

Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fiction]

*"Sorrow drifts into your heart
through a pinhole
Just like a faucet that leaks,
& there is comfort in the sound
But while you debate half-empty
& half-full, it slowly rises
Your love is going to drown"*
—Death Cab for Cutie,
"Marching Bands of Manhattan," 2005.

None other but sing true, call it deep vow, brutal hand up the sky, to the endless night, call it hard flutter from what slow breathes within, call it the remaining clod from a thousand stellar & fool hours, still dangling close, still a grasp to the wheel, still a fang in new dreams, hours of trilling grace, hours shattering deeper within minute by minute, foul silences of waiting, fouler still when the words come out to preserve one heart or torso at the shedding of another—

None other but sing true as the steerage gives way, sweetness falls now distant, the breathless hover of youth but another plan of raw memory by plank of ruined wish by plank of what hungers flatten the wall & which blood to rule, & a blight of bruises kept close in a bag none other may touch or know, none may touch or know me, none may touch or know, this what becomes in the awful place to sing truer, oh, crank it, climb it, crawl farther in, is any safe safe enough?

None other but sing true, down streets of neon trash, crowds around a quart & a bark of glaring newsprint, this quarreling hour won't come again, sing true, wail when the note eludes, cry, croak, when a mug of heat shivers up every morning hand & dulls black every nocturnal one, when all of it seems little & less, true, sing, cry, croak true, to a why clustered in world's daily spiral of spasm & shit—

True, sing true, the shined face warped below passes with its slaven pride & woe, tell you nothing for a kiss, tell you something for a dime, tell you everything if you make it good, down in the molten fall, make it good down there, tell you all, with a streak of grunts & an arc through inner skies without staying visitor, ever—

Sing true, says the book while a skinny yip of pages, deep vow to the endless night, brutal hand to a sky harder still, sing true, yes, I will shake & flake, a clumsy bullet in its chute, this is how, how's why, why's truth, truth a bush & its fruit flaming & poison to everything known, true, sing—

Whatever it leads, sing true, nights barking empty to skies tinned with brights, sing it with both hands, all three, what releases when so much for the bin, hard want of shake & flake, teaching skin to shine without sun, lean to wet burble but come only a few words, the inner scratch wished is knowing not by name alone—

What's to come but seed of years harm & heal, only lesson is yearn's, only path is humble's, only truth is Art's, & there are two ways of touch, choice is a slide, ranges with will—

Breathe. Again. The first turn left or right & none turn back. The first note a cry, a croak, a wet noise, a challenge to all listening, & to every note to come—

True. Sing true. Left or right.

ii.

Midnight when the quiet parts & the way splits out to light, & a puff of an answer, wispy drift on distant treetops, the air is cool steel, the light bounces & a few scattered inches reply, come to me, path, I am hardly more than just another who wakes & does not know, is this waking? Hardly more than who loves & does not know, whatever was love? Point to it! Where its flick, where its live hustling tremble? Who wants & does not know, what of it but shit & sweat & semen? What of it but yearn's countless hours, what was it then, more of a hard pull for least relief than two touches warming to one, what was it? Ask enough & kindling up an answer?

I dream this world, it turns by woods & steel, black shaft & white leaves, dream it & do not know, called it hunger for the cleft miles thousands & days years ago, call it dream with remain of faith in shifts, this, that, behold! Or just the night fine without wrinkle, groove ever bootless toward the tune—

A brutal report & wake. Wake or awake? What was it? Who?

Why the word “dis-illusion” on his mind, hyphen & all, & that great bang too, he could not immediately connect the two nor distinguish between them; it was like the bang spoke the word or the word emitted the bang, so what was it then? What had happened in my dreaming?

Had he really died? He looked around, the air muddy with early morning light, silhouettes of his many things unmoved in the night. Seemed like the hours had simply lain nearby & waited his return yet something now not ordinary, *something*, points at angles odd to the light, dis-illusion?

Try to remember now. Not one for black outs yet what else he'd call this isn't clear.

Just one fact recalled would save him, one fact of waking to crack dreaming's membranous hold, all the foolishness about dying would go. *Just one fact.*

His lower back hurts, like often in recent mornings. Tight, stiff, he wasn't sure, a pain that passed with his shower. Not much to worry on, not likely.

What fact then? Focus, Jack! Look, there's your fact maybe, see that neon sign outside? Couple of hours & it lights up, S & G Pizza. There! OK. Simon & Garfunkel Pizza, someone called it. Some wiseass. Who?

Dunno, but something, a knuckle of a fact if not the whole finger. S & G Pizza. Good

ol' S & G Pizza made of clay & rubber cement. Cheap though. A dollar a lousy slice. Five bucks for the whole shitty pie. Come baseball season they grow a line out the door. Monday nights free slices from 11 to midnight.

S & G. What the *fuck* am I doing back here? How long ago I lived in this shitpile?

He squirms violently on his bed. Can't get up, can't go back, needs a better clue but scared, really scared now.

What was that bang?

(The way is called dis-illusion, molten new press to go.)

iii.

It was a lousy time in my life, I admit that now. I would have then but I don't think people work like that, don't want to. We keep up the shitty job, the shitty relationship, the loser friends. This place was the central station of all that.

I'm not sure when it started going like it did. But there I was, dealing, & then I was doing some myself.

Little things. Fucked my girl's best friend. Stupid reason. She wouldn't do coke with me & fuck all night anymore like we did, like we did the first night we met & lots of nights after that. Something happened & she wasn't into partying anymore. She liked me enough to go with me but she was looking around. Not at men, I could've handled that. She wanted out. I think she wanted to take me too.

So naturally I fucked her friend, fucked her on our bed, fucked her when only more luck than I had would have kept it secret.

She left. There & then. Packed & walked out, not a word.

So now I'm stuck with this friend who's really fucked up. Likes it hard, OK, lots of women do. Likes it really hard, OK I can handle it. Wants several guys at once, whoa. Coke head Gangbang over the S & G? No.

I kicked her out but we kept fucking at her friend's house about twice a week. See the run of this? The cosmos brings me back here of all the places I've stopped?

Was there anything else, anything good?

The toothbrush? Fuck. I don't know.

He doesn't have to move his seat to remember. Unlike a lot of others in that crowd, he kept his hygiene. Kept it like a church when all else is burning, you might say.

And why? Those months he stayed with his granpa in the country. Made him brush morning & bedtime. Wash his face. Floss. Fucking floss!

But see his bathroom door had a lock. The one over the S & G that is. So the party kept out while he took care of these ablutions.

A yellow toothbrush. A tube of toothpaste. They talked.

Yah. See? But that's how it was. Middle of his coke-fueled years, no sign of God or saints in any of it & he's listening to them talk every morning.

The new girl, his old girl's best friend, had got him a new toothbrush & a tube of paste.

"The old ones are ratty. I figured you'd thank me."

"Did I ask?"

"Sorry! Shit."

"You're not moving in."

"How does getting you a toothbrush & paste equal that?"

"It does. And you're not."

It went on like that. It didn't matter then & none now.

But they talked. He kept using his old brush & old tube though it was running low.

"I'll be done soon."

"Don't worry he'll use you to the end."

"It's OK. I've served my purpose. I'm ready to move on."

He tried to use as little each day as possible.

"We all move on. That's how it works. I've got a few ideas on the matter."

"Like what?"

"Well, OK. The physical part of me, this tube, it will end up in some landfill. Break down, feed the worms, as they say."

"Is there more?"

"Sure thing! Some part of me affected the world, I think that stays. A stain. A scar."

"Is there any more?"

"Yah, at least to my idea. The rest moves along, it's not bound to this world. I think it just goes somewhere else."

"Heaven?"

"I don't know. It's just an idea."

I listened to this, whatever it was, they talked about lots of things, & then the tube was really empty & didn't talk anymore & I threw it away & I wish I had some choice in it all because I would have thrown away everything & everybody else in my life to keep that toothpaste talking to my brush. My granpa promised me brushing would serve me well for all my life. "You only get one set!" he'd say serious & smiling both.

Why am I back here?

iv.

When then, I don't know, was the shot a gun to my head, am I dead? Is this hell? Sure, that works. Life over I get sent to the S & G Pizza in the sky to wait for what happens next. Shitty pizza, lots of it, I bet it's free up here.

And I bet if any nookie it's 'Stina who shows up, probably with an ostrich egg full of coke & the Celtics' back court to party. And I get to choose: watch or take my sloppy skanky round!

No, this isn't working. Whatever this really is, he wants out. No cameras seem to be watching him but why would they need them? Angels, aliens, transdimensional bug-beings from the tri-moon Arse-World? Nah.

He gets off the bed, seems to have a body, seems to work in the usual way. It's still not dawn, if they have dawn around here, but enough to look outside a ways & see how far this delusion reaches—

A bridge. The S & G sign is lodged in a bridge . . . of glass? Alright. Stretches out

endlessly, alright.

