threads. I begin
to fear. How do I know a flawless world
can’t be found? I twist in, & in, & in,
feel myself starting to pull this world
closed upon itself, its possibilities, even
as glints & glarings of a new one nose me near.

I fear. Words are leaving. This is what
they do. *No!* (leaving) *No!* (leaving)
I try to cry out *help me* but it’s just a
silent wordless grunt. *No!* (leaving)
Try again, the world shaking, the Beast &
its mate together, comforting at this
once again known end. Failure. Pain.

No! (leaving) *No!* (leaving) *N-!* (leav-) *N-!*
(*gnatter*) (*N!*) (*gnatter*) (*N!*) (*gnatter gnatter!*)
No! Help me, Architect! My friends! Beast!
Hero! My father the King! Help me!
White tiger! Singer! Troubadour!
Help me! (No!) (gnatter! gnatter!)
Help me, Queen! Help me, all!

A great roar, a wild pain, I feel blown
all to light, cry soundlessly, & then
all silence. Silence. Then a voice,
my own, & yet I listen:

*“There is a door & now we pass through
There is a door. And now we pass through!”*

The world spasms. The world shakes.
The world holds. I reach into its maw
& fill it with everything I’ve ever learned,
ever known. I bind myself to this world,
its flaws, its beauties. I push time
back, smooth it like a thin blanket
along a long, long bare back. It is there
for those not ready to reveal themselves
to the night & its many kinds of truths.

I push back, growing stronger, healing
all I can, there is so much, & the world
will ever root up its song in part from
its countless fractures, how they chorus.



My efforts tire me, & I feel my friends
join me, gather at my back, help me
push, this world, keep this world,
arriving, arriving now, arriving
somewhere to something, close, closer,
more, & more, & a push, & now, good,
it's . . . water. Sea water!

I am in mid-dive into the sea,
my things tied about my waist,
bidding my friend goodbye with a wave,
this time I see his face true,
it is the hero, my friend, smiling
at me as once I had at him, thank you,
I love you thank you, & goodbye.

The shore is rocky, no beach where I half-
collapse breathless. The sea lets me leave
but willing this time. I have bound myself.
I have remembered some things &
bound myself this time. I will climb
the rocks to the Dancing Grounds,
restore them for all I've learned,
dance again on the girl's legs I choose
to keep. I will let the Castle continue
to return to green, the One Woods
hungering back its possession. The Tower,
with a touch, shall return to tree,
& my Architect will have his day & night
without end.

Finally, I will come to the Tangled Gate,
 that which I have loved best is here,
 always has been, not left or right
 by the Fountain, but *through*,
 no way *in* but through, I will step
 through the Fountain, its luring waters
 swallowing me as I do, & come at last
 to the caves & tunnels of my friends,
 leaving a part of me here, my childly dreams,
 they shall receive me as my beautiful
 dear friends, feather, fur, gill, shell,
 happy sniffs all around, but a part
 of me will draw a part of them away,
 away, deeper & deeper, ever toward &
 arriving finally at the Red Bag. Finally
 at the Red Bag.

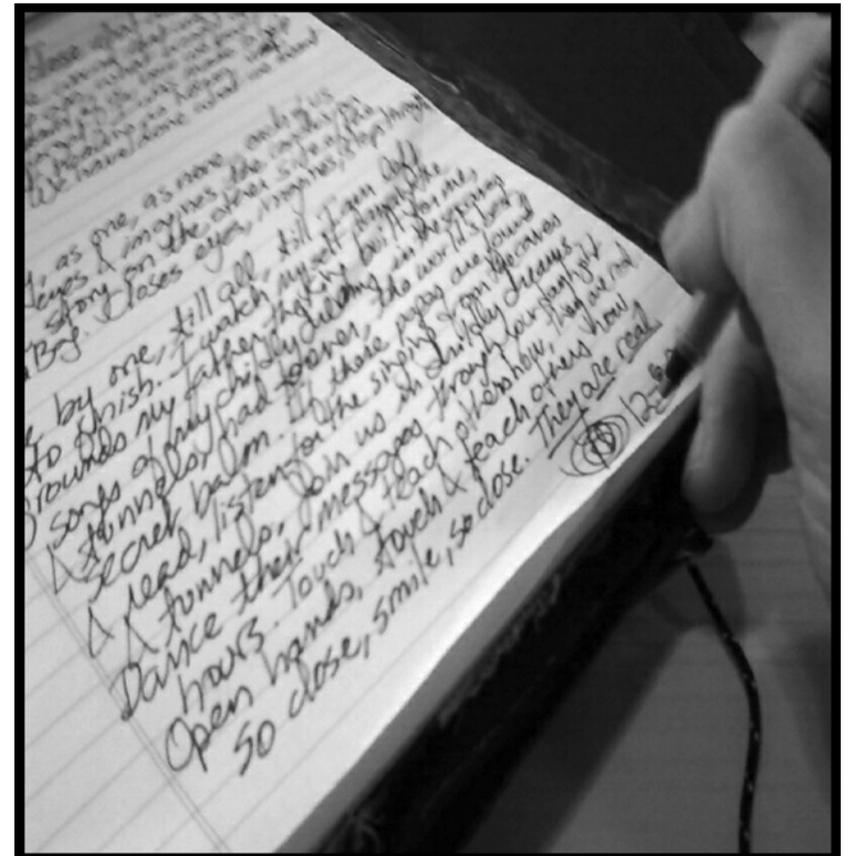
And here we will close what has too long
 been opened, the wound that was the loss
 of our home, long ago, what brought us
 here, the remain of us, how we built
 but could not forget. I was made to help
 us heal but healing is hereon, not
 back there. We have done what we meant
 to do.

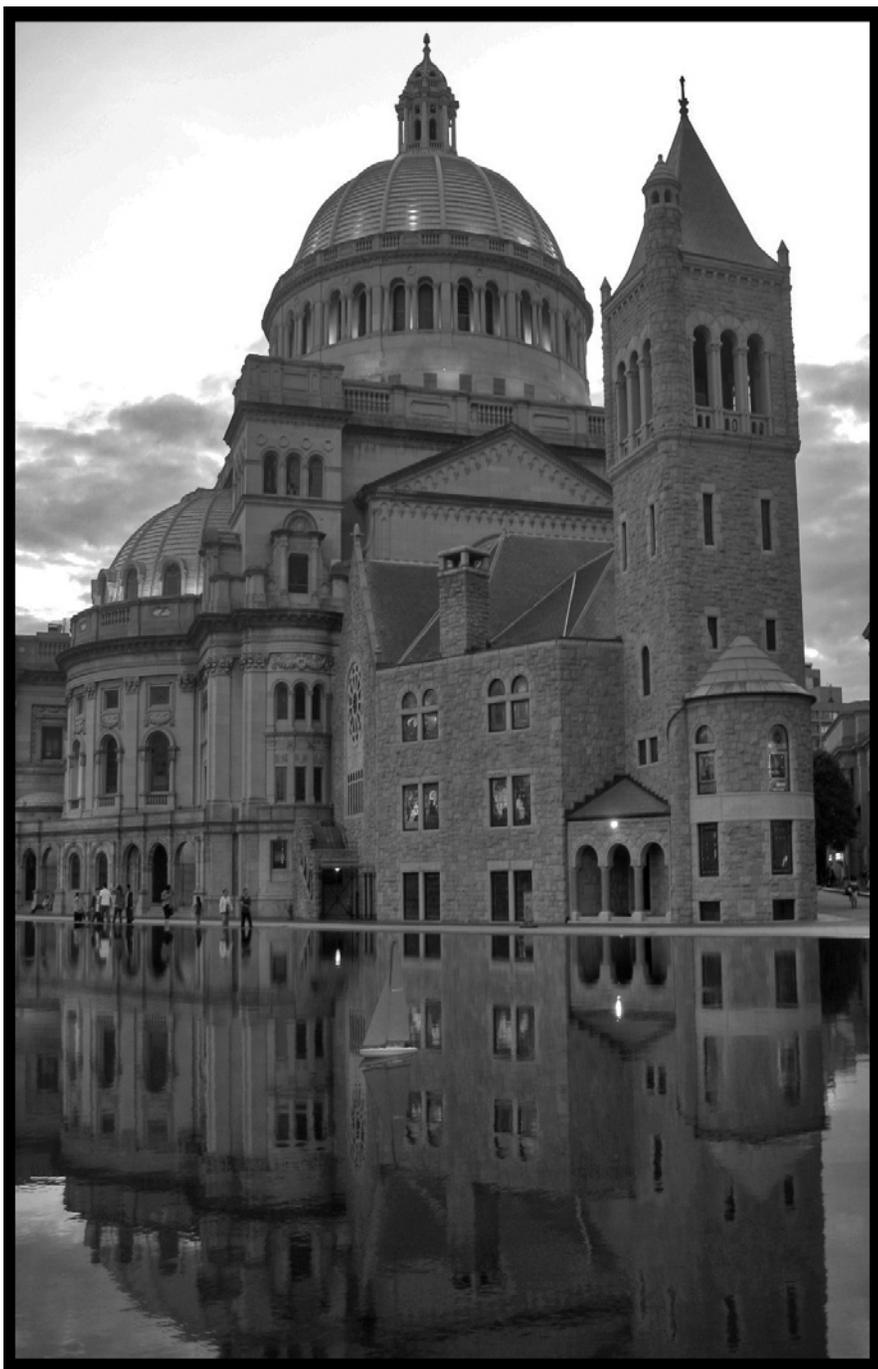
As many, as one, as none, each of us
 shuts eyes & imagines the conclusion
 of the story on the other side of the
 Red Bag. Closes eyes, imagines, steps through.

One by one, till all, till I am left
 to finish. I watch myself dancing the
 grounds my father the King built for me,
 songs of my childly dreams in these caves
 & tunnels, had forever, the world's best,
 secret balm. If these pages are found
 & read, listen for the singing from the caves
 & tunnels. Join us in childly dreams.

Dance their messages through your daylight
 hours. Touch & teach others how, they are real.
 Open hands, touch & teach others how,
 so close, smile, so close. *They are real.*

12/8/2012
 Cambridge, Massachusetts





Tom Sheehan



Old Man with a Broken Walking Stick [New Fiction]

It was where the Dark Forest runs out of breath, not far from Xi Shuang Ban Na, and the Lan Cang River, pretending to be a thief, steals much of daylight's silver. Here one morning, an elderly man with a broken walking stick came out of the forest and went along the river gathering its coin. He wore a cap for the weather and a jacket Time had touched roughly. And he limped.

The limp was a serious limp, almost twisting the man's frame. His left foot had a dragging stutter to it and his makeshift boot was greatly worn. The man looked as if he would topple easily. And need or want moved in the air about him.

The single walking stick at his left side was crude and bound in places, where it had been broken, with tightly coiled wire. Ning Li the blacksmith, from his doorway, saw him first, noticed how he leaned to one side. "Hui," he called, and his wife came to the door. "We will have another for breakfast," he said. Her apron was gathered in her hands and she looked at the stranger and said, "I am sure we will." As she nodded, she enjoyed the sun shining on the face of the river.

Ning Li, a big man with red suspenders and heavy brown pants, stood and hailed the other man. "Could you stand for tea and a biscuit, sir? We do not have much but we can ease some of your hunger. Eggs would be another matter." Again Ning Li noted how the man leaned almost to the point of falling. Then he saw the man's kindly face, the clear blue eyes, and the way he held his chin. And his hands! His hands were delicate and smooth and did not look as if they belonged with the walking stick or had used the walking stick for a long time.

"You are too kind, sir," the man with the walking stick said. A slight smile wore on his face. "We are in luck, for I have two eggs here I found last evening in the forest, and no place to cook them." From a pocket of the worn jacket he brought out two brown eggs that could be yet idling in a nest. "If the lady of the house would oblige, she may do as she wishes with them." He held out the two brown eggs and Ning Li called his wife. "Hui, we'll have

biscuits dipped in eggs today, just the way you like them.”

Then Ning Li pointed to a chair and said, “Rest easy while the biscuits get dipped and fried. We’ll have our tea here where the sun comes first. If I were a carpenter I would fix that walking stick for you, but my iron would be too heavy for you.” Then Ning Li said, “By what name are you called, sir?”

“They call me Stick. They have called me Stick for a long time, for so long I know no other name. So Stick I will be. It is not uncomfortable for me.”

They ate their biscuits with a small mound of butter and sweet syrup. And a second cup of tea.

“Do you have far to go?” Ning Li said, as he finished his tea. “We could put some lunch in a bag for you.”

“Not far,” Stick said, “not far at all.”

When the tea was gone Stick said thank you and went on his way.