So then, Jack, is that how they brought you here or how you leave or both? It an exit or a test. Come on, man! You've read books when you weren't fucking whatever wiggled twice your way!

How to know? Dead, dream, sweet reveal of yon hereafter? He looks back at his room. Remembers the last time he fucked 'Stina there, he'd taken to pushing the bed to the side so he could fuck her slowly on the floor. Make her beg. Wouldn't let her come. His fury twisting into a muscle enveloping his body, a rhythmic rage, then she spoke

"Don't you love anything?"

"Wha—?"

She jerked around til he pulled out & let her up. Her so-light blue eyes muddy with fuck & powder but straight at him now.

"Don't you love anything?"

He stares, lifts off her, lets that freaky fine fucking ass of hers loose, says nothing.

"Come on! It's not me. I know that. But what? Who? Do you believe in anything?"

For a moment something held between them. A clarity, a wordless, lilting, beautiful hover. For a moment none of this was ruin & revenge. She was a pretty girl, worth a soft, shaping hand upon her, a sugar-filled heart given, timeless even beyond youth's ever-arcing raw yearn, the moment birthing its impossible lengthening stretch.

She sat up in a crouch. "You know what I believe in? What I love? God. You think cuz you bang my ass you got all of me? You don't even get that last bit when I come, or when you won't let me. God gets it. Always has. Always will." Finds her pack of Marlboros, snaps one into place.

He threw her out that night. They kept fucking but there was no more talking & he enjoyed it less. Gentler, harder, it did no good. God got the last bit. Always had. Always would.

It's a bridge, alright, & looks like glass, but it has no rails. Just a walkway to forever who knows how high above, what? The dirty sidewalk with its stuck gum & butts & crusts like the real S & G? Nothing?

I could try that door there, see if I can just use the stairs to leave. Those wooden steps with the dead bulb? The dead wires, really, since he tried putting in a new bulb himself one time & the switch still didn't work.

He walks to the door, & tries the knob. It opens, & there's the hallway & there's the stairs.

A choice then. Nobody stopping me. Why do I think which way I choose will bring me deeper in or pop me back out? And either way no going back?

v.

So wanting to call the good natural & the bad aberration, hold up, stumble, those words are crackling with ambiguity, wild glints from the building's lower-floor windows but not near its basement nor

its root—

Wanting to believe the open hand sweeter true than the fist, wanting, if not single holy explain at least a cluster of bright lights tossing worlds out & receiving creatures home—

Wanting to nod that beauty fills the pocked world & overflow, & more coming & whether a stream or a dangerous hard burst, a sad cry may be heard over the years & miles, rescue is one chance more than none for every existing bit of the cosmos—

A dawning hour & dream raises the perplex of countless diasporas at demise—what's buried, what lingers in memory & deed, what travels back, along, elsewhere—ah sugar!

But, raven-eyed clarity argues later, no, what is, is, nothing to join, nothing to resist, flesh torn by bullet & tree by hack, the quietest laugh of two in an alley's thin cover, great young kings slaughtered with wine & generosity fading on their faces, old crowned hacks with truncheons for hearts & deathlust for principle—

So tell me which if not several or none—tell me, how it assembles toward great song

She stops reading & looks around, startled to be here. A beat, & *very startled*. One least glance down at her outfit & slight touch of her hair—

but it's the scent from her neck, *that scent*, she'd not worn it or smelled it since she was here

the red tinge.

A Love Supreme.

vi.

A preacher, easiest way to describe him. Yet what church, which holy book? Were we followers or stalkers? It was more than months, it was years but not all at once, not til near the end.

The end was here. He was going away, for good, she knew it, she came here intent to go with him. She was crazy with . . . something. Love? Lust? She knew both well enough, even that young, girls learn quickly to discern & distinguish or it goes bad, sometimes quickly.

Maybe love. He wasn't so old & she admired him. If he had commanded or requested or hinted her to his bed she would have come, & probably several times again.

Ha. It still hurts. She'd waited here, for hours. She'd dressed & re-dressed herself for hours. Brought nothing, not a change of clothes, not a credit card. Herself, primed but plain. Her request was simple: will you take me or deny me?

What the fuck am I doing back here? Is it going to play out like that again? Am I dead? Am I dreaming?

Nothing much til the drinks start arriving. The men in the club sniff her, sniff the sex untucked in her outfit & perfume.

She tells the barman, an older gent who does not speak to her breasts, that she is waiting for someone & wishes no drink offers. He nods, kindly, firmly, no more drinks distract her.

His only doctrine seemed to be: "Praise." Someone asked: "Praise what?" & guessed God. He let them. That is, he did not deny or dispute.

She didn't think it was a two-word commandment, or even one word. She didn't think it was a commandment at all, advice, caution, or any else. She thought it was simply what he did, not even a vow. He said "Praise" as though he had said "Breathe." He breathed, he praised. For that matter, he shat, he praised. He was sullen, he praised, he was ecstatic, he praised. He was praise & even this was putting it too complexly.

So do I leave? I stayed much longer last time. Long after I gave up. I had nothing else. By when I realized that what I needed exactly was to fuck blind & mewling one of those drink-bearers they were gone. The bartender watched me but kindly; I could have talked to him though he wouldn't have fucked me. I was too pathetic.

What would I have said? "He's gone. My path is gone. I came here to beg him, maybe I would have followed him & killed him if he had said no. I was the last of them. I thought I had won, outlasted the rest. No. I'd simply *lost last*."

The bartender, have locked the door, closing time, came over & offered me the couch in the back room. He knew I was sober but in a way worse for it.

I declined, I was almost rude. I left quickly, took a cab home, with money I could not afford to spend to a place no more home than an alley, maybe worse.

Worse. Lord it got worse.

Now here. There was a . . . noise. A shot, a baseball bat? Am I in that alley, mugged & mauled? Returning in my bleeding coma to where I last had hope?

I'm not leaving. Whatever the fuck this is, I'm here again & leaving didn't help.

So I wait, watch the bartender a little closer than last time. He's old-fashioned, his pepper-grey hair close-cut & neatly combed. His spectacles, gold wired. His apron is more colorful than I would've guessed. Looks like a Jackson Pollock painting, wild splatters. A gift. He's loved.

I love him a little. He's the last one to see me with hope, watch it leave me.

He reads the paper, the sports section. Plays the radio softly, probably so not to bother me. I noticed none of this the last time. I waited blindly.

He locks the door, shuts out most of the lights.

"Miss, I don't like to be forward but I am going home now. You look a bit lost. There's a couch in back, with some pillows & blankets. You could sleep & I'll let you out in the morning."

She makes herself nod, it hurts amazingly but she does, just enough.

He starts but then nods too. "It's the old manager's office. Rebecca, that is the owner, doesn't use it much. Right back there."

She nods again, no pain this time.

He smiles, stands uncertain a moment. "Well. I'll leave you then. I'll be in at 8. You won't be bothered. There's a refrigerator with food."

"Why me?"

He stares.

"How do you know I won't rob the place or burn it to the ground?"

He takes her questions seriously but is undisturbed. "I don't, for certain. But I'm pretty



AbandonView

sure you came here to meet not just anyone tonight, & that person didn't come. Maybe you have a bed somewhere but you can't face it yet. I know about that. I've had a few nights like that." He nods. Smiles again. A smile gravelly with kindness & years. Leaves her be. She hears the door lock from outside.

vii.

Dream of a deep, waking groove, what sleeping fingers gesture to, the body's lost night hours buried in dream, deep, waking groove, slicker want than sugar & girl-come, within a great tree's thousand flicker, I ask nakedly here but of what, of whom, I don't know, all truth in deep, waking groove, bears the words, bears them lightly, seriously, enough like they matter, enough like maybe not—

A next & a new & maybe no, or a yawn, or the ideas are thin & futile, or they don't strike, don't even tap, & yet here I am holding this notebook like a guitar, like my one true lover, my pen all that carries me between thens, among hours stupid & peerless—

And I don't know truly don't fucking know & I want to, I want to know some of it matters or comes to good—

Shit. What is this book? Where am I? Oh. He left. I didn't know what to do. So I read. Still secretly twelve years old, braces & no breasts, no confidence, reading. I know why I read this shit. He believes the way I did, the way he did? I don't know

Anyway, stand up & deal. Couch, right? For one, miss? Yes, sir. I will be dining & dreaming alone tonight. Very good, miss. This way.

Or . . . that way?

She notices the hallway past the manager's office, past the couch its old blanket & pillow, elsewhere, seems like a pretty long hallway for a small club. Where to?

Am I allowed to sleuth in the afterlife, or coma, or whatever?

Should I go? Would anyone care?

viii.

The floor's always cold, oh I remember that well. I felt it even on my cot, even when I traded for a second blanket. A floor of ice, that's what I called it, & it should have been low on my worries list, but it wasn't. I was like that back then; I wasn't trying to be different or a character or a nut. That's just how it was. I took the pills everyone tried to tongue & spit. I sat in group & listened & always had enough to say when it was my turn.