Just before noon, still where the forest runs out of breath and the river steals daylight, Stick was hailed by another man in his front yard. The man had seen the man’s serious limp in the heat of the sun. “Stranger, would a bit of shade and a small bite of food aid you on your journey? We do not have much, but we will share. I am here with my two daughters. Today is a day without meat for us. We have a few pennies left from rice we bought.”

“Such a lucky day it is,” Stick said. “Last night in the forest I came upon a deer who had recently impaled himself. I came away with some venison.” From deep in his jacket pocket he drew out a small parcel wrapped in dark paper. “However your daughters choose to cook it, let it be done.” The daughters danced away with the venison. Soon the aroma climbed on the air in the middle of the day. And there was a sauce to go with bread and the four of them dipped bread and ate the venison.

“My name is Feng Tu and I am a music teacher,” Feng Tu said, his big teeth showing as he talked. “If I could work with wood, I would make you a new walking stick to assist you in your journey. But I have no knowledge of wood. Nor what its grain is or where its strength lies, except here.” And with that he drew a violin up from below the table and played songs for Stick and his daughters. After a while, Stick said, “I must be going. But I do not have far to travel.” He left with his *thank you* as soft as music on the air.

Stick was not far away by the close of evening. A young boy came up to him and said, “My mother saw you coming for a long time from her window. We do not have much, but you are welcome to eat at our table. We have some rice soup. It is thin soup, but it will be warm.”

“Young man,” Stick said, “tell your mother we are in luck. Just last

evening, in the middle of the Dark Forest, where there was a small patch of late sunlight, I found two potatoes, two beets and two carrots.” He dug deep into his jacket pocket and brought out the vegetables. “Tell your good mother to thicken the soup with these.”

The boy nodded with delight and ran off to give the vegetables to his mother. He soon came back and said, “She thanks you a great deal. If my father were here he could fix your walking stick for you, but he is away in the Great War that moves around the world. We hope he comes back soon. He is a carpenter and could fix your walking stick easily.”

At dusk they ate the newly thickened rice soup with the potatoes and the beets and the carrots cut up in it. The soup was delicious and the boy soon fell asleep on a bench in front of his house while the mother cleaned the dishes. Stick said goodbye. “I have to keep moving. You have a fine boy. I hope your husband gets back soon. War is a great separator, but often not the final one.”

His way took him along a stone wall for a few miles, the sun sinking all the while.

The river had nearly given up all of its daylight when Stick was walking past an old house sitting back from the road like a deep shadow. Not one window had a light in it, nor was there any smoke coming from the chimney. A voice hailed him from the darkness in front of the house. “If you have no place to sleep, sir, we could put you up, but you must be able to do with the darkness and the cold. We do not have any light or any kindling to start a fire or any matches for that matter. I am afraid that my children will not be able to do their reading this night and they might also catch cold. The edge of the moon says it is going to be cold.”

“You are most kind, sir,” Stick said, “but fear not. Last evening in the forest I found some flint and stone in an old pouch on a tree stump. We can start a fire with them.”

“All well and good,” the man in the darkness said, “but we still have no kindling to get the big logs burning.”

“Ah, but we do,” Stick said, as he slammed his broken walking stick over a large stone in the wall and splintered it for kindling. The sound crackled so harshly in the night it frightened the man.

“But how will you walk on the morrow?” the man said.

Stick had no hesitation. “You will make me a walking stick tonight,” he replied.

“I have been unable to work for a long time,” the man said. But all night he worked hard on several pieces of wood he found behind his house,

knowing that before this stranger came he would not have even looked for such wood. Light came from a good fire and warmth filled the house and the children were asleep after reading their lessons. In the morning the man handed Stick a shiny new walking stick that caught the early morning sun all along its shaft. The walking stick was smooth with a lacquer finish on it and a pad on the top where it fit under Stick's arm.

That sun was barely up over the horizon when Stick walked away in the early rays of sunlight. Down past the fields he went, past the stone walls, to where the river again was catching up all the daylight it could grasp. Once, with his new walking stick, he waved back at the man.

Later that evening all the people gathered in the village and were talking about the man with the broken walking stick.

"I am glad that we were able to feed him," Ning Li said, his thumbs hooked on his red suspenders. "We gave him breakfast, a royal breakfast, a meal to begin the day with." He paused, hooking his suspenders a little higher. "As my mother used to say, 'A meal to touch the backbone.'"

"And we gave the poor man his lunch," Feng Tu said, "with venison and thick gravy. A meal also fit for a king." He smiled proudly, his large teeth showing. "We even played music for him to soothe his vagrant soul. If there were a place for that poor man to live, this would be it. We all did so much for him. All taking our turn with a stranger." Those around him nodded in agreement.

The boy's mother, not to be outdone, not wanting to be left out of a share of goodness, took her turn. "A most splendid and thick soup we gave the man. Thick as any soup can be, heavy with good rice and potatoes and beets, and new carrots to give solid offerings. A treat for any beggar on his rounds. The kind that sticks to one's ribs." It was a matter of punctuation when she added, "And he ate a goodly share of it."

The others nodded in agreement again, seemingly all of one mind.

They were very satisfied with themselves, puffed and self-indulgent, but a voice from the edge of light, the man from the darkness, said, "Do any of you know what he gave to us? Why do we continually wrap ourselves up in our own gifts? Why do we tie up our own ribbons in such a manner?"

"Well," the boy's mother said, "what did you do for him? It was near dark when he left my house."

"What fools we are," the man answered. "It's not what we did for him. It's what he did for us. He took care of us. Me, a useless man for years, I made a walking stick for him. I haven't worked like that in a long time and I guess we all know that." For a moment he hung his head. "That's one of the reasons

he came here. The man needed a walking stick to get on with. And he saw to it that I made it for him. We did not really do for him. He did for us, but we are afraid to say it."

The next morning, on the other side of the Lan Cang River, where the mountain suddenly stands tall and the field stops its long run, the man with a broken walking stick came limping out of the forest, ready to lean on some more people.

Another elderly man, enjoying early sunlight, hailed him from his front door.





Joe Ciccone

The Window

Everything is still complete on the other side
 Though the window fell shut
 Sometime in the night
 The sky reflected there is as flat as a door

In the bleak schoolhouse my father without a beard
 Took his pupils to the lectern
 And set out to teach
 Why tomorrow was to be for everyone

It was here he first calculated the day's turning
 It was here the measurements piled up like the dead
 With no answer
 And he wondered how someone can teach what they are unsure of

Today he is gone three years

The half-restored sedan waiting in primer in the garage
 Failed to become more than
 A broken echo of all that seemed constant
 In other days
 But its screws were loosening from the day it was new

Everything is always briefer than you'd think

Soon the wreckers will come
 With their engines moaning
 To pause in the snow
 Laughing
 Laughing

They trust what they've been told
 I still hold what we never had in common
 Hope for very long
 Courage with words

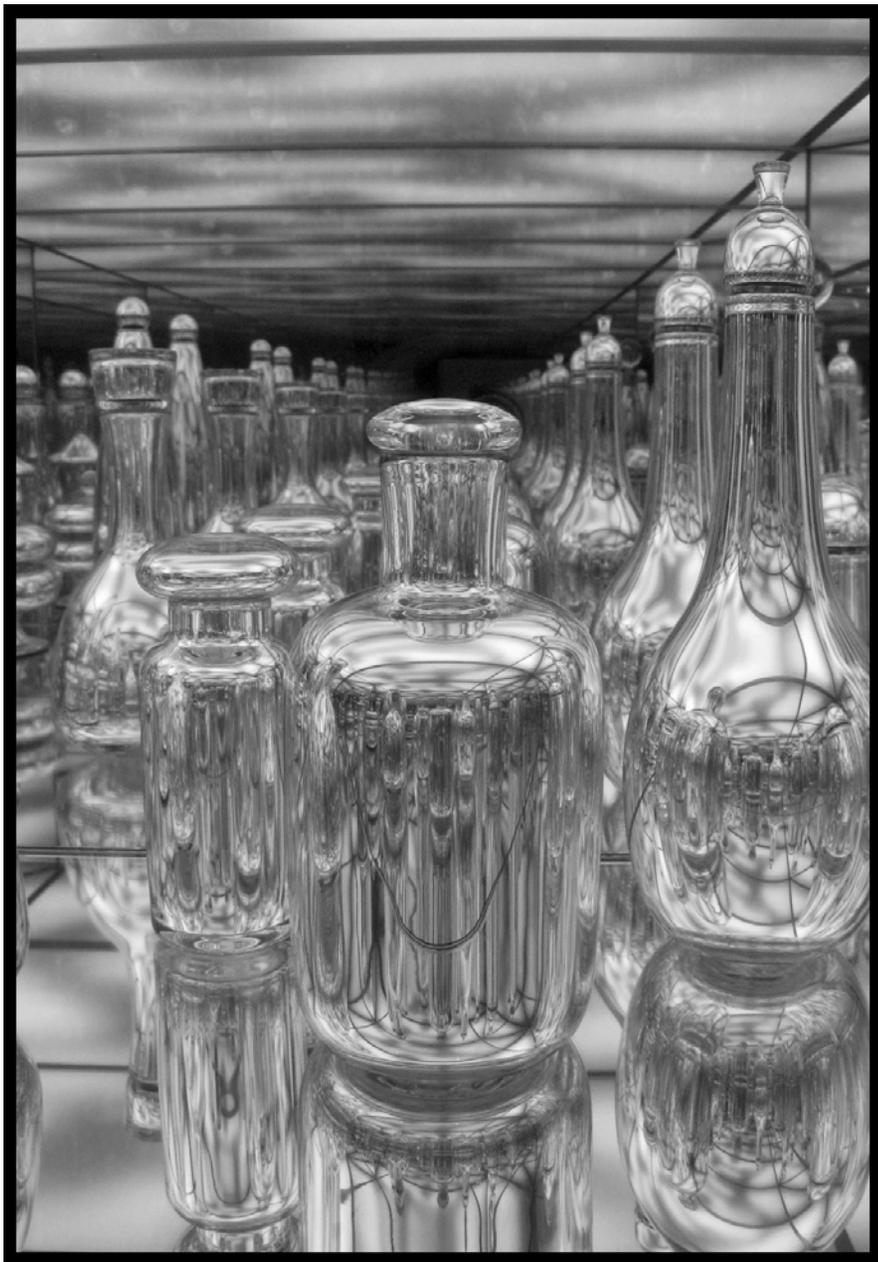
A train in the clouds headed west

But neither of us was good at being young anyway
 And it occurs to me now
 It is mainly the heaviness of our hearts
 Toward our own things
 That we must bear alike
 Even in death

The day is made of granite
 What is on the glass is not real
 Today my father's hallways are crumbling
 But our lives were not made for the taking
 They are irreplaceable

All around me the gray pavement is receding
 Soon it will be evening
 I leave trying to remember what I was supposed to do





Jonathan TALAT Phillips



*Welcome to the Rodeo, Cowboy:
My First Journey with Ayahuasca*
[Journal]

We pulled into a gravel driveway a mile outside of town. Three other cars stood in front of a small, deteriorating farmhouse that featured the same flaking white paint and sinking front porch as the humidity-wrecked houses from my parents' economically depressed homeland in north central Missouri. This would be like tripping at my grandparents' house. Dark clouds had rolled in from the west and the brown hills around us looked sad and ominous.

Nick, our "aya-guide" for the journey, stepped out of a two-story chicken coop behind the house. Trained as an ethnobotanist among tribes in the Amazon, Nick's style sported an eclectic fashion ecosystem—Peruvian poncho, Shipibo embroidered hat, Ash-ninka red-and-white beaded necklaces, and Gap khaki pants.

A mutual friend introduced us a month earlier at a Williamsburg loft party. When I asked Nick how he started guiding psychedelic journeys, he told me in a friendly, nasally voice that in Peru the vine told him to learn how to brew ayahuasca and share it with people in the States for healing. "Really?" I nodded politely. "The vine told you this?" He said it was the most powerful medicinal plant he had ever encountered, and this was his profession. Still, I wasn't sure I wanted to embark on a journey with a skinny pseudo-shaman who looked barely thirty. He may have known about the medicinal benefits of dandelions and lyre leaf sage, and could even survive a food stoppage in New York City, having lived off edible plants in Central Park for a week, but I didn't trust that any of those experiences could match those of the several-hundred-years lineage holders of the Secoya and Conibo tribes.