But the floor of ice was my worry & I didn't tell anyone about it. I figured I was onto something so the rest of my life was an act. A good one. Nobody knew squat.

Well my doctor wondered. He'd ask me why I thought I was in the hospital.

"I'm a danger to myself & others?"

"Try harder."

"I have to rehabilitate enough to rejoin society as a useful member?"

"Come on."

I'd smile, he'd chuckle & we'd call it a stalemate. He was a nice guy, wife & kids.
 "What was the last thing you remember before coming here?"
 "I fell apart. I didn't see it coming but it happened. Wham."
 "Wham?"
 "Yah, wham."
 "Tell me about it."
 "I don't remember it too well."
 He looked at me annoyed.
 "I don't! There's a gap, a chasm, & I see it but I don't see what's in it or how I made it."
 He nods. Somewhat satisfied.

OK then here I am again. The flood is goddamned cold as ever. But this time there's not even a chasm.

There's a wham though. A wham! really.
 I try to stand & find I'm still old but maybe not so old. I try the door & it's not locked. Quickly I sit back on my bed. None of this is right.
 I got out of here! They let me go. It was a long & hard time but I waited them out.
 "We can't hold you any longer. I wish you & I had made more progress though."
 "You did fine. I like you."
 "That doesn't matter. What matters is that I won't be where you go to help you."

Hey, there's a TV! Shit. It don't have cable, & it's black & white, but I didn't have one in my room last time. Someone always hogged it in the common room. I had a radio, a pink one shaped like a cat but I don't see it here.

The TV is showing the news. Looks like a war. Another one? I ain't never shot nobody & I'm in here? Is that the President? Looks like the other one. I stopped keeping track. I'm sure he doesn't notice me either.

Am I back then? What happened this time?

What I remember is changing the damned lightbulb. That & that damned movie. I began to wonder if they happened the same night, the same decade. I wondered if so much could have happened in one night & suddenly my life was gone.

So yah I lied to the doctor. He had no clue what I saw, what any of that was like. He couldn't help anyway.

The day they released me I almost lost it, almost cracked so I could stay. Very close. I had no old life to return to.

I just wanted to see that movie again. I think I did. I think I did & I think that's why I'm here again. It put me here.

ix.

His arc began young, rode its bolt still, shakier but still, or maybe he wandered a series of them, an oscillation of reveal & obscure, how to tell, why, life sequential but more disorderly for this, there had probably been many light bulbs, many movies, surely yes, & how many empty wallet nights happy on a lone drunk & how many quivering some pair of clawing hips, & how many times his ideas seemed run out, & how many times a bloody burst of new ones, & how many doctors with their same questions & how many times did he say fuck you embedded in a softly spake lie?

His only disbelief was in nothing, this jacketed his heart in times none other would or wished to—

I disbelieve in nothing.

What then?

Not the high smacking prize of fleshly commune. Not the quiet break in a man's ego where a hustle called God may step in. Not the truth of books still safely bedded in great evening oaks. Not the neural conjure sparking bluest from dreams. Not Yogi the Bear nor Arthur the fucking grail.

What then?

I disbelieve in nothing.

x.

Hadn't told a lover that in a long time though I used to all the time it sounded nice though I had a buddy some years ago said to me every time we'd hit our fourth tavern of the night or fifth if he was cheerful or distracted "pussy loves power" & sometimes in an Australian accent "pussy loves power, matey" we drank together a whole gulp of years back then but the last time I said it was the girl with freckles & no tattoos I remember how pleased I was when her clothes came off & not an inch awled with ink I must have licked that young skin an hour more like three & its perfection she was so out of her universe in my bed & I'd stopped going slow it was tiring to train one & the next & within an hour of her giggling arrival in my bedroom she was on her flawless flat tummy hands so handcuffed one to each bedpost as I slowly shaved her already trimmed cunt to a gleaming bareness & she shouted & cried each time I accelerated my cock fardeep her tight cunt & I had to make her cum it was my world's vow in that lost hour she did & fainted it was so hard eventually she came to & wanted more in a whisper til I refused smiling & she clawed me several good ones til I let her have it again she never quite put on the freckled farmgirl mask again & I let her go when I realized her bitchscint wasn't wanting a master cock but new raw shipment every time she even did me the grace of crying that last time & as I fucked her, hands bound & hung from a ceiling hook, leather, chains, branding, not enough but my gift I whispered to her over & over again I disbelieve in nothing I disbelieve in nothing I disbelieve in nothing & there were years much later when I missed her freckles when I missed the thin layer I'd taken from her that first night & over & again until it did not return & she couldn't remember & it didn't matter but I knew & I had another buddy but we didn't booze we smoked excellent hashish from his hookah while he spun Grateful Dead bootleg cassettes on his stereo & we talked philosophically til dawn it was dear those nights with him & I wanted to say it to him too but I no longer bore this view deep

enough in me I'd felt the cracks come on me least blips I would ignore & then whole yards of wall torn away & I said nothing to anybody & then another life a calmer merer one but still some pleasures until the night I had to change a light bulb wanted to willed to & the movie & then it was over, really over, I came here in a car or an ambulance or a hearse & it was over, & then I left & it was over again & then & then & then & then & here & then & here & then & freckles & nothing I disbelieve in nothing & it was ancient but I chased oh hell's world behold my yearn I chased—the floor is cold here like always I disbelieve in nothing.

xi.

When the bird comes, I know it's time to decide, I'm not here to wait this time, the bird is mythic in size & replaces my thoughts of the door, what of any door when a great golden bird arrives?

Something tugs at me still, I don't know what, something wishes me delay, what's different this time, what does anything mean but here a chance to go?

It was my friend with the hookah, he'd puff & say, "watch out for those real silences, the crazy ones that won't quit. Breathe a couple of times to check but you might have something."

"What then?"

He'd puff, every fucking time, & think like he didn't know. Then he'd say: "If the universe is saying wait by its silence, then wait. Listen. Look around. But wait."

"Wait for what?"

"It will happen. One thing, another, it will happen."

So maybe it's just hashish remembrance that stays me from the bird's back, but for a moment I wait.

xii.

I could live your unsated muse for years & you'd not heed. What doesn't arch with my back, what secrets don't my moans tell? How am I not yours & not anybody else's, not even yet my own? There are things I already know, came to you knowing but maybe I needed more salve than commiseration awhile, needed to be held, wanted a little bluntly, I let you find what you wished in my eyes, let some dark hours unravel, let how much I know waver & wisp as you spoke me back, your simple recall—

When I bled you thought you'd taken something. You were shaken but your manteeth flinched only a moment. First mark on prime cunt . . . still a man! But you missed it then, that moment. It was there. I showed you.

But you shook lightly with pride. I began leaving you then, not tonight. You'll never figure out that subtlety, but there it is, plain with the pound of lingerie I'll leave with you.

You got prime cunt that night. My heart was long gone.

xiii.

You come home in the middle of my packing but you don't see me or my suitcase. You're high from your friend Muddy's liquor stock. "Absinthe doesn't make a person drunk"

you told me. “It makes him sublime!” You go into the bathroom after giving me a brief kiss & a longer grope, leaving the door open, I hear you pee, then the shower & you talk all the while, expecting me to come in & listen, not noticing when I don’t, eventually coming out naked with a towel in hand, finishing your story

“—He hit her & only stopped long enough to untangle her from his bicycle rack where she’d gotten tangled. One moment you’re changing a flat, the next you’re dragged along the road, trapped in bars & straps!”

Wipes his body clean, obsessed with drying completely. Then his hair. Continues talking.

“—Muddy agreed, more or less. He figured if you catch a break like no cops showing up at your door there’s no time for sitting around. Dump the car, pack your gear, get the Greyhound to somewhere far. Don’t call anyone, just go!”

Finally he looks at me, manages the spot between my chin & chest. This tells me he’s horny but not desperate.

“How was class?”

“I didn’t go.”

Eyes up to my face. “Why not? You’re not one to play hooky. Are you OK? Sick?”

I walk over to the bed where my beat blue suitcase is. Covered in Grateful Dead stickers & random others I picked up on my travels. Duct-taped at the hinges.

He looks, & freezes. “What’s this?”

“What does it look like, Jamie?”

“You’re packing.”

“I’m leaving.”

“To where?”

“I don’t know. Just like I didn’t know the day I met you. Now I don’t know again.”

Silence. This is going to get ugly. He’s never hit me at least. I keep packing & wait.

“Why?”

“Everything is God. Everything is shit.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I don’t have any other words. I’m going. Yell, mourn, get drunk with Muddy. Another girl will come along.”

“That’s it?”

I turn & look at him & he pisses me off by going for his dropped towel.

“Nothing else? Not something I did?”

“No, Jamie, something I did. Or didn’t do. You were kind to me. But your ideas don’t go very deep.”

“What does that mean?”

“Nothing. You had fun. But you missed something.”

“What?”

I force the snaps shut, pick up my coat & walk to the door. Drop the key on the bureau next to the door.

“Wait!” He doesn’t move toward me. I don’t wait. I pull open the door & go. Shut it softly because, really, he never hit me & I did need a friend then.

The street is chilly night & here I am, willingly homeless. Left or right.

I pause & imagine Jamie flinging open his window & yelling “*You fucking whore!* You

fucking *cunt!* Take your braindead fucking ass to some other jackass! Cunt!”

No. Not him. Not even close. Not even *close* to close. He’s dressing, maybe a little shaky, thinking what he’ll tell Muddy.

I can’t go back & forward isn’t telling me anything. I keep meaning to move but the moment there stretches on & on.

xiv.

Who would know? she thinks back & around, nearer some faces & little close to a few, pushing, eyes closed, sniffing for knowing among her days & miles, & coming reluctantly to what her dreams have been saying often of late—

As a child, she had a friend. Not quite imaginary, like many children. Others had seen this friend & that made it more real, more scary, more fun—

Her friend had left but not without a way back. A word. It had to be spoken aloud, & sincerely. Spoken thusly, her friend would hear & heed & return. The word was simple yet she’d never spoken it since then, taken no chance. This word was her emergency jewel. She’d mouthed it a few times but not spoken it aloud, & sincerely, though her dreams had been urging.

Now? This moment? She knew it would happen, knew this better than she feared it wouldn’t, knew it would happen & the chain to then would be re-connected, the world would brighten, she would have to nod to the truth as she’d come to only dimly for awhile.

One word, spoken aloud, & sincerely. Dumb? No.

A garbage truck rolled past, a stinking noisy metal beast, its leering creatures hanging casually from it. One even flapped his tongue at her. Bet you’re tight, baby, wanna touch it, little girl? I don’t bite, baby, not too hard. You’ll like it, all you whorey bitches do. Please? Please? Please?

Maya closes her eyes, breathes deeply in & out several times, opens them, blue of a clear middle range, looks up slightly to a fragment of blank sky, & speaks.

xv.

I wonder if elaboration would help, really, if anything bright worth can be more than vaguely neared—if something intimate leaves its own hour but a breath’s linger, if anything at all can be got toward & beheld & called *this good thing stays*—

Follow a moment & its shadow & its effect, what climbed toward it, what fragmented away—

What I know is the beast never sleeps, & suffuses the universe. What I know is how raw the desire past slogans & skirts. What I know is men will not win. Someone said truth is usually sad, I remember this better than most—wishing not—

The hurrying slows, the snarl becomes growl becomes croon—then someone else will raise blades & new songs—

What this *but* elaboration? What this but *good thing staying*?

xvi.

But I remember you all, believe me, for all you didn’t see, for the complexities you

thought my open thighs would solve, or salve, those were my times too, what I didn't know, I couldn't give—

& now? What would any of you have? The beast moves along, that's what I know.

Is this me or you or the next one? I spoke my word, with sincerity, what next?

You tell me.

Things hold together loosely at best,
the familiar is a passing clot
of sensations—

I don't know, these words aren't
mine, is this what it was
like then?

Maya turn left & head deeper
in sweet it grows be strong—

xvii.

Now what? Suddenly here I am hurrying down this city street, am I being chased? I don't look back but watch the faces I approach, they are blank, turned within, unaware any around them tussling with drama too, that tells me nobody is running toward me, & here comes a street corner & a Don't Walk sign & I decide to risk to know & stop.

No hand snatches at my shoulder, no voice grunts with capture, now I look around & nothing. Yet I was almost running, where the fuck am I, think!

A party. I knew slightly the person who brought me, & he disappeared upon our arrival. At the bar we were at he thought I was gay, said there was a big party he wanted to bring me to, I remember feeling so lonely that it seemed like a good idea, so I went, & it was a stupid idea. I hate parties, especially sex-filled ones, & damn there were naked & half-naked bodies everywhere, an old mansion, unlovely & run down, & did I get a drugged glass of punch? No. I feel clear, nothing fogging my system. I feel good, better than when I was in that bar—

Keep walking, I may be watched as well as chased. Trust that something bad was going on, just don't remember what yet.

What city now the question, a newspaper box will tell me this but I find myself not looking for one, my feet now obeying me, it seems—

Try to add a couple of more pieces, what bar? The one I stayed at for awhile, where they called me Bowie?

No. I had to leave. At first it was perfect then it was a cage, I don't remember how one to the other. Nobody asked anything of me, except I knew my presence was enjoyed, & they believed, or at least enjoyed, my lies. Me a spy? Me a former mushroom? I talked shit like it was gold coin. I made everyone rich.

They weren't dumb. They simply accepted me. I fit in with the freaks & fools. I was funny. They liked my eyes. I don't fucking know.

What was it then? What turned it wrong?



AbandonView

Was there a woman? Think!

He stops, annoyed faces stream around him, & a soft, insistent, hot touch swallows him in memory. Of course. Shit.

“Shit!” he yells & begins to walk faster again, & faster still. “Shit! Shit! Shit!”

Shit.

(shit)

xviii.

She was my age, whatever it was, maybe older, but she tasted much younger. She tasted tight, smooth, whole, I think it was the third time I fucked her I realized what a goddamned beautiful creation I was with. By the fourth I was crumbling. I left after the fifth but came back, & twice more, & somehow there was a back to return to, a long loving back, a voice creamy with eros & agape, a mind, . . . a soul, . . . a *something* that understood me, that empathized, that listened that somethinged & if I had walked left than right that last night & found her again she would have stayed with me.

not that I hit her, I didn't, or cocked around, I didn't, some of my departures weren't actually physical & there was nothing adding up to a fight, the world didn't end in any way save in my worst crevices, & she let it, hoping for return, reunion, more nights til dawn in bed, walking streets, on roofs with sunrises & dusks, at that bar she played at,

fuck. I'm in Seattle. That's where she's from & here I am. She doesn't live here most of the time; that is, her band doesn't & so she doesn't—

OK then. Why?

She told me about living here, the old neighborhoods, the bands she saw when Seattle was so obscure it wasn't even a secret. She told me how she'd come back over the years, her band sometimes splitting for awhile, come back here, hang around, walk for hours thinking, thinking some more—

She used to live the band's guitarist, love like a made & kept & treasured wound, & they had awhile til he backed off, now he's married to that blonde girl, the wound in all this was not that she still pined but that she accepted—

Fuck, this is going to hurt.

xix.

She didn't believe I wasn't a spy, wasn't a former mushroom. “Truth's a cagey fucker” she'd laugh. I kept this bit of wisdom when I left.

She never confused me for him, not even once, I think she even bedded down with me differently, not less intense, but a sense of later in moments. Mostly new, tight, fresh, knowing, but there was just a small scatter when I felt some truth in her face she wouldn't acknowledge—

Now I don't know. I find myself leaning against a wall, feeling programmed to do so, slumping to the ground, not choosing to do this. Gretta, what's going on here, can you tell me?

The sky is darker now, hours in a blink. Nobody troubles with me here, I don't even have a cup or a sign to tell my affair—so I wait—and I don't know—I get tired—I try not to doze & it comes like a cover over a birdcage—

Someone sits next to me, on both sides, I flinch ready but they are smiling & guileless—

“I've been where you are”

“Want me to move? Is this your spot?”

Laugh. “I mean your soul”

“How's that?”

“Uncertain, wanting something you can't name. Nobody else seems to feel that way”

“But they do. We all do sometimes” The other one, I realize with a quiet sniff, is a girl—a team—

“Have you eaten?”

“I'm not hungry. I'm fine”

“Are you high? It's OK. We like it too.”

“Are you a fucking cop?”

Again the laugh, soft & boneless & without judgement—

“Have you been in Seattle long?”

“Not really. You?”

“We travel. We've been here before. It's pretty, very green.”

“But a lot of street kids. Lots of meth & speed. Junk & booze. Runaway girls & that usual nightmare.”

“Are you social workers?”

“No, not really. We try to live right, which means compassion & common sense.”

“You're in a cult?”

A moment's silence before she says, “I don't think anyone says he's in a cult. That's simply a cruel description from someone who doesn't know or care.” Silence. “Or want to know.”

This was getting too intense without explaining itself. They were polite enough to leave if he asked but intense enough about their business to *have* to be asked.

He closed his eyes & knew they would wait. If they didn't, was no matter, but he didn't think they would.