But I had been curious about the effects of ayahuasca since reading Dr. Rick Strassman's *DMT: The Spirit Molecule*. In the book, Strassman offers the poetic hypothesis that DMT—which is endogenous to the human body as well as countless plants and other animals—is produced by the pineal gland. Shaped like a pinecone and named from the Latin word *pineus*, which means "relating to pine," this tiny gland, weighing .1 grams, sits right in the position

of the third eye—or, if you prefer, the sixth chakra, at the top of the body's Tree of Life. It would be fitting for this mysterious gland to secrete a substance that triggers the most electric mystical experiences.

Nick helped carry our bags up a wooden ladder to the second floor of the chicken coop. Inside, five New York City Burners with Mexican blankets draped over their shoulders were preparing the space with ornamental rugs and wild flowers. They lit incense and sprayed sweet-smelling oils in the air.

"It's kind of quaint," I said hopefully. But all of their efforts couldn't hide the wire windows, busted-up floorboards, and the musty smell of rotting wood.

"It looks like a horror movie," Mitchell replied robotically. A swarm of angry butterflies raged through my abdomen as I pictured a long afternoon trapped in the grotesque psychedelic chambers of my mind.

Nick whistled for us to sit in a circle. He played songs on a qanbks, the short-necked lute/guitar from Yemen, then whispered Shipibo healing prayers over the plastic Canada Dry bottle holding the ayahuasca. "If you get into any jams, I have wild chili pepper to bring you back." He poured the murky brown liquid in a ceramic cup and handed it to Tavis. When it was my turn, I asked "the vine of souls" to help me with my next clue in uncovering the secrets of the Tree of Life, and how that might help heal our world in crisis.

I cringed while swallowing the viscous substance, which tasted like an unsavory mixture of coffee, green tea, and dirt. We sat quietly for forty-five minutes until I noticed the weathered ceiling boards slither and bend, curling into immaculate designs. The battered wood wove into a beautiful alien language that I somehow recognized. The characters looked like Celtic rune merged with binary code. I felt as if I were about to "remember" their meaning when the paint flakes on the wood brightened and blossomed into elaborate beige and cream-colored doilies, which suddenly bulged forward, descending towards me.

"Just kick back and relax," I heard a presence tell me. I immediately recognized it as the same voice that had appeared in my room the night I started seeing energy fields. "Cowboy, you're in for a fun ride." This time the apparition had a sense of humor, calling me "cowboy," but I didn't find it funny. I immediately sat up, sipping up short, panicked breaths. I had dabbled with mushrooms and LSD before, but even with the hallucinations, I knew my experiences were a projection of my own mind. This time, just as in the online ayahuasca trip reports, another entity (or at least that's what I presumed it to be), was telling me to chill out. Could I trust this being? Where did it come from? What did it look like? Why was it hiding behind these lattice designs and why did it follow me around? Maybe this was a helpful spirit or perhaps I was

crazy and hearing voices that weren't really there? Whatever it was, I wasn't sure if I wanted it around.

Placing my palms carefully on the wood floor, I slowly lowered my body back to the ground. The fanciful doilies in the ceiling blossomed out like flowers, and wove and danced down towards me. I felt them lock into small vortexes of energy, which I presumed to be the major chakras, running along the middle of my body. I had never encountered the chakras physically before, but in this heightened state of awareness, they weren't just mysterious subtle centers, but powerful pneumatic motors that raised my body's vibration as the lattice-designs spun them faster and faster. Tears trembled into my eyes with the acceleration. My organs, bones, and skin grew oppressively heavy, crushing in on themselves and squeezing out the air in my lungs. "Oh, my god," I thought, "I'm dying." With a sudden flash of light, the pressure released and my energy consciousness shot out of my scalp, blasting through an undulating veil of colorful fractal patterns until I found my spirit, if that's what you would call it, swimming in a serene velvety black void. A school of globular white lights swam up to me like dolphins, blinking on and off as if they were saying, "Welcome home."

Floating bodiless in this peaceful void, I recalled a line from *The Jesus Mysteries* by Timothy Freke & Peter Gandy, that the Gnostics were "psychonauts who boldly explored the final frontiers of inner space, and the origins and meaning of life." Was it possible that the Amazonian vine would reveal to me traces of the ancient Christian mysteries?

As I harbored this thought, a full-size movie screen suddenly unfurled from within the dark nothingness. Scenes of my life projected in super-sonic speed onto its white surface—moving to the mountains from the suburbs at the age of two; my father losing his job; hiding in the basement from my mother's shouts; receiving my high school diploma; holding keg stand competitions in college; fumbling sex with my first girlfriend; healing my throat in Prague; and screaming "The Republicans are coming!" down Lexington Avenue in my Jonny America outfit.

After all of these images, the screen showed me a young pregnant woman, maybe sixteen or seventeen years old, being tortured in a dungeon or bunker with dirt walls. I tried to make sense of the image, and how it pertained to me. The presence whispered through the void: "Cowboy, that was you, a long time ago. You've carried the sorrow and anger from that trauma throughout many lifetimes."

"Reincarnation?" I asked to the strange voice, confused. I hadn't thought much of past lives, nor of people who believed in them.

"You chose to be born to your mother in this incarnation to relive this

terror,” the voice said. “You’re learning to transmute and overcome those energies. So get this straight, okay, your mother is your guide. You got it, cowboy.”

Before I had time to digest this bombshell, my consciousness swished back into my body, but I wasn’t exactly me. I saw myself as a majestic bear-human on a stone throne, a wild but graceful animal with a human continence. “This represents the story of tribal humanity,” the voice advised. That image soon disappeared to reveal a half-human, half-lion on a gilded throne, similarly animal but more regal. Around me embroidered red-and-silver tapestries hung on the walls of a vast palace chamber. Millions of other half-lion royals appeared with golden branches stretching out of their glowing crowns, connecting us in a gilded web. “This represents the story of civilization, humanity’s journey out of nature into separation, laws, and technological achievement.”

Experiencing this vision had a profoundly calming effect on me. I shed some of the negative judgments I held regarding humankind’s leap out of Eden, and the violence and cruelty that entailed. Perhaps it was all a transitional phase, a necessary second act that will lead to a transcendent third one. As this idea occurred to me, from behind my thrown, two golden eagles with eight-foot wingspans rose up, circling higher and higher in the air until they broke through the ceiling. Then the room crashed into rubble.

Out of the dust I saw a snake-human arise on an invisible throne. It had normal yellow eyes and a slow flickering red tongue, but its scales boasted a complicated diamond pattern that looked futuristically alien and synthetic. Powerful white light emanated from every pore of this creature. His gaze struck me as sophisticated, telepathic, full of Buddha-like compassion. This snake was the coming together of nature and technology after a 10,000-year schism, an enlightened non-dualistic synthesis.

“Cowboy, this represents where you humans are evolving,” the presence announced, “toward something beyond your wildest three-dimensional imaginations, yet you already know this and hold the seed within each of you. It’s already happening, so get ready for some fun. The party is just getting started,” the presence giggled almost ominously. The snake sucked in his tongue and winked at me.

With that final gesture, I disappeared into a swirling *Doctor Who*-like wormhole, racing through a tunnel of kaleidoscopic colors until the presence told me: “Open Sesame.” It took me a minute to register my coordinates when opening my eyes. I was sitting on an oriental rug in a dilapidated chicken coop. An ordinary American white male. Everyone else was nestled quietly under their Mexican blankets, off on their journeys. Nick waved a stick of incense in the air, whistling along to birdcalls he had recorded in the Amazon, which played

on a pair of portable speakers.

The presence was not yet gone. It asked me to lie down, which I did, and close my eyes. It then began to zap healing light into my anxiety-ridden abdomen. Painful memories surfaced as the light opened knots of trapped energy in the depths of my intestines. There was my mother screaming, “We’re going to the poor house”; my brother punching my stomach while holding me down to the floor; me drinking myself to oblivion at Denver’s Lion’s Lair; and me again standing on the railing of Prague’s Charles Bridge, considering ending it all. The white light dissolved the pain of these traumas.

I meditated on how these experiences could have mirrored the victimization of a tortured woman, who might have been me, many lifetimes ago. I saw a possible link between the woman’s suffering and the melancholy I felt as a kid, brooding over blue snow-capped Mount Evans at dusk, yearning for something I had long lost. Perhaps the root of my suffering went beyond an unpleasant childhood, to a spiritual source unperceivable to educated psychologists.

As the white-light surgery reached a sharp pain under my belly button, a medieval portrait of Jade and me flashed before my eyelids. We each wore long red robes, broaches around our necks, gold crowns with crosses sticking out the top, and held jeweled scepters in our hands.

“Jade is your queen,” the presence informed me. “You have karma together, so stick this one out, okay? No more playing the field, at least for a while.”

“You’re kidding!” I yelled back at the voice. Somehow, I was able to take all the animal royalty, the energy healing, and a past life as a tortured woman, in stride. But this was going too far. Jade as my *queen*? I had grown up with a fiery-tempered woman and my tolerance for it only went so far, no matter what some uppity presence had to say about it.

“Just consider it,” the voice said, then continued the light surgery for the rest of the afternoon.

The effects of the ayahuasca faded by nightfall. Sitting at a long wooden table in the farmhouse kitchen, we nourished our bodies with Nick’s vegetarian version of feijoada, Brazilian bean soup. While eating, my fellow journeyers shared the communications they had encountered with the plant.

“I asked the vine, ‘This is just me talking back to myself, right?’” Mitchell recounted. “And it answered, ‘Sure, if that makes it easier on you.’” A woman, who was still wearing a Mexican blanket over her shoulders, said, “I was told we need to rush to save creation on this planet. There’s not much time left.”

“The vine said we need to stop fighting the old systems and start creating

new containers for people who are going through these spiritual openings,” Tavis reflected. “Together, we need to build something that’s never existed before—a global network of light.”



Martina Newberry



Blooms

My father helped Mister Hudson move his old fridge out to the garage and move the new one into the kitchen. Daddy worked at Kaiser Steel in Fontana shoveling slag and minding the Open Hearth. Mr. Hudson worked at Upland Savings and Loan. He wore a suit and a nasty face and he hated the neighborhood kids. But Daddy helped him anyway and turned down the five dollars he was offered, told old Hudson “Naah, we’re neighbors after all” and thanked him anyway. Second Avenue was old and shaded with big pepper trees. They shook at the slightest breeze, grew malformed fungi at the base of their trunks.

*The gritty winds came down
from Mt. Baldy. The sand
smelled like copper, gleamed
like copper.*

On Saturday, when Daddy’s friends came to visit with their permed floozies in tow—Andy Kushner with “Penny” and Bob Trow with “Brenda”—they all got loose on beers and shots of Old Crow and Daddy told about moving Hudson’s fridge. Andy Kushner pinched his girl’s cheek with a thumb and a forefinger knobbed as tree twigs, kissed the red spot and said, “It won’t make the old bastard any friendlier, Jack.” “Why sure it will,” Daddy said, “he can’t get any damned UNfriendlier” and everybody laughed like crazy. The room filled with cigarette smoke and the flexing of calloused hands and the smell of Evening in Paris perfume. Brenda’s stockings, brand new from Sears Roebuck, got a run in them and she cried a little. Everyone went out onto the front porch and looked up.

*The sky glowed like the night
was on fire and maybe it was
and the sounds and colors
of the mill split the sky.*

This all happened a good 20 years before the mill closed and the skies above Fontana and Rialto and Etiwanda went blue and maybe even clean. Before I went off to college, we drove—my father and I—to the closed-up mill and the deserted shells of the machine shops and the blast furnaces and the empty soaking pits where only the ghosts of ingots lay cooling. We went right up to where he used to work—the locks on the gates weren't locked.

It all looked cold and unfriendly like old Mr. Hudson's face. *It was such dirty work, such hard work* I said, but my father said, "Naah. I was grateful because it gave us a living." On the way home, we passed Dominic's Bar, closed as well. All the men had drunk there and stayed too late there and left their lunch pails there and left their smelted dreams there at one time or another.

*Walking out of the mill,
the men grinned, faces so dirty
their teeth looked whitewashed
fierce in the gloaming.*

*Walking into Dominic's
Beer tasting of hops and grime
hard-boiled eggs, sausage
out of jars, into steel fists.*

I wish we could go here again, I said. *I wish I was still 9 years old and Momma and I could meet you at Dominic's after work and I would have a hard-boiled egg and a sip of your beer and a Shirley Temple for myself. I wish Dominic's never closed.* My father said, "Me too," and flexed his fingers. Dominic's sign was falling off the building, my father tried to fix it. I saw Andy Kushner trying to help him. They couldn't get it fastened back up.