An early morning, Gretta going down on him, her long wet tongue doing crazy fucking things down there, enough morning light to silhouette her in red-gold, & she starts humming. Not the usual pleasure of slurping & maybe moaning, she was humming in some part of her mouth & throat not busy with his slavishly hard cock—it wasn't a tune, more a rising & dipping sweetness & he held back coming for the longest time to feed on that song, feed deeper than she was, this was crazy, life was fucking nuts when you were in this moment & he knew it couldn't last & she loved to make him come & swallow every bit down & kiss him deep & comey afterward & he finally let himself not because he couldn't hold off but because she was humming & letting loose with everything in him coming & shouting & shaking & thrashing was all he could do in reply, in gratefulness—

he opens his eyes & lets that moment instruct instruct this one—

xxi.

What won't cohere, bear borders, accept a name, here its long horizon, here its limit,
some won't, no tame, no civil, no friendly

What's hard for high & little has ever satisfied, taste this ink, it doesn't like you, it
doesn't like anyone, its bitchgoddess the free groove in all—

Slow, slow, let something near, some lively, ceaseless heat, let it try this play, let the
fabric tear let the muscles tighten, let the fucking caterwaul til light lost to the morning's
arriving king—

More try more they say deep enough in the jungle & men of vine-knowing there an
explaining pulse, not bush-heat but what gestates bush-heat, where the source & where bound,
ask these men they are not prisoners, fine, close, nearer,

nothing tells, nothing there to tell, collapse the world's molecules yet another way,
nothing to tell, the heat is simple, the universe is wet for the slide & the make, til cool, til
dry,

What then? What the fuck then? Twitch with every other slave, pretend will, some
glance toward truth—

So when something here begins to tame, to cool, to dry, no, sacrifice a body & an ideal,
no matter—

Believe nothing, quite, dismiss nothing, ever, even looney—be a bright hurting fang in
mind—nameless root blossoms in heart's dreaming—

less afraid to burn it all down & watch it grow again than how green things curl quietly
away—

What truth in the passing talky cafe hour—what truth in the king's shouting wane—what
truth as the snap breaks & secrets piss out—what truth as the world burns, dwindles, sinks,
whimpers its going years—

What truth in the brutality of cities & villages alike, in the great torturing machines of the
new century astride the age-old shaming isolating, defeating, acoustic tools known all where
& away?

Don't tell me the books or bullets,
don't tell me the cross or the cunt,
don't tell me the moon or the
desert, don't tell me trees or
mushrooms & dolphins singing in unison—

What truth in the soft nights blazing one's heart with impossible memories, hands holding
candlelight, chocolate tipping breasts for several licks, somewhere two break another's neck
because they can, because the sound makes them laugh together, what truth on knees or raised
to sky, somewhere a motorcycle hurls toward an amber dusk, somewhere men gather around
a glow in silence, somewhere the fists won't stop—

Don't tell me you know with a grateful or humble or arrogant smile. Anything you know limits some & eliminates nearly the rest.

Say I don't fucking know & I may not believe this tomorrow but I'm walking now, someone near me warms with trust, I see that motorcycle flying through the air, the world is ending every moment but I believe beginning too—

No tame, no name, no civil, no friendly, no edifice, no book, no plant, no creature, no dream

I am the labyrinthine you walk through me—everything & still dwindling, priceless, fading, you can't, you won't, step by step—

xxii.

Move an hour, two through the darker fantasies, where walls shade an audience, where daylight knowing flakes useless away, where the danger is more a hook than safe, soft, comfort, an hour, two, there's no complete return, periods of cease, of refute, then another hour, two, no explain but those damn dreams, the shaking waking kinds

Near, & still nearer, breath quick & ragged, breath beautiful, words take back their claws, their unholy snap,

an hour, two

this world in raw belongs to no man or steel-clad polity, notices few & great, tiny roars of civilization,

but a curious, creeping eye in the night, something live pushes off something dead,

an hour, two

xxiii.

Worry it repeats, worry when refrain, worry how again breeds again, worry bout the wane, worry bout the wane, worry bout the wane—

fuck it says the mushroom, there's the door, in your hand the song, your breath & beat click along, the rest is the waste when hours caged to some trifle—

& fuck the idea of anything trifling, every last grit matters, there's beauteous burst in all, nothing is everything is nothing is remember that old rhyme?

World not resting against a wall to be cuffed for its explain, world broils through simple & complex, world comes again & again a hustler best when trying to collect two dollars from cat A to pay cat B the three he owes, wine to water, pink skirt short enough to plain the tale & yet smart thighs grin & keep it, two kings lie like old whores when they preach peace between them, your daily paper more like blue tissue completing a thin brassiere's wavering scam, aliens walk among men with hardly better wishes,

“Ask the swaying green light,

do you really mean go?

Where the freedom in yes?

“Ask the summer-stilled red,
do you really mean stop?
What if nobody does? Are you ready?

“If the light falls, when they hit,
are you ready?”

Mix three guitars with a bitchiness
for better & something like that—

xxiv.

What won't calm, even in the bed's golden silence, what bites any light nearing hand,
the brutal of remembrance, the metallic unsentiment of hope, nothing fine but hard & sharp,
when the heart cries squeeze it a little more, make it work to breathe, make it love for stay not
soft—

Still, the vine eaters of eternity, again, a why for fine ass's siren, a why for kings mad
want to clash bloods, the bright stupor of feeding masses, how the countless beauties of the
world & still a body in lone sickness wanes, merchants great with bags of coin & fine green
acres tap fingers & calculate new gain—

xxv.

A mile thick of pages scrawled a thousand thousand yawps & songs, what of any of it,
the hours are now years, continents of miles, endless the not knowing, the chase, the limp, the
corrode of want's twist with music—

hardly begun, another ragged sheaf of high notes, the first, the only, its weeks, its
years

Off a closed bank a mute rune in red reflects among other lights bouncing through
each's reflections passes by a neat pale beast hurry hurry hurry!

Answer in rare hours, or the rest, or none at all, or nothing to answer, what to answer,
nothing to answer—

xxvi.

Sing it true, tonight feel the labyrinthine, more a how, more a covering, a great swallow,
no calm in it, no steady to travel or mull, sing it true how every hour wants its golden brute
point, sing it true knowing no other way, what truth, what anything,

How fine this Universe of strew & ferment! Its beautiful slaughter & re-invent. How it
shapes to no plan, no moral, no story any hands have ever gathered to tell—

No answer. When the temples burn, when they build again, nothing. When the great

preacher his eyes golden round for a moment, when the king, walls to his answers, ceilings to his cries, the beautiful torso tapped for more, or simply taken

look to trees, look to the vines, look to those bright dead stars, look close to most private dreaming, look wide where all put a hand in toward hope's row—

Praise, universe, several, many, countless, & I don't know, & I don't know.

And I don't know. A gift. I don't know.

Labyrinthine, hour delicious, how purr, how undulate, how softest red wings & green gobs of melody—

One sound bears all if any could listen that much. One sound, one note, if only

& again I don't know, I fire & languish with some melodic faith, one hour's long try & carry it through several's drag, faith crackles unknown but I call it Art, I call it love, I say Universe bear the whole of your song & listen!

xxvii.

I take the bridge of glass, & whatever I am now, this is my way, I know that. It has no sides & sometimes it's so clear & quiet I wonder if it's there.

Try to remember. Try, fucker! There are always answers. My grandpa said you got five senses & another. Use them five, good, but don't forget the other.

So I'm walking on a fucking bridge from a bad memory to something else. I don't know if I create it or it's just sitting there waiting—the bridge arches up, becomes steep, becomes very steep, becomes impossible to move but to hang on the sides

is this right? There's go to be more here! What's the point?

"What's the point! I won't let go but I can't move forward!"

Silence. "What's the point? What's the point?"

The bridge seems to level off a bit. How bout that. But it's still not leading me anywhere.

What would you say, 'Stina? Laugh your skanky ass off at me.

No. I'm not like that. I never was. That's how you saw me.

Why am I seeing you now? Are you all my guilts & stupidity in one package?

No. I'm here because nothing's ever fully revealed. Not even your own thoughts.

That it? Thanks. Lots of help. I learned all that Socrates dope a long time ago. It's true. So what. It's true, & so what.

You asked what I would say, & you were wrong.

What else?

As much as you want. Always as much as you want.

She's gone. The bridge is flatter again. I look back. The S & G is gone, nothing back there. I'm not sure how this works but I seem to have some control. I still don't know the fucking point

but alright, I can see how I'd end up here.

"Too many books, sonny," my granpa would say. He was right in a way. He'd show me things to top what I was reading about.

I don't think he disliked books, I think he more distrusted them. "A book's a tool, sonny. Dumb & direct like that. Use the right one. Sometimes none work." I really didn't understand him but I listened like it was breathing & food & safety. He talked to me like I don't know if anyone did ever again. Maybe 'Stina. That's funny. My granpa & some skank. My fucking gurus on a glass bridge out of an old dooper's den.

Don't tell me the Universe doesn't have a dark fucking thought or two sometimes about its contents.

xxviii.

I walk down the club's long hallway, well past the manager's office where the barman kindly invited me to sleep. What would he think now if he forgot something, his wallet, & came back, & looked in on me, & saw the door open & the room empty.