A week later, I was on my way to San Jose State College, wanted to be a librarian and a writer. My father hugged me hard, told me, "You're the daughter of a working man, a steel worker. Be proud of that." I wasn't proud right then, but I got proud some 25 years later when an elitist bitch told me I couldn't write worth a tinker's damn because I didn't have a degree. I got proud then and told her about my father and told her she ought to be slapped, but not to worry because I wasn't into slapping and I left her class and didn't go back.

*In my dreams, my father
glides over hot rolled blooms
and billets. His shovel makes
sparks that bounce off his grin.*

*The alarm sounds and the door
goes up to show the molten river
red as blood and hot enough
to rival hell.*

*My father guides that river
right out into the sky where
the stars drink of it
and continue to shine.*





Zannemarie Lloyd Taylor

Troubadour

The hand of the player is calloused
And broad. Like carillon bells, he rings out
The import of mood or moment—voice
Mellow or hoarse, sweet or sweaty,
Crooner rich, blues coarse. He aches
For his guitar to swing out
Across any abyss, to something
Gentle a kiss, or the brightness
Of a half smile.

The Troubadour spans the ages, miles,
Spaces in heart and mind. He has been lost,
But never unkind. His is a wish
On the wind, hope out of time,
Love on the mend. A man
Who walks the barely visible line
Between truth and passion, between
The dust of night, and the shiver
Of sequined memory.

The Way You Say My Name

I love the way you caress me with my name, the way mothers and fathers
Caress and greet their children—with expectation that the world
Will meet, invite, envelop them.

I love the way you light my name like a marquee, when you sing it,
When you go neon, electric, on me. I love how you clasp our lips to it
Like a kitten pouncing on a moth.

I love how the syllables spring forth from your spark of intonation,
And linger in the air like Chinese lanterns. I love that you know me
In my name, like the first and last words spoken

Before the fall of the Tower of Babel; how the courage in your eyes meets
mine,
Now hands follow, sudden grace embracing us, clutched around us—
I love the way you say my name.

Predators As They Grow Older

Men with owlsh faces
Squared behind rimless glasses
Masquerade as studious,
Or professorial.

Sartorial, they preen
Against their own disembodied flesh—
Body a wall more than a spark—
They flash dully

To themselves, or hide
Behind ritual. They pretend they have
Never been to war, or foster home,
Or prison.

Men whose owlsh faces
Bolie the grip of suffering times
Let the corners of their aging minds
Grow rounded.

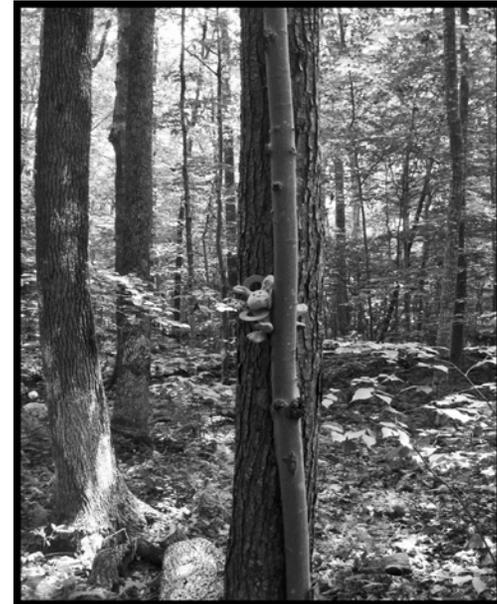
Faced with the wobble
In themselves, the bobble in their souls,
They look at you as prey, and then,
Look away.

They forget, in this dissociative state,
That they took you for a mate, in rage,
Or tried to kill you, then
Forgot you.

The owl in those faces knows
The haunted places, the fits and skips of heart,
The sawed off spaces in the brain
Or hypothalamus.

It shows the kneaded bread-dough body
Its origins, it tattoos, its scars. It reminds
Of lost taboos, sins mortal and venial,
Or menial.

Behind the rimless glasses, the man with a
Squared-off face replaces those searching owl eyes
With a shallow look. Don't read in. This is all
There is.





Letter to Occupy

The Occupy movement is extraordinary. It has raised local, national, and world consciousness about vast discontent, about failing national and global economic systems, and about the astounding gap in wealth, effectiveness, and life chances between the 1 percent and the 99 percent. This is the first time since the 1930s that social class has been front and center in our society for those paying attention.

The great American movements of the latter half of the twentieth century—civil rights, anti-Vietnam War, women, GLBTQ—took years to get off the ground. Thanks to the unforeseen consequence of globalization and the rocketing rise of social media, massive numbers of people have been able correctly to identify their lack of jobs, housing, affordable education, healthcare, and viable life aspirations with those of millions—no, billions!—of fellow global citizens. It did not take years to get all this going. It took days. In circumstances as diverse as those in Spain, Greece, Chile, Tunisia, Egypt, Wisconsin, Israel, and Quebec, the colossal outpouring of anger—shaped by extreme passion and nonviolence—took away the breath of billions of participants and observers, and caused those in charge of the status quo to tremble mightily.

The Occupy action itself was brilliant. Its explicit claim was that public spaces belong as much to aroused, angry citizens as they do to Sunday strollers and people taking their workday lunch breaks. Tent cities with health centers, religious spaces, media desks, and even libraries, could not, after their first few days, be ignored by mainstream media. A twenty-four-hour presence complete with colorful posters, sheltering of the homeless, rolling discussions about everything, and call-and-response nightly General Assemblies was a wonder to behold.

Of course it did not all go smoothly. Occupy evolved quickly as a super democratic and quasi-anarchic movement. It had no central leadership or platform or plan. Each city's Occupy grew in its own way. Waves were made, splashes were felt, and cries were heard.

Occupy began last October. As winter approached, ideas were abundant for how to sustain the encampments, but before plans could be carried out, police forces, in what looked like a nationally coordinated maneuver, uprooted



just about all the Occupy sites.

Stage One of Occupy, which grew like Topsy and commanded extensive attention, was over. Occupiers moved indoors. Planning continued. Actions like housing the homeless and challenging mega-banks sprouted up in city after city. But the sporadic nature of the actions and the decentralization of it all diluted the original passion and the initial message. And—crucially—it shrunk the public awareness that is the oxygen of a movement like Occupy.

Occupy is not over, but Stage Two has not yet come together. I will now, audaciously, suggest a Stage Two that I am convinced would rock the world.

Where the Money Is

Any social movement that succeeds has to be based on an accurate analysis of conditions of discontent, and of possible ways of overcoming them. Occupy, as I see it, draws anger from two sources. One source is personal situations. Many of the people behind Occupy in this country—and in the corresponding movements in Tunisia, Egypt, Greece, and Spain—were responding at least in part to having found no work commensurate with their higher educational accomplishments. Lack of work and crushing debts (especially in the United States which is unparalleled in sticking students with gigantic education loans) are a mighty combination.

The space between those personal discontents and awareness of ghastly inequities in the larger system was as thin as tissue paper. The unbridled opportunism and cynicism of just about all parts of the finance industry—the ruthless and cunning manipulation of naïve home buyers' dreams; the masterly posting of banking personnel in key government positions—became suddenly apparent to large numbers of people. Their anger spread like wildfire, and Occupy erupted from the white-hot outrage and discontent.

It became clearer than ever that there is something mightily wrong with a society that spends hundreds of billions of dollars bailing out banks and automobile companies but claims to have too little money for healthcare (the United States is the only advanced country in the world that lets substantial numbers of health dollars go to insurance companies rather than health and has no national healthcare system at all), education (the United States is way down globally in measures of success in education), reversing climate change (short-sighted corporations making money off pollution succeed in making this most urgent impending environmental catastrophe into a mockery), housing (the disaster of sub-prime mortgages has thrown millions out of their homes with nowhere else to go), and more.

Indeed, a recent report suggests that upward mobility, also known as the American Dream—the chance to move forward in education, income, status, and lifestyle—is now lower in the United States than in just about any other industrialized country.

The people who are responsible for this mess—corporations and politicians—are not stupid or evil. Rather, they are acting the way their positions in society demand that they act. They are sucked into huge machines demanding that profit and power—not decency and compassion—rule, have always ruled, and shall rule until the end of time. They probably mean well, but their training is so severe and successful that it is very hard for them to pull away from it and see the world anew. And to discover how they could save us all—including themselves—from our impending devastation.

Those masters of finance, industry, and politics can find their way beyond the profit and power nexus, but this is among the greatest challenges facing those who seek a just society. The 1 percent have staked their all at maintaining the social order in its current form, or on a reactionary earlier form where they would have even more money and power than they do now. There is no greater challenge on earth than figuring out how to end the dominance of that 1 percent. They need some jolts, gigantic bolts from the blue, in order to be motivated to get off the money-and-power dime. Some of them understand this and will go with change. Others will fight it tooth and nail. The challenge is there either to persuade those others to move from greed thinking and values to social, planetary thinking and values, or to wrest their power and wealth from them nonviolently. There is no greater challenge facing those who envision liberating, universal change, and who commit themselves to working for it.

The first step is to recognize the claim that there is not enough money for housing, education, healthcare, and climate change reversal is simply a *lie*, one of the *greatest* deceptions of all time. It is a fraud motivated by short-sightedness and assumptions made by mainstream economists rather than by stupidity or evil.

The 2008 crisis and its aftermath have led even some mainstream economists to question their assumptions that a market system works best when it is unconstrained and makes lots of money for investors. Alan Greenspan, who headed the Federal Reserve for almost twenty years, and whose policies are heavily responsible for our economic catastrophe, has admitted that he had put too much faith in assumptions that the market system works best with few controls. If the economic profession is as shaken as it seems to be, this is surely the time to work with dazed, smart economists, as well as those who knew the limits of free market thinking all along, to shift the economy toward human



and planetary well-being and sustainable economies as alternative visions. These goals, given public airing, would surely satisfy everyone who decided to look at the larger survival picture rather than just the small-bore profit one.

There is plenty of money right now for superb healthcare, outstanding education, housing for everyone, healthy food, infrastructure repair, and reversing global warming. There is abundant money to meet all these needs. The claim that there is not enough money is a diversion, a tall tale, a ruse meant to keep the big bucks in the hands and pockets of the 1 percent, rather than spreading it around for the benefit of all. The case for cutting back on government supports—for just about everything but war—is, in short, one big lie.

It just happens that the great piles of money needed for meeting real human needs are stored in places that some clever people have convinced most of us are sacrosanct: tax loopholes, tax breaks for the 1 percent, and the military budget. It seems to me that Stage Two of Occupy has got to reveal to everyone that the money is there, and to demand that it be freed for saving us all and our planet. Here's how to do it: through one universal political movement, crossing all boundaries, and divided into three parts.

Part 1: End Tax Loopholes

Demand that citizen overseers, working with attorneys general and tax officials, and elected in contests not financed by the 1 percent, have powers of inquiry and enforcement to plug all loopholes that allow the 1 percent to pay less than their fair share of taxes.

Nobody can spend hundreds of millions of dollars, let alone billions. Or needs to try. Nobody truly earns those big bucks anyway. They gain wealth by inheriting a starter fortune upon which to build (think Romney here), and/or they make it by underpaying workers and outsourcing much of what would allow the United States to maintain a vibrant economy, and/or they make it by stripping workers of organizing rights and healthcare benefits and pensions, and/or they make it by hiring extremely clever if unprincipled lawyers who devise ways for them to pay little or no taxes, and/or they make it by promoting products that are unhealthy and even dangerous, and/or they make it by creating grotesque conditions for workers in third world countries who work at starvation wages at best, and/or they make it by buying politicians who rig laws in their favor in return for hefty financing of political campaigns. And so on.

I emphasize that the people who make oceans of money and dodge taxes should not be hated or scorned. Our problem is not with them but with the structures that permit and even encourage them to act ruthlessly in

order to achieve the two prime goals of profit and power, the goals that all but drown alternative goals of sustainability, planet preservation, and decency and compassion for all.

Part 2: Increase Tax Rates on the Rich

Demand a graduated income tax, returning in the United States to taxation levels of the Eisenhower era, which taxed the super rich beyond a certain point at levels up to 90 percent. It is a myth that low taxes on the rich stimulate the economy. They don't. The United States economy did far better when taxes on the very rich were high than it does now that taxes on them are low.

The culture of the 1 percent obsesses over making ever more money and, most likely, appearing in the *Fortune Magazine* list of the 500 richest Americans. Money becomes a narcotic, an obsession that the rich can no more control than can any other addict manage their intake of alcohol or drugs. Insisting on ever more wealth is not an economic triumph; it is a tragic mania. The 1 percent have to insulate themselves from the feelings and realities of most of the 99 percent and therefore have really *to cut off their own humanity* in order to meet the rigorous demands of an economic system that has spun out of control.

Part 3: Reduce Military Budgets Drastically

Although humans have suffered war for about 10,000 years, we are at a point in history where there are far better ways of resolving conflicts. Fully respecting the training, hopes, and sacrifices of warriors, I think they are especially well positioned to see that war is not the best way to make money for investors or to change whatever conditions wars are intended to change. The United States is now the premier war-making country in the world, *and its military budget is greater than those of all other countries combined*. The United States also sells tens of billions of dollars worth of war materiel to countries—many of them like Saudi Arabia on the anti-human rights far right. Billions of taxpayer money—*our* money—finance arms fairs that promote those weapons sales.

Heads of state classically try to show their masculinity by leading nations into war. They often find war a useful and necessary payback to war contractors (also called defense contractors) who help finance their election campaigns. They also use war as a way of distracting their populations' attention from their real problems by diverting anger at the institutions and injustices of their own society toward a manufactured enemy instead.

As war winds down, it will still be necessary for nations to maintain

small militaries capable of defense. Offensive war should be defined by the International Court of Justice as a crime against humanity and punished by massive economic boycotts and ending of diplomatic relations with any state that initiates a war.

U.S. wars, in particular following the Second World War, have ended in nothing useful to anyone. The division of Korea remains a blight for everyone concerned. The war in Vietnam, spilling over into Cambodia and Laos, killed millions and gained nothing of consequence for the United States or any southeast Asian country. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have increased wealth for oil barons and war contractors but nothing else of use to anyone. Millions have died to keep the war machine going. Whether it ever was necessary, war is no longer so now.

In the last hundred years or so, a major alternative to war as a way to end conflicts has emerged and has grown considerably: nonviolence. Gandhi and King were the best-known teachers of it, and there are now countless successes of nonviolence. Back in 1905, the governments of Sweden and Norway were preparing to go to war. Troops were massed at the border between the two countries. Norwegians and Swedes in large numbers insisted there be no war. The governments acceded to that demand.

In just the last year, huge numbers of people in Tunisia and Egypt overthrew despised dictators nonviolently. Millions of students in Chile and Quebec brought those countries' higher education systems to a standstill with nonviolent calls for making high quality university education available to everyone who wants it. The effectiveness of Occupy itself has been tied very closely to its nonviolent behaviors. On those occasions when violence was employed, nothing good came of it. This is the time in history to move from violence to nonviolence. Much is known by now about how to do this. The ideas and the training are there for the asking.

Except for the very few countries without a military, this is the time to campaign for reducing military budgets by half over a three-year period and then by half of what remains, over the following three year period. The money gained from these campaigns should be used for meeting real human needs for jobs, education, housing, healthcare, and for reversing climate change to the extent that that is possible. There is enough money for all of this. It is in raising taxes on the 1 percent, ending tax loopholes for all corporations and individuals, and drastically reducing military budgets.

Campaign Financing and Democracy

There should be no private money in any elections. Governments should allocate the same amount of money to everyone running for office. Corporations, unions, and private wealthy persons should be forbidden to contribute even a dollar to political campaigns.

One of the oddest judicial decisions of our time or any other is the bizarre notion that money is a form of free speech. It is said that “money talks,” but it really doesn’t. The person with the money does the talking, and the money short circuits persuasion, which is the main technique for using free speech in politics.

The ordinary person who gives 50 dollars to a politician’s campaign is not equal to the very rich person who puts in ten million dollars. *Money is not speech*. Rather, it is a form of bribe, pressure, intimidation, coercion, seduction. It is a way for very rich people—those in the 1 percent—actually to buy politicians who are then obligated to make political decisions in favor of those who paid them to get into office. In a democracy, words are free speech. Money is a tool for manipulating. *Money is not free speech*; it corrupts free speech.

The 1 Percent Is Not Homogeneous

The 99 percent / 1 percent formulation promoted by Occupy is brilliant. Not since the 1930s, when unions were strong and there were serious political parties challenging “free market” thinking, has social class—the study of the hows and whys of the haves and the have-nots—been on the front burner in American society. But now it is, and the 99/1 vocabulary is now part of common discourse.

As our society moves ahead in confronting its monumental problems, though, it is useful to move past stark binaries like 99 percent *versus* 1 percent. That formulation, implicit or explicit in much of what Occupy has analyzed so far, unfortunately sets the stage for the 1 percent—through control of police forces, media, education, and politics—to find ways to intimidate and subvert Occupy. It also assumes, incorrectly, that everyone in the 1 percent thinks and acts just like everyone else in the 1 percent.

That is not true.

There are numbers of millionaires and billionaires who are not only sympathetic to Occupy but who call for higher taxes on themselves and their fellow 1 percent’ers. These more visionary and understanding members of the 1 percent—Warren Buffett is the best known of them—know about global

warming; they know about intolerable greed and corruption; they know no one is entitled to endless billions, and they know about the outrages and injustices of the system of which they are a part.

Actions for Major Change

The time is ripe for a bold move to capture the imaginations of the 99 percent and of those parts of the 1 percent already leaning in that direction. It will be necessary and possible to persuade as much as possible of the 1 percent that working on everyone’s behalf is more in their interest than is the profit-power nexus that they have been taught trumps everything else on earth. We could see as a goal an eventual combining of the 99 percent and the 1 percent to make a society where 100 percent agree to bend their talents and hearts to building a world of justice, sustainability, and survival of our planet itself.

Sure it’s a pipe dream. So was the end of cannibalism. So was the end of human sacrifice. So was the end of slavery. So was religious freedom. So was free speech. So was the civil rights movement. So was the anti-Vietnam War movement. So was the women’s movement. So was the LGBTQ movement.

The philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer wrote, “All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident.” And so it will be with the world’s first global political movement, to return the wealth of a society to all of its people to be used for the benefit of everyone. That idea was ridiculed for at least a century and a half. Now we are in Schopenhauer’s stage two, when the idea is violently opposed. We can and must hold on long enough for the idea to become accepted as self-evident. That will require a huge amount of work. Here is how it can be done:

1. *Redesign Occupy as a global (not national) movement.* Even though the three sources of plenty of money are all but obviously apparent in the U.S., all or nearly all countries are structured with a 1 percent that maintains more than its fair share of wealth by avoiding paying at full tax rates and taking advantage of tax loopholes. Except for Costa Rica and a few small island countries, all nation-states spend far more on defense than is in any conceivable way necessary. Helping the super-rich to part with funds they do not need joins with lowering military spending to create funds needed to meet everyone’s real human needs. Or work to transform the Democratic Party from within. The Tea Party has done this to the Republican Party. It can be argued that it is time now for a progressive counterpart.

2. *Embrace nonviolence as the main method of working for social change.* Local chapters of the global movement could engage in comprehensive trainings in the theory and numerous techniques of civil disobedience and other forms of nonviolence. Countless nonviolence successes would be studied carefully as would failures. Change would proceed with respect for everyone, including opponents.
3. *Oppose cruel structures, not people.* It was tempting in the 1960s, as at most times in history, to identify an “enemy” and demonize it. This practice is so familiar that it is all but automatic for countless activists and bystanders alike on the left as well as on the right. The problems we face are in the *structures* that train people to behave cruelly far more than in the people themselves, for if the people who abuse are replaced in structures that remain the same, the abuse will be repeated. It is time to replace hierarchical structures, and their power wielded from the top down, with horizontal structures, where people learn to identify and solve problems *together*. This is what some people call the difference between *power over* and *power with*.
4. *Design a slogan that will crystallize the movement and its vision.* “Our planet, ourselves” might be one possibility. “Sustain our planet, sustain our lives” is another. “Wealth belongs to all.” “Compassion and joy trump profit and power.” “Share power, save planet.” “We are all in this together.” The possibilities are endless.
5. *Work for change cooperatively.* Fighting within Occupy and any other change groups reflects old patterns of assuming that one has to “win” rather than that one has to solve problems in community. For some months, countless Occupy encampments explored democratic decision-making and did it with a clear sense of community. Much of that fell apart eventually. Out of control anger, insistence on having one’s way, reluctance to look inward to learn what interferes with acting calmly and effectively, and ties to this generation’s versions of “political correctness” have all interfered with the further development of Occupy.

It is hard to take all this into account. But positive social change does not come from only wishing for it or spending just a few months on it. There is no greater task for us than figuring out how to survive the political and environmental crises of this era. This is infinitely more challenging than making money and living comfortably. As successful change comes, it will be discovered that working with others for genuine human dignity and liberation and environmental sustainability is infinitely more rewarding, too.



DOLORES TOODLE GOES TO MARKET

“Goodness gracious. Mercy me!
I’m all out of sugar and have little tea.
My milk and cookies are getting’ low . . .
‘Tis off to the market I go.”

So Dolores Toodle pulled up her stockings,
put on her bonnet, and started walking.
Resolute, focused, determined, resigned,
Dolores with groceries on her mind.

‘Twas a glorious morning—no morning so fair—
with larkspur and lilac perfuming the air.
“And how are you today, Mrs. Millicent Warner?”
She asked of the widow who lived on the corner.

“Quite well, indeed, tho’ sad I am,
to have neither butter nor strawberry jam.”
Dolores replied, “I happen to be taking
steps to the market. Come walking with me.”

Thus, two elderly women continued their way
toward the neighborhood market that glorious day.
They met old Bridie Cullen on Cavendish Street.
She was going for crisps and a tin of meat.

With her cane tapping flagstone she joined the parade.
—a spinster—a widow—and lonely old maid.
“Sweet Jaysus and Mary,” prayed pious Dolores,
“Bless and direct and defend and watch o’er us.”



They arrived at the market. They burst through the door! Millie Warner yelled, “All of you—*down on the floor!*” Bridie flipped the sign over to the side with CLOSED on it, while Dolores brandished a pin from her bonnet,

as if she was pointing a Colt 45, she cried, “Nobody’s leaving this market alive unless all of the sugar and butter and tea are forked over to Bridie and Millie and me!

“Heads down! Don’t move! Yes, you too, dear . . . or I’ll jab every last bloomin’ one of you here! We’ll be wanting your cookies and crispies as well, or I’ll send all you sweethearts to hell!”

Bridie caned and disabled the security cam, adding: “Don’t forget milk and the strawberry jam!” She poked at the stock boy: “Your ass is mine . . . I’ll ram this cane up where the sun don’t shine if you even so much as look up at my face—so be a darlin’ ‘till we blow this place.”

As Dolores and Bridie stuffed loot in their sack, Millie went to get booze from the cooler out back. Dolores demanded a carton of smokes, a tin of meat, then she waved. “Toodle-oo, folks!”

They hotwired a Bentley, with pedal to metal, and Dolores was soon boiling tea in her kettle, back in her hide-out that night all alone, Dolores Toodle was using her telephone to tell her two cronies, “We certainly must take a walk one day soon to the Savings and Trust.”

*As we age it may seem that we run out of time.
But you’re never too old for a life of crime.*



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixation]

(excerpts)

*“Out here on the perimeter there are no stars
Out here we is stoned—immaculate”*

—The Doors,

“The Wasp (Texas Radio & the Big Beat,” 1971.

Bowie doesn't dream anymore, since he's been some or all mushroom, they don't understand dreams or, like many things, don't wish to, or at least admit it, & so he doesn't dream but then he does tonight, not even fully cohered—*seriously, where the fuck am I?*—but whatever he is, was, comes together & he dreams, he's in a record store, & the old feelings of love for such places is real, walking in like it's better than the subtlest temple, the vastest toy store, he arrives not to a store at all, in his heart, but—

Sees the girl. Her hair is a frosted blonde, the kind he hasn't seen in a long time, & she has a nice figure, from what he can suss through her thick rumped sweater, & a young smile, she looks lost, in a place where he always feels found—

“I started in one place & now—”

“That happens here, if you let it—”

“I didn't think I did—”

“But here you are—elsewhere—”

“I suppose—”

Bowie considers. A bed & candlelight. A blink away. Away the rumped sweater, & maybe that hair coloring too.

But why here, this girl, this dreaming? Are the mushrooms letting him have this, or is he having it despite them? They're not enemies, he reminds himself. He just tires of their critiques. They don't get that constant content is not a human

thing. Peace isn't always preferable.

"Come on," he says softly, taking her hand, realizing he looks much younger, less fleshed out, not a boy who would say or do such a thing, but she reacts immediately to his order. They walk deeper into the record store.

He looks at her, twice, & thinks, OK, I'll ride this one for awhile. This construct. Maybe the girl too. He wonders how young he actually looks. He talks, this is where his shaping skills learned from the mushrooms, come into play.

"How was class?"

She's distracted by the rows & rows of LPs, starts to page through some. "Which one?"