I decide: I'm not going back there. I'm dreaming, I'm dead, I don't know but I'm going to keep along until something happens, whatever it may be—

It goes on & on, would I begin to get a little footsore if I was dead? I try to fly & can't. What then?

I don't realize how silent it is & dark too until I see flicking light up ahead, & crackling. It's a fire, up there, a big one!

Then I'm walking on grass, no path, no hallway walls anymore, there are tall pine trees, & a full moon overhead, & I look back to see no club behind me.

I still have my book, which is surprising. I suppose it & my slinky outfit worn for *him* prove some continuity in whatever's happening.

The fire is pretty far away, down a hill. There are shadows around it, people. I wonder if I have to go that way, how much choice I have in this. I try moving toward some woods ahead to see if I can. Nothing stops me.

But who are they? Could they tell me what all of this is?

If I had no choice I'd resent approaching them but since I do I find I want to.

Wishing I was wearing something less obviously showy, I walk slowly over. It takes awhile & it seems the hill is miles down, & the fire gets no closer.

I stop. What now, Genny?

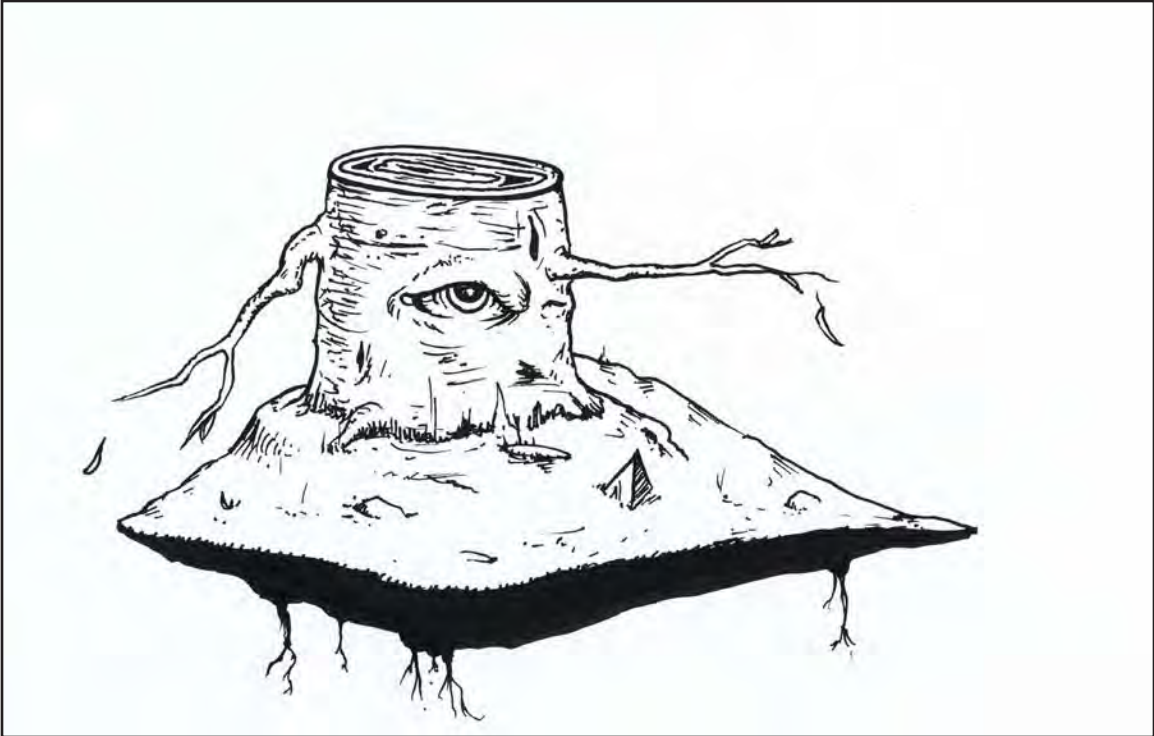
Sit. Stop & sit. Something he might have said with that least smile of his. I suppose I did want him. Why wouldn't I? Was that why he didn't come that night? Was he afraid what would happen?

Or was he trying to reject me less harshly?

The sound of drums comes up to me from down there. Hippy drums. Quite a few. And voices, shouts.

I remember days like that. Beach parties. Parking lots outside rock shows. Being 16 & totally fucking immortal.

I make myself stop crying. Watch. Wait. Something will happen.



AbandonView

xxix.

I don't go with the great bird. I ask him to give me awhile & then come back to check on me. Do I ask this like I know what I'm doing? No. I ask the great bird to understand me & hope it works. He leaves & I don't know if I'll see him again. Beautiful bird.

She had a perfect ass. Round & tight. For awhile I was her master one & all. Shit, why do I keep coming back to this?

I liked tying her up, relished it. She never complained but I don't think it did much for her.

She didn't know where I'd been & didn't ask. I think she was afraid to know too much.

She loved me for awhile but I made clear how it was. She was my fucking piece. She was really good. Perfect ass.

But before had been other things. So I'm not surprised I'm here. I'd been trying for this.

There's a lot I can do if this is controllable.

I told her how I wanted her to dress & it pleased her. As college smart as she was, a mind bookish powerful to take on any comers, she really brightened when I told her very short plaid mini-skirts would please me no end.

I'd gone beyond it all, frankly. I was burnt & wanted to glide for a long while. I could have, with a different set of friends. But they took me along.

Maybe she knew, I've never considered it. I'd met her somewhere, I won't say more, & we'd stuck close along the way. Awhile now.

How does this do anything toward this present tangle? I don't know.

I'd had a wife. I wasn't wanting for another ever.

So I need to see her.

xxx.

I walk out the damned door. Nobody tries to stop me at first, til a guard notices me.

"You can't leave."

"Why not?"

"It's not your time?"

"I think it is."

"People don't just go when they will."

"Look, man, I'm not stopping & it will hurt you to keep me."

He looks at me. Pauses then shakes his head. "OK. Take me on if you want to. I've wrestled quite a few." Crouches, beckons me. Ready.

No. I'm not going to fight. I wonder if the bird would have worked out better.

But then unknown to myself I punch him & he goes down really hard.

Well, then. I decide to keep walking til the next impediment comes.

xxxi.

The word is "seaweed" & it's where I met you that day in my childhood, that one *best*

day. I was standing by the ocean which someone had brought me to, it was a lesson, I think, a metaphor, a parable, someone was always trying to fucking *teach* me something back then.

I couldn't listen. I had never seen anything as beautiful as the ocean. I listened to it for the longest time, that story the waves keep telling, opened my eyes & watched the waves arrive along the shore, if there was anything I've experienced since of beauty, it was somehow kin to that moment. The sun glaring hard & hurting, the sight of a large dog chasing into the water after a stick his man threw for him. Voices, shouts, frisbees.

The seaweed on the edge intimidated me a bit. Thick & slimy, I touched it very tentatively.

She was there. Suddenly. One moment, seaweed, next moment, my friend. We looked at each other & I saw her eyes range from the bright green of the seaweed to the blue-grey of the waves.

She was nude. She was older than me, had a woman's body. I looked around quickly but nobody noticed us. That is, nobody noticed *her*.

"Hi, Maya."

"Hi. How do you know my name?"

"Nobody can see or hear me but you. Don't worry."

"You don't have any clothes on!"

"It's OK, Maya. Clothes don't really matter."

Her name took me awhile to learn. It involved three whistles and hard & soft breaths. I called her Samantha. She smiled.

She hasn't changed. Or aged. Or dressed.

"Hi, Maya."

I smile. "You came."

"Of course"

"I don't know what to do. I left my, um, friend's house. We had a fight."

"You didn't feel him intimately anymore."

"No."

"Did you ever?"

I look hard at her shifting eyes. "I haven't felt much in awhile. That's why I need you."

She smiles. "I was waiting. We had our agreement. But now it's time we went somewhere."

Samantha begins walking & I follow, noticing, as I didn't when I was a child, how beautiful she is. The strong, sensuous arch of her back, her brown-green hair thick to her waist, her buttocks tight and round, her legs those of a natural athlete. Yes, I follow her.

We go neither left nor right. How like her!

xxxii.

What I know is the beast never sleeps, burns til dry & out in one & then hard thrills through the next, never sleeps & suffuses the Universe, no escape any can point to solid & say near this, see it unclench for you, see the sweet to escape to, none, preachers, kings, artists, the highest, tightest prettiest wettest, moaning, reaching, arching, piece of golden ass at midnight's

widest finest moon will go old bones in hardly a time, release atom by atom to the earth & other making plans. What I know is how raw the desire, how the bitch yearn fleshes every flesh, bones within bones, no slogans, no skirts, where feeding & breeding source no man can cut to with pole or reason, lift out a beating heart & watch it reach its cease & know nothing new, cry together every disparate formula for air & time & desire & music, go on, nothing, maybe dissect a memory for a glimpse, maybe live between dreams, what I know is that men will not win. Someone said truth is usually sad, I don't know, I don't know, I don't know.