Takes another small jump. "The only one you care about. English."

She smiles, weirdly. "Oh, you know. About the same."

He snatches an image in her mind. A teacher, rumpily handsome. Now stands, briefly, in the class, from his view. Sniffs first before really looking. Shrooms taught him that too. Smells like perfume, jackoff, damp pussy.

Sees a little. She's in the front row, off to the side, listening with every pore, but not looking up at him. Using sniff to guide his vision, he traces at least two boys' paths to her. One lightly, one almost too intensely to know. She traces back to them, somewhat, but to me there is a deep path, a road, a highway so hard travelled he gets why she cannot look.

Another jump. "Are you going to see him again soon?" She freezes. Whoever I am, she's uncertain of me, has told me her story in vague terms so far. Was going to tell me more soon. Maybe.

"It's OK. I know. Don't worry. I wouldn't tell."

She likes me but there is little eros between us. It's there, but that's always true between every human being the big stupid obvious secret.

She doesn't look up. Ah. Her way. I again consider the rumpled sweater. Pretty tasty in there. Consider below, Has he—have they? No more than once or twice—once—*ahh*—

Think now. There's always more than one force at work simultaneously. Shrooms

taught me this too. They put it like humans are hung from tangled yanking strings & each has a personality summed from the conflicts of these strings, little more, but OK, their lesson was look in as many directions *at once*—what is yanking? An old hunger? A new? What kind? What is your body doing? Why aren't you paying it more attention? They would ask me more about my body than my thoughts. It's talking to you, Bowie. It's talking to you, Bowie. *You* are talking to *you*, Bowie. Are you hearing anything?

So I sniffed that the girl's been fucked once, recently, probably by the teacher, who she has a passion for, & I'm one of her friends, but not the two boys in English class who are chasing her too—probably not knowing they've been beaten, easily beaten—

Am I gay? That would make sense but no, I'm in my own body, I sniff that still-tight pussy of hers with more than scientific interest—

She suddenly shows me an album. Its cover seems to show a small space shuttle bursting from a sphere, in a shattering burst—I look at her—

"It's Journey's new album"

Look still—

"*Escape*? We were waiting for this! Where are you today?"

"Oh yah. Sorry. You know."

I'm grateful to see her nod & smile.

It means something. I jump.

"Let's get it & listen to it at your house."

She cringes. I bet it's not the money.

"OK. Mine works too." She nods, smiles.

A record store. Vinyl LPs. It's beautiful. I slow our walk on to find the copyright date of this album. 1981. Oh. Look at the cover again. A sort of fantastical theme. They were a rock band. Not a major one, but popular for a little while.

None of this is helping.

She's uncertain if we're ready to leave yet. I decide to piss the mushrooms off.

"Did you like it?"

"What?"

“When he fucked you? Was it a hotel room? That’s my bet.”
Smacked hard, she freezes.
“He brought you somewhere first. Not anywhere around here. Dark, cozy.”
She stares at me.
“He went slowly at first, with candles & kisses. But then he told you his fantasies. Bondage, maybe a whip.”
She still stares.
“You liked it because he did, it pleased him. But then you started to like it anyway.”
She smiles. Weirdly.
“Next time you want to do the tying. You think about it all the time. How much you want to do that.”
She nods. “Bowie . . .”
“Tell me something. Tell me *what the fuck*.”
“Look at the album. That’s you.”
“And the sphere?”
“It’s them.”
“Tell me.”
“They want to offer you a deal. A way to distance yourself.”
“So they can’t do this? Take the *fuck over* at will?”
“Yes. Not totally, but more.”
“What then.”
“It’s about the White Woods.”

It was one of many shards from his childhood, memories of his father, pieces that might or might not sum to the same picture. The White Woods. Maybe. Yes.

They had lived in several homes along the way, at least two he remembered. An earlier one, bigger than the later, had a study his father used. Books from ceiling to floor. A massive desk, like a boat with drawers & an old copper lamp. That room. He dreamed of it sometimes for many years later, especially of when he’d gone in alone.

The curtains were heavy, always drawn shut. There may have been an armchair, other furniture, but it seemed like the desk was not just king in size but in importance. His father did his work here, when he was home, many hours, usually silence when Bowie sat, small & crouched, listening at the door. But a very occasional murmur. No phone in there. Was he talking to himself, ghosts, aliens? Bowie would reject no possibility, then or now, & he knew more of them

as the years passed.

Had he heard the phrase “White Woods” spake through that door? Maybe once. Maybe over & over. He could not parse remembered fact, dream, wish. But he had gone in, once, when his father was away.

Hadn’t meant to. Well, maybe had but the room seemed forbidden. It was little if ever spoken of. At best, “I’m going to work. Good night.” If that.

Had the door really been ajar? He had not turned the doorknob to push in, not then or ever. Fairly sure. The knob was shiny, like a Christmas tree ornament, distortingly reflective. He’d listen for sounds of his father within & watch his own gloopy face listening.

Once inside, not breathing, he crept toward the desk. He was not afraid of his father as a son might be, fear of an angry word or a blow, more afraid for him. He’d told Gretta one time, “I inherited something from him, I’m not sure what. Even then, I could sense it. He was reluctant about it. I don’t know if he wanted me to have it or wanted to protect me from it. Maybe both.”

There was an open book on the desk, reached by creeping, barefoot as he was, through thick crimson-colored carpet, & crawling into a very large chair. A book. Possibly a manuscript. Bowie dared not touch it. Perhaps he’d learned already about fingerprints from one of his favorite TV shows. *The Fugitive*? There was another one too.

It was open on the desk, the pages milky warm in the light of the old copper lamp. He was young when they’d moved from that house—well before he’d hit double digits—but he could read well. His father approved of a book in his hands more than all else. Would make a gesture to wish to see the title he was reading. Nod, sometimes even smile. Other boys learned to throw footballs straight & true to earn such a smile. He intuited over time which kinds of books more likely earned it. Novels. Sometimes poetry. Rarely philosophy. Maybe science.

He leaned over the book, curled over it to near the words without touching.

dreams will become more real as you engage them more often. As separate as they seem from your waking hours, they are not. You must knit the two together, back together, & a different picture from the one you have now will start to emerge. This may seem foolishness. It is not. It is an unformed path ahead of you, one of many possibilities. More so than others, one you will likely never see except when looking back, & even then it will not look as expected.

Somewhere in the house, there is a noise, he looks up. Nobody is home, nobody is expected home. The wind. He nods. Looks back down to the page but there are new words, & an image. A forest, woods, in winter it seems for all is white. He leans even closer, for there is a figure, that of . . . a girl. She is among the trees. Blonde, slender, a bit ragged in dress.

She moves. He blinks. She moves again, from partially behind one tree to another. She moves each time he blinks, during the blinks. He tries to trick her, half-blinking, fake-blinking, but it doesn't work.

Below this strange picture, the words: "Take back your mind, Bowie, & help others too. This is what I did until things changed. I let my mental toughness & my empathy both weaken. It was what I couldn't say to you back then. What I should have tried to say anyway. I say to you now. *Take back your mind & help others too*"

Bowie starts, fully awake. Not in his childhood home, not in that record store in 1981. No, this is now. Where he hasn't been.

"*Take back your mind. Help others too.*" Bowie nods.

Nod. Look up to the TV screen at Luna T's Cafe's bar. A bank robbery, ambulances taking bodies away, the would-be robbers, the latest report said a father & son team, imagine that, local too, both unemployed, at least a lot of the time, the father had had his shares of tussles with the law, a wife-hitter, till she left him, & a couple of drunken barfights. But a gun? And his son? A jock, a football player, had set a couple of records too, but he'd dropped out, a pregnancy scare with one of the many cheerleaders he'd bedded, drinking & partying too much, his old man pressuring him to get a fucking job, ring down one of them curvy pieces before they all got took & *settle the fuck down*—

Only she wasn't. Pregnant, that is. Just a virgin & scared when her period a couple of days late. Then it came but he'd proposed. Me? Fuck. I don't know. You love me? I waited for you. Until you were done with all the other sluts on the team, I knew you'd come sniffing. What I'd been saving for you.

And it hurt too but *godd* it felt *good* too. Listening to you moan for *me*, knowing it was my body you wanted, well, shit, I almost *wish*—

No—I mean fuck no. That's my mother's generation, get knocked up young & that's that. We got options now I mean, even if I had been—

But I wasn't. And fuck if you were strangely pissed off at me. *What the fuck.*

But you were. All the other girls thought I was getting it from you all the time but shit if that first time wasn't *it*. It's like I won you, then I owned you, then I lost you completely. You didn't chase any of the others, either, old or new. Nobody knew what the fuck. Then we graduated & moved on. It happens.

So yah I was working part-time at this garage, it wasn't bad, I can fix shit, my old man taught me that much. How to fuck a girl so she stayed fucked, & how to fix an engine. How to throw a pass too, but that was like twice—

Yah, & you were falling down fucking drunk off your case of MGD. Lousy fucking Broncos couldn't win a fucking pie-eating contest after Elway left. But you'd take me out the back yard, the one we shared with the rest back then—*fuck you! I'm playing ball with my kid!*—that usually shut up the neighbors—you were big & loud & they saw how Ma kept her voice low & her shirt buttoned high—

But it was you started it—like your old man—he'd taught you—cocked behind the ear, straight & true, point to your target, snap your wrist, works every time—that's what I got—& I was tall—taller than you—you'd been a second stringer—I think the starter was so much better & such a nice fucking guy you just let those ideas go—it didn't hurt too much—

Then you saw me throwing for the same damn school & nobody taller, & my throw the one you'd fucking gifted me with before I had any idea—or you—

You saw the cheerleaders go for me & that burned too—you'd been the pet of your own day, they'd give you a pity fuck, a friend fuck, but nothing to crow about, nothing a guy could really call his own drinking with the rest—no begging, not much moaning, just some fun when you were remembered & they were bored & horny—

What I knew was that there wasn't going to be any college money—me & the coach had gone toe to fucking toe on it—he laid it on the line, the good for nothing prick—too small a school, hard times, blah fucking blah, maybe a partial, maybe the second year—just fucking bullshit—

And the worst of it was that the one you'd finally knocked up—or almost—I'd nearly had her six months before—she'd been trying to get you into her panties for longer than that—finally she just came over one night when you were out with one of the other ones—& laid it on the line.

"Dontcha like?"

"What's not to like."

"Fresh. You like fresh, doncha, Mister?"



“Yah. Fresh.”

“And tight. You know how tight, Mister?”

“How tight?”

Grinding her hot little ass in my lap, hand against my thickening cock, whispered wetly in my ear. “So . . . fucking . . . tight”

I nearly creamed there, or just a couple of easy maneuvers & I would have been hard inside those panties of her, she was playing me, I knew it, somehow trusted she could take me this far & still control it—

I was almost beyond caring—she'd found me home, drunk, alone on a Saturday night—I could have spent a fun few hours deflowering every inch of her—so close—so tight—until she said—

“In his room”

“Hm”

“Take me in his room”

For her, leaving her cherry stains on his bed sheet, had by his old man to boot, must have seemed like the drop dead biggest turn-on. For me, it wasn't. It was just admitting defeat.

I dogged her a little though. I was still hard & she was still half-nude in my lap. I could tell she was already out of her league when I let her kiss me tongue-deep, she liked that, but my practiced fingers on her nipples, that was good but strange, feeling me squeeze cup, tease the nipples, pinch, pinch harder as I squeezed her in my lap, made her stay put, she was panicking a little, so I slowed us down, more kissing, more caressing, I moaned more, calculating how much I wanted, how much was worth it, eventually I had her between my thighs, she was sucking way more than she ever had, more than pretty girls like her usually do, unless there's real love or a competition, I kept her down there awhile & my fingers got all under her skirt, got her panties rustled up some, made sure, made damn fucking sure, we came together, made sure I took her there, on the couch, in front of me, now get out, what? Get the fuck out you fucking whore & I won't tell him you were here to blow his old man. No. But. It was a genuine pleasure, the wrong kind but still it's true, to watch her trying to pull herself together. Half-fucked, half-not. Plan didn't work. Still horny. Embarrassed. Every pretty little fucking cheerleader who ever shook her ass at a crowd of hard dicks she'd never had to satisfy should have a humbling moment like that. To balance things out some.

Anyway, that's who you almost knocked up. I laughed when I heard & decided karma is fucking real. Then when she wasn't, I *knew* it was.

And I told him. Some of it. Enough, as they say. Wonder why you didn't get him again? He couldn't shake the picture of you trying to seduce his

old man from his cock. Turned you way on, him off. I bit off a piece & called it good.