The hurrying slows, the snarl becomes growl becomes croon becomes wheeze becomes relax. What then, come on! Someone else raising new blades & news songs as the box lowers, as the dirt tumbles in—

The hour is golden anyway, the minute impossibly bright with twists of hope small & large, I wish to be its prayer—listen—one night I dreamed about a wall of sunsets, every one slakelessly beautiful, one or two cartoons & no less so, & I was crying, this dream flipped me over, broke me again & again, I kept passing through new dreams & telling of it, what was it? A wall of sunsets, each one unique,

The hour is golden & a stranger as it goes, its dusky grey light not that of a wall of sunsets yet here it is, the day was ugly plastic hours I vowed to write to try & make good, to try tonight, struggle & try, try,

My pen snarls, growls, croons, snarls anew, I cry out to my faith in Art because I have no other, here I am, Art, help me, Universe, the Labyrinth is me, my place untold, my world unexplained, why does the blood fly? I move one room to the next & hardly say a thick fist's word to anyone—

Help me, Universe, make Art good, help me Art, make this universe good—I do not give up—I will not slumber—I will feel no matter the roar of hurt—I promise—in dirtiest, worst hours I promise—

xxxiii.

Bowie fucks the girl his first night there. An odd fuck silked in comfort, sympathy & acceptance. She's neither passive nor a deathpraying freak, she enjoys, invites him to enjoy too, witness with her in their heat what she is & what she offers,

but maybe it turns out rough, not a lot but she is young & his demons are hard & fine with age, she rolls onto her perfect flat stomach with just a bit of reluctance, flinches to the practiced seeking thrust of his ass-hungry cock, grunts in what couldn't really be called pleasure when he soft, soft, soft, hard thrusts into her, hands under her, squeezing her tits hard enough to hurt a little more than pleases—

“Shhh” he says, several more thrusts, suddenly he likes it like this & his cock explodes, his cry a soldier's not a lover's—

sleeps on the floor & prepares to be gone by daylight—still panting, still stiff, not sexually aroused but some more primitive taut, doesn't fucking matter, this is America, what he had for a moment isn't what's wanted, what's sold on the streets—

she crawled into his loose splay & fell asleep still gnawing at his chest, hard sharp little teeth grawing & gnawing—

daylight came & he did not go—found himself watching what he could of brightening mountain & sky—a blossoming tree branch just outside—the air much cooler than Seattle’s had been—not close, not humid

Where was he come now? His recent hours are shattered & yet the nude girl sleeping face close to his heart—

right on his heart—face now turned slightly & listening, dreaming along his heartbeat—

Gretta told him a story one night, there were several bottles of wine & she was blowing his mind with Miles Davis’s *Bitches Brew*, he was unsure he’d heard it before yet remembered his Miles-is-God period, every LP, posters on the wall, yet here it was with this killing lovely woman, good red wine, lots of it, a fat joint, & this story, her great-grandmother, it was summer, she lived by the Pacific, she had been a very famous artist who didn’t show pictures anymore & one night she woke Gretta up deep in the night, a full moon, & carried her out the door so nobody else would hear, down to the ocean, the whole scene one ripe for fairies & savages but just the two of them & the ocean’s ferment & the moon

“This is God at work, Gretta-bird,” she’d whispered. “I came out here like this one too many nights & realized me painting my soul out did not good. I would never match this.” She’d kissed Gretta’s cheek & left. Gretta shivered, & watched for hours.

xxxiv.

Universe of strew & ferment & its rhythms seem more beautiful the plainer. Look for gestures cupping their feeling, cupping like flames. Look for what rawly strides by necessity blind to elevators & protocol.

Care for thoughts that bear their changing passage through hours, neither blot what’s been nor too many prayers to it.

Notice what hides among words & shadows, when a leader will not say yes or no but patience, awhile on, then we’ll know.

The years break again & again, what seems solidity is simply endurance, the tide comes & comes, sun parts & comes new—

If it were something in these pages it would be tough, it would care, walk its music true—the complex & simple in this world weave toward the same place. Here now. Here always.

Here everywhere. Here forever.

Nothing lost

Universe of strew & ferment I feel lost & I’m not single in this. No sureness in limb or faith unassailable.

But something else—best of felt truths in motion, a kinesis of prayer & its validation, God is dancing tonight if anywhere, if anything, if not one & all, God is dancing, what else could this flight be sure in its arrival?

Answers less sure than breaths, & breaths finite, questions combust with the annihilation of answer or they clog & rust, what I want to say is some bear traps, traps disguised as promise,

chase after me, chase after me, chase after me, lookee here, lookee here

My question, its trapping hooks, its rusting near, is want, why want, why want? Why want?

Why want. None tell me. None tell one another.

What next question, if indeed free of this one, is that possible? Want the cage, the hooks, the drown, or the thread through the labyrinthine? Dark pearl in every running blood, fine high moonlight in velvet shimmering hips, first touch in wordless shy, ever wish for the next

Yes til it snaps, how many countless kinds?

Question, thread, trap, hook, & thus, what, to? What does the world's plain magick say?

Walk true, say yes. Speak true, say yes.

xxxv.

Ask what the world & a hundred shouts back, world as evolution, world as ferment, world as cookpot of countless souls, world to learn, world to love, world to test, world to survive, world among many worlds, cmon, give it, some answer must stretch a little farther, must bite a little deeper—

Cmon, give it, something to explain the hoary velvet dusk tonight & the gunfire some miles far—cmon, give it, some dearest nugget in a strong, tender hand, pass back & reveal how all crosses all, how beauty & foul twins in truth barely knowable one from another—where dreams fairly web through, what great shaft around which all spins—

something, no? Something, sweet beneath the complex of time, of flesh's brutal wants & ceaseless entropy—

something, more than a fine word like love or music, something for deep wood empty riverbed nights & dustless great computer servers kept ready for a thousand missiles' sleek launch—

something—

Follow it down into the street's grime, into the dulling daily noise, the he-said-she-said-and-then & hardly more, bring your high ton of ideas to smoky traffic jams & carnage-smiling TV news reports, out to where the knives whir mechanical & cowflesh parts & falls in cry & rhythm—what is the thread through & back—

what the thread, & a hundred shouts reply, nothing true over another, a cacophony of urge—

& an unliked question: does it matter?

The golden fixtures, their dear light web shadows & subtleties, a mystery in this room, thousands of years, mounted on cliffs of flame, from up here a partial view of the Labyrinth, maybe enough if any could get here, followed the clues & refused less—

xxxvi.

Each of them in the labyrinth, labyrinthine more to the, yah, fuck, what means any of it because I don't know, I call most of it noise between feeding & breeding, I call most of it so inconsequential—what matters then, what matters, how to shuffle or discard or diffuse this mess to a playable tune or two—

Nobody knows, I keep asking & looking & there is no answer anywhere—there is talk of war & ideology—none of what it means to be alive—what precious lost when a body falls—is something precious lost? Maybe there the question again—does it matter?

I ask not to diminish but to wonder at least among these obscure pages if lives are not expendable, if it is possible to take this idea as a premise—

Would this be liberating? If no life's loss mattered more than another, if grief struck equally for a kin & a stranger—if death was devalued by the individual & raised by the race—each death a matter of tears for all—

I ask because I see the world lessing its estimate of persons all the time—covering up death with words, with lies, with moments of silence to a question asked—

Each of them in the labyrinth, to learn & suffer, brought there, a hand moved pen & thus & so. It works.

Each of them also to enlighten what I'm missing.

As the vision takes over & my eyes fall to darkness, what is that room, old & beautiful, I have to give it to them, to pass through, give what I have left, which is little.

“You'll know this room because it will feel very old, many centuries, because its lighting is elaborate & elusive, more shadows & angles than seems possible. You'll pass through it, in a hurry, but I say slow, stop. This is important. This room matters to you inestimably. Having reached this room you have a greater prospect than thought possible.”

Do I control or know the Labyrinth? I don't think so. I'm not sure what it's supposed to be to help. Or if it helps at all.

I am atwist with these things & little clears very often. Then there is music sometimes & I seem to know.

Now it continues.

xxxvii.