Anyway we went out on my 18th birthday & buried the hatchet once & for all. I was going to work, try to find a girl who didn't shake her titties for crowds or hang from a pole—that's the wifing type—the girls hanging from poles were great, for fun, we almost shared one that night, fuck, Pops, I would have, why the fuck not, those whores love the threesomes, a little extra money, make sure they ride the rails hard before you ride them—I would have—

But you sat outside in the hall, smoking weed, calling this a birthday present, how a working man gets his relief every now & again—I paid her extra to sound like I was hitting her a little—I knew you'd love that—I fucking wish we had—

Instead it's weeks later & we're both jobless & drinking too much. I'm reading about some famous politician coming to my high school's commencement—why did I drop out again? Trying to work that one around in my head—not doing so well with it—

And your sorryass buddy from high school, everyone called him Philly because he was from east when he was a kid. I think it's cuz he was as girly as a she-colt. His idea puts us in that truck, driving to that bank, that fucking morning—

And me? The one they both had? I moved on. I had to. Not that I wanted to. By now, by the time I was graduating, I wanted both of them. In my bedtime fantasies, it could work. Marry one, fuck them both. I figured I could keep them both satisfied. I'd been listening to locker room secrets for years, how to keep more than one man satisfied, it could be done if the girl really wanted to, if she was in love or . . . undecided. Or maybe just some fun.

Once you got used to laying with a man, satisfying him, getting some for yourself, it's awful sleeping alone too many nights in a row. A few nice, a couple, nice to have the bed alone, crack a fart or two, catch up on some reading, or just do your nails & drink wine. They mostly think nails are for scraping down their backs as you moan.

Eventually I moved out of the dorms & took my own place. My mom could afford it. She divorced my dad while he still loved her, so the settlement was way too generous. Hence I get a two-bedroom apartment with a porch.

I'm standing on it, now, & I'm thinking about both of you. I saw the news on TV like everyone else. *What the fuck* were you thinking? The moment I heard a cop was shot & in hospital, I knew you two were done. They're like

fucking Klansmen—close in that town. None of them could get a cheergirl at gun-point. Well maybe a gun but nothing else. The story was you all shared & didn't mind some blood.

So I knew. You injured one of them, they shot to kill both of you. That simple. The message kept the peace mostly, probably more than in some other places.

I watch the moonlight & Mister Moon has no answers for me, save that my thighs are still grinding for some action. I even had them on the computer & the phone for awhile. But it was too easy. Too pathetic. One started getting too close anyway. Couldn't have that. Married. Kids. *I just wanted to get laid*—

Now I'm in bed & thinking why the fuck did you do that? Why aren't you both in this bed with me? Why aren't we fucking & sucking our brains out?

Maybe I'll ask Benny tonight—he likes to tell me things—it's been awhile—I know how he avoids me—how I know what he needs—what makes him crazier than he is—

I was an orphan, not sure how. And I couldn't remember my family. The farmer took me in, brought me to Clover-dale, introduced me to his three sons. One a little older than me in high school, one my age, one younger with the sweetest smile.

The farmer took me to his bedroom & opened an old trunk of clothes. His dead wife's. He handed me a plastic garbage bag & told me to dispose my clothes in the bag, & find in that trunk all I needed or would need to dress.

She was smaller than me by a couple of inches but I was able to fit into some of her dresses. They were short on me, tight. Showed more of me than I wished, & more tightly too. I was uncomfortable wearing the dead woman's clothes even as I couldn't say why. But he expected this. He showed me what that first night.

Sitting with me on the edge of his bed he opened his hand and pointed to his well-worn palm. Tapped it. "You," he said in his gravelly voice, accented some way. Closed the hand to a gnarly fist. "Me," he concluded. It never changed from this.

The boys went to school for half-days, home at noon to farm the rest of the day

until sundown. It was his compromise with the town. He would concede no more to them than this & his prosperous farm was important.

I did not go to school. It was never a question. I was acquired & possessed & did not merit the luxury of schooling.

I knew how to read, somehow, from my old forgotten life. As I explored the farmhouse & grounds I discovered books I *knew* he had never read or even seen. He had not built this. He had *purchased* it.

& I was acquired to serve. To cook & clean. Breakfast was prepared before dawn. Meat, eggs, toast. I knew enough to do this, prepare this meal & the lunches & the big dinners. None of them helped. Not once. The littler ones might have but it was forbidden. The girl cooks & cleans; we farm. There is no question in this. This way of life came to be very quickly after my arrival.

The nights ended after supper & the lesson. We sat & listened to him read from the strange old book. Not the Bible, I figured that out, nor any other book I knew of or would ever know. I don't think it was written in English & I really wonder if it was written in any other human language. But he spoke it aloud to us in English, in his strange accent. It never went on long enough because he was soon ordering us all to bed.

I learned, by accident, from the smallest boy, that shortly before I'd arrived he'd moved the boys to the other end of the farmhouse. Their two old bedrooms, eldest having his own, were now for other reasons, locked until one day I decided to see, were next to his. I came to believe he would not have them listening to what he planned to do with me. Toward that end, he'd move them to far rooms & locked them in at night. The pieces of all this didn't come right away. Really, I eluded him also by accident.

That first night I learned I'd be sleeping in his bed. I must have been sick, maybe even drugged, because I got into his bed agreeably enough. Immediately he shut out the light & said, "bare." There was no humor or flexibility in that voice. I took off his wife's dress & then paused. "Bare." I took off the rest & edged to the side of the bed. I heard him undress too & held my breath. I didn't know what but I suspected enough. My body crackled with alertness.

Would he have? Yes. Whatever I had been, however I had lived, whoever had loved me, I was bare in his bed, him too, & it was plain. He got in the bed & grasped me lightly from behind.

It was soft, for such a large man. A gentle grasp & I believe he would not have hurt me for pleasure. I believe that more than I would about the other men since. I was his prize, what he would re-build his world around, destroyed as it had been by his wife's death. Had it happened as he intended, he would

have had me that night that hour, & it is possible I would have become his by heart & mind, not just body. No matter how terrified I was, that first grasping of me would have marked me his, & I willing, if not—

A word in my ear. Softer than the bedsprings as he curled around me, but a word & not his. "Sing."

Was it her?

Probably. Yes. Maybe. I don't know. In that order. Why unsure, seeing as she saved me later? I don't know.

I felt his hands moving in closer, to touch my breasts, my stomach, the rest, felt him already very hard, & for a moment I let him continue. For a moment I let. Then I began to hum. Hardly a song, more just barely shaped noise.

It was enough, he withdrew, I pushed the hum into music, the melody of a song I could not remember all of, so I hummed the bit twice & then shifted it to another & then realized he was asleep. Curled into himself, but not as though harmed. Relaxed, led from where he'd been into Dreamland, too dark to see his face but I knew it was relaxed, open & wordless, become now something he'd never been, or not in a long while.

I lay there trembling, unsure if it would last no matter how deep his sleep seemed. But he didn't move, not a muscle or an inch. I finally passed out from fear & stress & relief & the utter darkness in which I lay.

Woke suddenly nearly screamed but it was simply my time to get up & make the breakfast while they did early morning chores. That's how the day began, every day I was there. On Saturdays the four of them drove the old pickup to town for supplies. On Sunday they were somewhere on the farm but I was forbidden to ask or find out. Were there words said? I just knew.

And every night he intended to take me with no memory he'd been thwarted every other night. Did he think he already had? I don't think so. I was not seeded. I think more that when he shut out the lights & crawled into bed nude & hard & ready, a blankness engulfed him as I sang. A hole he did not know was there. At least for a long while.

The oldest was different from his papa, I think because his lust for me was simpler, purer. Didn't take him long to figure a reason to leave school early one day & get on home—

I'd considered him. I'll say that first. His body was young, like mine, & his cock would have been candy in me. So I was tempted. When I saw him coming home alone, I thought about it. I figured he had a method, & a reputation. I mulled



& measured, & decided, no I'd have to do something.

He found himself on his papa's bed groping me. Unsure. Horny & unsure how this sexy little bit got the advantage.

"You want to fuck your daddy's piece. Nod."

He nodded. Unsure.

"And right here in his bed where I sleep at night."

More unsure. But nod.

"You can do me better."

Stare.

"Cum for me."

Heavy breath.

"Now."

He groaned in real pain as he orgasmed.

"Again."

Now tears.

"Again."

Now he was off the bed, crawling.

"Again."

He left the door open as he left.

I don't think he remembered that day too well. Just sidling up to me in the kitchen, hand inside my blouse. Crooning, "you . . . are . . . not . . . going . . . to . . . be . . . my . . . new . . . mama" I let his hand get a good squeeze of what I had, get hard down there, before I crooned back, "his bed."

The farmer smelled the jism in his bed that night but said nothing. Looking back now I wonder at the fuck of this all. He tried his turn at me & I crooned him to peaceful sleep.

It wasn't them that I wanted or could have had me easy. It was the scientist. His songs. I would get them in the mid-morning mail & save them till they were all out in the afternoon farming.

Took my long bath reading his letters. Let down my hair. Lit the candles. I read them aloud each & every one, sang them as he said, so I'd be ready that night—

I was young to the body's passions, it was new & wild & scary to me, & the farmer was never going to get what he wanted from me, I wasn't his dead wife, & he couldn't sustain what I needed, but this scientist, he got me, he *fucking*

got me, & I knew I'd never know him, sitting every day in that hot bath, candle lights in the shadows & cobwebs, the oldness of this farm, how it wasn't just a farm, & his letters were somehow teaching me this, how? I couldn't figure it. He was teaching me what else this place was via letters. He'd never been here.

How the farmer would move in close to me, always that gentle embrace, the warm breath, the cupping of my breast, the way my still body enflamed his, & I would sing as in that bath that afternoon

*The silence between each
is the freedom few remark
swathes of unfinished music,
rushes of light*

& his breathing would slow & his hands on me would relax, & the cock so hard & ready to slide into me one way or another, me being acquired & all, would limpen & crawl back into its slumbers.

I wouldn't stop there, wouldn't relax or sleep, no, those words burned & bruised me & I kept singing them, & more, over & over, bare in the farmer's bed, singing his words, cumming his words between my thighs, squeezing my breasts like I could make him feel if I hurt enough—

The farmer was getting close, he didn't know it, but I was singing as he was pushing himself in, as he was moaning *o baby how tight o cherry baby spread for me*, & I would be singing

*what's prettiest about regret
how it folds into new forms*

Moaning, pushing, my thighs open, if only you were the man wrote this song

*Each new blossom dipped into
in an old skin of gifts, hours,
what came, what didn't*

Pushing in, how is it wet, is it tight, does it fucking matter as long as it's here & spread, but the singing

*How the day feels now,
the way memories will
whore to keep life when
their lesson & loss have both
long wrinkled dry*

& I would let him slip out but toward the end he would sleep rock hard still, & this bothered me, wasn't fair, so I'd hum him softly into cumming, no words, I wasn't the scientist but I'd do it for him, feel it spill, all for me, all for me, all for me, & none—

She knew better, knew I could not sustain it all. Even the oldest boy was eyeing me again from a distance. Part of me possessed by the scientist from afar, the rest by the middle boy who'd not so much as kissed me but I knew, I'd taken spectral visits into his bed, into his dreams, it didn't seem strange to me, I was sleeping naked in a man's bed I'd not known long, I couldn't remember how I got there, he'd never kissed me but his looks so sweet & those nights when I filled his stomach till he could not breathe, stiffened him as he wouldn't groan, lead him near, & back, & near, & back, begging, & back, let it go, now all of it, there there, now lick it off, every drop, there, lick it good & smile—

I'd gone as deep into it as I could anyway, singing through room after room, there weren't this many rooms logically, lengthy, vast & vaster rooms, I sang & sang & more came & when was this & how, did it all come from those letters was I in my tub still crying out for you & why did I describe Maya when you asked what I looked like, that's what I can't figure out, I can't trace it one way & another will you help me Kinley now, will you help me? *Will you fucking help me?*

I wake, I think. Kinley has me in a kind of body lock but it's to protect me.

"A part of me is still there."

"Yes. I know."

"She buried that place, Kinley, she *eviscerated* it. But I'm there. A part of me. He's keeping me there."

"The farmer?"

"Fuck no!"

"The boy? The oldest."

"Kinley. What the fuck."

"The scientist."

"Yes, Kinley."

“Why, Christina? He protected you. He loves you.”

“He’s still protecting me. He will still loves me.”

“What then?”

“I don’t know. But there’s a part of me that’s there. That hasn’t left.”

“Will I lose you to him if we go?”

Here, Christina just laughs in Kinley’s face. It was her “fucking blind stupid dumbass lovely Kinley my Kinley” laugh, more or less. He took what comfort he could as they were dressing to go.

the red tinge.

A Love Supreme.

A dream of desolation

Ragged claws, ragged claws,

A mind sliced & revealed

A new dream, a bigger dream.

No longer a dream at all.

Remember everything but lightly.

There is no higher

There is no ground

We kiss

And you are mine once more.

There are only two tomes.

One tells the sky.

One sings the earth.

Preacher.

She stirs. Then sleeps deeper. Preacher beside her nods, lets her deeper.

“Are you ready?” asks Tweety.

He nods.

It was in the book you were reading that night, Genny, the very act of reading those words, a kind of spell, a set of deep instructions—

Genny nudges closer to him, sighing, Preacher lets & lets a little more, allows himself to grasp, to hold, Genny, we know the dark patches, keep them close, *oh so close*, keep those crevassed places close, like they are something not nothing, like a magick, like therein a release, an arcing high over this how, this why, some other beginning, a new knowing, a wild forgetting, like the poisons harvested from the dark patches can fruit a balm, a healing from the farthest stars within, a fruit to bite into with a cry, ride its pains, ride hard its pains, *just play through*, & soon or at least the knowing what gives breath like song to all—

Singing grasps it all & language just the visible exhaust—

Go on in, Genny, go in—

I’ll follow—I’m waiting—

Tweety too—

“Preacher”

“I’m here, Genny”

“Here, where?”

“Well, Dreamland.”

“Why can’t I see it?”

“Your eyes are closed, Genny”

“Are we still in bed?”

“No.”

“Then I don’t want to open my eyes.”

“Why?”

“Took me too long to get you to myself in any bed. I’m not ready to leave it yet.”

“Genny.”

“No. Tell me the story.”

“Which?”

“The one that brings you to me. Here. In this way. As who you are.”

“Oh.”

“Tell me.”

“Genny, I’ve been wrong about more things than right.”

“Am I with you?”

“Yes.”

“Then you did something really right.”

“And you won’t open your eyes until I tell?”

“No. That would mean arriving, wouldn’t it?”



“Yes.”

“Then, no, Preacher.”

He nods. “I met him in a dream of desolation.”

“Who?”

“My best friend.”

“Where is he?”

“He’s gone.”

“Oh.”

“This was many years ago. We would talk, shout, try to outdo each other, like young men do.”

“In this dream.”

“Yes. Well.”

“What?”

“They can have continuity.”

“Eh?”

“It becomes like crossing between countries.”

“Dreams?”

“Yes.”

“So your friend?”

“He was in dreams. Hadn’t always been there.”

“Oh.”

“He gave me a device when he went away.”

“Away?”

“His device was to play cassettes that he would send me.”

“In dreams?”

“No. His cassettes came in the mail. The device was real.”

“Uh?”

“We’d established a bond. It crossed.”

Genny nods, eyes still shut. Thinks a moment. “What did the cassettes say? Were they letters?”

“Yes. I would get them in the mail wrapped in brown paper, unstamped, just my name written on them.”

“What did they say?”

“He was unsure at first. He kept close to the familiar for a while. Traveled to Germany, drank beers. Thailand for—”

“Sex?”

“Yes. He was testing it. The pleasures were first.”

“And?”

“At first they were the same. He hadn’t had too many . . . loves growing up. He

indulged.”

“I bet.”

“Nothing forbidden any longer. And it was good. Then it . . . waned.”

“He got enough poon?”

“He got more interested in other things.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. But in the cassettes he was singing. One song I remembered, *‘Ragged claws, ragged claws, a mind sliced away & revealed, ragged claws, ragged claws, those walls aren’t high enough to protect the world from me, my music is bark & root, I’ll travel by soil, sup on the starlight, ragged claws, ragged claws, a mind sliced & revealed.’*”

“What was he saying?”

“I didn’t know. Then the last cassette came. Called *Last Songs*.”

“Couldn’t you go to him?”

“Dreamland isn’t like that, Genny.”

“Like what?”

“He was far from me. He preferred it that way. I’ve always traveled Dreamland alone too.”

“Until now.”

“Yes.”

“Am I a burden?”

“No.”

“A danger?”

“No. I’ve learned more since then. There’s dangers here no matter what, just different kinds.”

“What did the cassette say?”

“I got it the day after another of my possession dreams”

“Possession?”

“Something in me would take over & I would end up in places with pretty girls, very pretty girls, most fooling around with it, with what was possible.”

“What did you do?”

“What do you think?”

“I think you fucked them”

“What else?”

“They weren’t very good?”

“Not at first”

“But then?”

“I’d find her Beast”

“Beast?”

“Beast, Genny. I would root in her until I found her freak beast. Then I would encase her in mirrors endlessly high, coax, coax, coax, until that was all there was. Sweat. Snap.”

Genny thinks a moment. “What did the cassette say?”

“I don’t know. It was all squallings, like he was in a desert, or ocean, or both. He wasn’t coming back to me. I played the cassette that morning, in the bar where you waited for me, where I would play every cassette, & I knew he was gone.”

“Is that it?”

“No.”

“There’s a woman.”

“Yes.”

“Still?”

“Not really.”

“That’s the worst kind.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“Tell me.”

“We met at Iconic Square.”

“Where’s that?”

“A city.”

“Which one?”

“I’m not sure. Possibly more than one.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean it’s a kind of a place, not one of a sort.”

“Kind?”

“Its waters are special.”

“Special?”

“Dosed, Genny. Lightly with LSD.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I met her there with her friends.”

“Oh.”

“I’d discovered it on my way to kill myself.”

“Again?”

“Something was wrong with my friend & I could not save him.”

“So you were in despair?”

“That makes it sound pretty.”

“And her?”

“She waylaid me.”

“Waylaid?”

“Genny I’d figured out I was going to find a way back in from there.”

“But she?”
“She came back later that day. Without her friends.”
“Smart girl.”
“She knew that I hadn’t been paying attention to them when they sat down on my bench, flirtatious, asking me what I was reading.”
“Knew what?”
“It’s the fountain, isn’t it?”
“Hm?”
“Look, Mister, these nice legs are usually more than enough to keep a gentleman’s attention.”
“Yes. They are nice.”
“Do you think so?”
“I’m sorry if I didn’t . . . notice you adequately.”
Genny laughs & nods. Listens.
“She led me to her bed that night. It wasn’t hard to do. She lived in a single room but with huge windows. Unshaded at night while we made love in her bed, then on her floor.”
“Lucky girl.”
“Part of me stayed with her, wanted to stay with her always. Why not?”
“Your friend.”
“Yes. And my own heart. She would find me often at Iconic Square & was . . . jealous.”
“Of a square?”
“One night we were walking an avenue, holding hands. She stopped us & directed my gaze into a streetlamp. Look deep, she said. Deep as you can. I did.”
“And?”
“She turned my glare-stricken eyes her way, to her face. ‘That’s how I need you to love me,’ she said. Then we walked on.”
“Didn’t you try to explain?”
“She brought her friends around. It’s like she was sharing or boasting or trying to get it all on the record before it ended.”
“Did you fuck them?”
“It’s what she wanted.”
“Were they good as her?”
“I hurt each a little, Genny. I did what I did then, when possessed, but I wasn’t. I let one look up at me into my eyes, as she had never done with a man before. I let the other see the man she’d most hurt, let her see him in my face, release all she’d kept for him to me, it was all nothing.”
“What then?”

“I brought her to the fountain that night, to drink with me, to know.”
“There is no higher & there is no ground, drink the spray before we kiss.”
“What is it?”
“Drink with me.”
“Oh.”
“Drink it with me & you will be mine again.”
“I. Oh.”
“Drink. Drink with me. Drink the spray.”
“Oh. Yes.”
“Your lips. Your ruining kiss.”
“Oh.”
“There is no higher & there is no ground.”
“Yes. Oh.”
“Kiss me, across the abyss. Do you see it between us?”
“Yes. Oh.”
“Kiss me. I am yours.”
“Oh. Yes.”

Genny opens her eyes. She is sitting with Preacher. There is the fountain. Tweety Bird is in her lap.
“Iconic Square?”
“Yes, Genny.”



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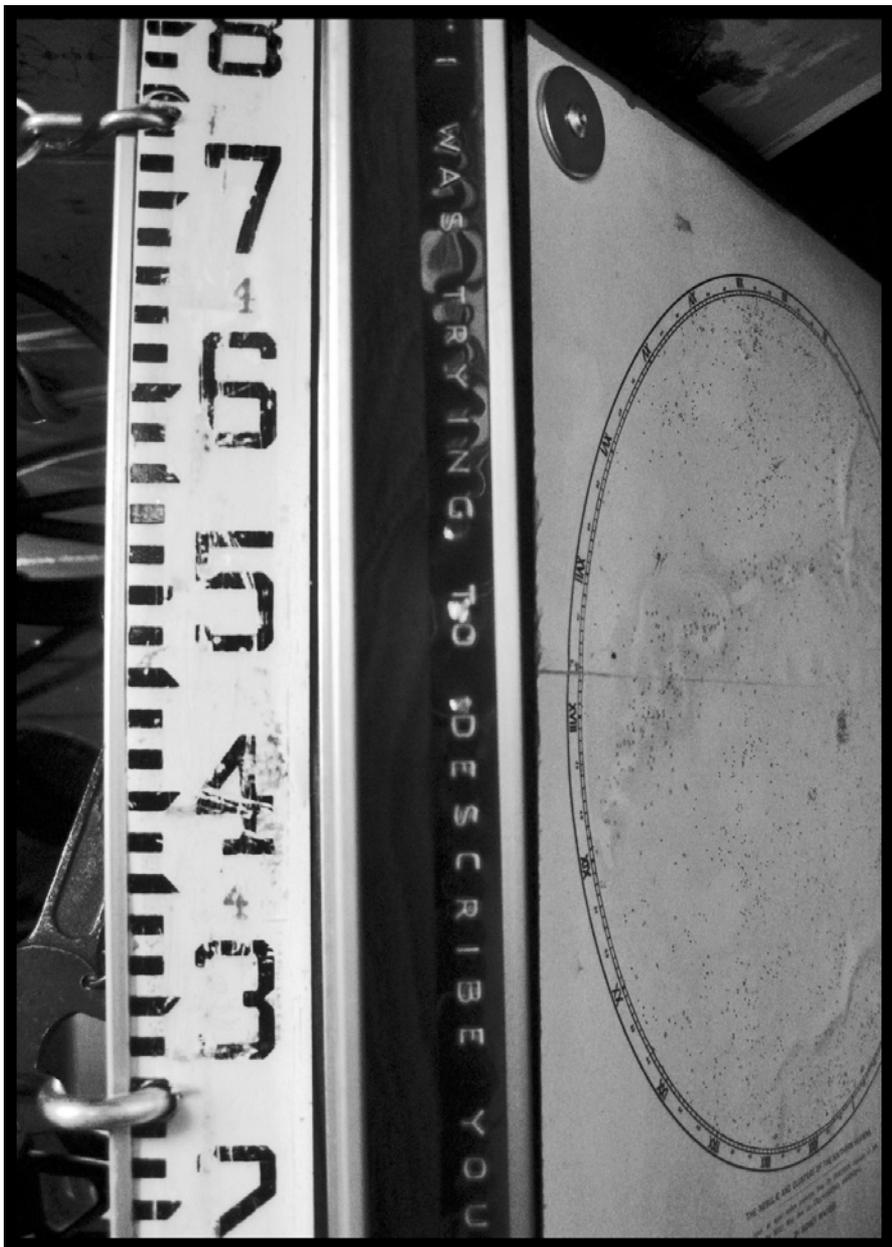
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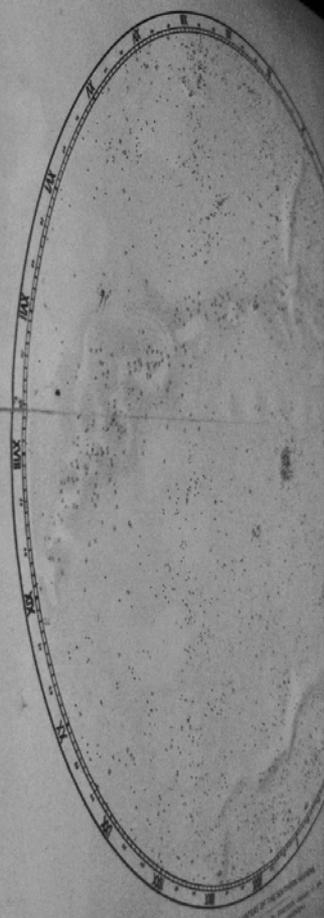
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