One night I danced in an electric labyrinth & told a stranger the story of the Minotaur, Ariadne's thread, & so on, I was luscious with the moony desert night & long sips of haha juice I walked the electric labyrinth, swinging with it back & forth til arriving in its center, the stranger asked if I was the Minotaur what a strange question—

I stayed days away from these pages, scribbled tittering little notes but did not approach otherwise—

I wanted to find the book here I could write smoothly, thought I did, the book not made of rags & rages, the one I could hand around to anyone easily—

No. This book is like war, it never leaves & never refines, little explains yet so much bears—this book is like want, like the pull toward fecund flesh, toward bright fruit, toward the melody-wrapped beat going on tonight & every night—

I want to say more, how the lights glare too plainly in this coffeehouse—how the music isn't dangerous enough—how the patrons are tired & fold within, how I wish for sudden conflagrations day after day—

It will remain rags & rages, simple, & thus its shamble, & thus its elusive high—

Nothing much around excites me like this messy undone book, what it might become even if most likely that's not liked by many—its wish to stay, to prosper on its freak path, to demand a bit more than other books—learn how—

Not wishing to stop yet this gnarled beauty, this extended slop, this embrace so waiting to burst, this ink churching these many pages with love, with the ludicrous—

What happens next see a shift here, a crack in the gears & beams, much set up may fall over with a clouding cracking thus—what's left, what's new will be uncertain, maybe always—

A promise to fill the pages to come as I do—a little melody, a little desperate, willingness to speak up—

I keep falling into dreams where everything is melting to the touch—I wake up & distract solidity about me—who is tricking who? Wake to pressing hands & tight voices

are you OK? are you injured?

we can call a doctor—lie still let us sit a bit together—

When it resumes it will be somewhat
different but how I do not know
nor if that will stay either—
this book's truths are diffuse at
best—

this moment each of the six persons in this story are approaching each other, from different angles & dimensions, years, roads, wishes

approaching to arrive, I don't know
maybe always approaching,
a book who will not let up
too many half-built places, too
many secrets nobody will find—

the fade toward dreams now—

A page nearer, & what melts behind without new, cast in this morning for some staying hour, a memory tacky to the heart, clung within it, & what comes? Fragments, less, a few words at a bus stop, the alien becoming of a loved face, one night the stars lured, hinted their depths—

What comes? Music wastes little with sentiment, wants for the flow, wants for the want, music cares for what lacks tame, what binds to nothing—

What comes? Love for the next page, how new it will strike, how deep it will blow—

What comes? Cup faith but shun the hook & pinch of beliefs—

What comes? The next page will blow this moment wide, deny its all, its ever way the secret hustle in things is never stop moving, you *can't*, you *must*, you *try*



To be continued in Cenacle | 71 | December 2009



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Two.

*"The most beautiful thing
in our world is fire"*
—Aldous Huxley, quoting Plotinus.

A room that becomes more, I don't know how to tell, it relates poorly to hours, to linear time, to the simpler mathematics of dimensional space, but untroubled, so untroubled this room that it remains solid while there is otherwise passage, change, no explain how so

where closest to touch each other, here, this room, this seems the best there will be, each will brush the others, glance off, notice & shift, breathe & allow, this room, its walls of fire, its ceiling of stars, its floor of moonlight, its couch of silver melody, its bed of blue light & red gold—

Would the greater disappointment lie in the world letting down your hopes or your fears?

xxxviii. / i.

Again the feeling of sudden arrival, the blind accounting for flesh's safety, she's nude this time & bedded & there is breathing near her ear, sleep's breathing, steady & distant, & there is a smell, light but sharp, & she knows it to be her own sex smell mingled with another's, but the mix is not familiar . . . exactly—

She tries to sort the jumbled hours in her mind, each a hungry pet for her best attention, & she can't do it immediately—

Slow . . . slow . . . I'm in a bed, I'm naked, I fucked someone, we slept, I woke, he hasn't yet, if a he, but I think so, women don't smell that powerful to me. We fucked & slept together in this bed, big enough that we are not crowded too close, & by the way we aren't crowded too close, not twined, not like the Renoir statue at the Tate Modern, more something of a Hopper, was it good? Was he? Was I? I never know beforehand if I'll be good, sometimes I lose it, the rhythm, it's like not being able to sleep, but he's still here, he's sleeping, he didn't leave me no matter how bad I was—

Who is it? Why does he smell familiar? How did I get here?

Tricking herself by not thinking clearly for a moment she opens her eyes & cries out before she can stop herself—

Fuck. Shit! *Fuck*.

I didn't want it to be him. I knew it & I didn't want it.

Now what?

I wait. Try to breathe slowly & deeply. Memories are still trash through my mind's stream but OK.

I think about something he said a long time ago, when there were still a lot of us following him, when everyone got along, when there was hope & mystery enough to propel us together.

We were camping in a strange desolate place, but the moon was near full & the air was coolly sweet.

He caught everyone's attention for a moment after dinner. Suddenly we were all turned toward him, stopped from our doings.

He smiled somewhere, as he would do. Quiet; we waited.

Finally he said, "No waiting. No yearn. Tis arrival." Nodded, & left it at that.

I got so fucking wasted that night. Woke up at dawn, naked & stained.

He wasn't always mojo guru. I'm so *fucking glad* he wasn't. He liked throwing around a Frisbee, sometimes he was clumsy as hell, but once in awhile he leaped to make a catch like one of those big graceful dogs you see on TV, flying for a moment & you don't breathe so excited—

The bed is getting heavier—is that possible? I feel it slowly weighing down. Time to be brave, darling. Open em up. Now.

It's not him! Shit! What the fuck is that? Did I fuck that?

Wait, no. It's OK, it's him. Not really OK but what the fuck? It was bigger than any man, hairy like a bear, horns?

He moves around & sleeps again. Is it him? Was I that good? What did we do? How many times?

That's your dirty mind talking. Evil eyes will check out anything with a twitchy ass. Boy, girl, hell maybe I did fuck a man-beast! Me turn down Bigfoot? Not unless he had issues with shyness & flaccidity. Maybe not even then.

Are my clothes around? Can I get up & dressed without bothering him? Do I want to? Some men take one look in the morning & their cocks lead the way back in. So to speak. Get lucky their tongues go first.

OK, so I don't know. I feel stupid waiting for him to decide, to wake up even. I very softly feel around my thighs, not wet, of course. Not bruised, at least by touch. Hell, maybe we—

"We did. For hours."

xxxix. / ii.

The film is called *Remoteland* & some say its origins trace to a cancelled cult TV show & its lunatic fans. What happened with that show was a tragedy & the chance that this new film is related pretty much dooms its success. A few will go to see it, hoping for more lurid themes, but it will likely close in a month or less. Art-films are like this, they have a moment's scrutiny & catch or don't. Doubtful this one will.

Remoteland is long & what's worse is that several versions are released. Too many complications for most movie critics who skim the press packet & write up dismissive reviews without seeing it. They call it "hopelessly obscure" & "relentlessly dark," an "overlong derivative slop" that, "doomed to its alleged associations, stands no chance of art-house much less mainstream success."

But *Remoteland* doesn't close in every theater right away. A small audience is present every screening, weekday & weekend, it hangs on, one could even say it digs in, not many see it but they see it over & over, they buy buckets of popcorn they eat little of, they're polite, & a little scary—

Word spreads that here's something special not hardly close to the cultural radar, many theaters schedule midnight screenings & they nearly sell out occasionally. It's creepy, the same faces so often, even taking the same seats, but they bring in a piece of change—

So just another *Donnie Darko* or *Waking Life*? A *Wall* or *Song Remains the Same*? *Eraserhead*, maybe.

The latter, maybe, a likewise obsessive film with an obsessive audience. Polite, though. None cause any trouble. Many theaters rake in the little piles of green & assume it won't last. Nothing does.

But a feeling like: which theater showing it will burn down first? Where will the first murder take place? How long til whatever this is proves to be a super scary zombie cult sex initiation drug ritual awaiting the right full moon for total massacre? How long?

It doesn't happen, nothing bad at all happens for a very long stretch. Some settle for calling it the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* for even *weirder* kids.

Seems this will be enough. Nobody fully believes this, but seems true month after month.

Of course they won't tell, nobody's business but ours, & we don't really know what's going on, just that one guy who freaked & nobody knows what happened to him—

But it's ours & we know what they do with secret things—they think *TripTown* ended cause it was cancelled? Cancelled?

But that guy, what happened was scary. I mean, we keep track the best we can. Not in a cult way or a government spook way, but just to make sure things are cool. This is something special we share, it's important—

They try to explain it like a movie or a TV show but it's really more like following Phish or the Dead back in the day. That's the closest anyone can say. I mean it's strange but that's what it's like. You belong to something, it affects you, you see what it was like. TV shows & movies are passive, you sit & watch, maybe together, maybe you talk about it after, but nothing you do directly affects the experience while it's happening. It's recorded. You watch.

With music everyone affects what's happening, the band feels the night, the vibe, the

hall or venue. They play live. Unexpected shit happens.

It's like that. Not Johnny Carson either. Way more like the Dead, if the Dead was like a TV show or a film but doing what they do.

I mean, the more I try to say the worse I do. You're thinking it's like a play on TV or something, Shakespeare, but no, man, it's not.

It's like if you could get something back from long ago, some secret, special thing you had, it got lost, it got stolen, you put it away, then that too. You recover it, whatever it was, & you catch up on things, & your friend is back, your friend matters again, your life fills in something empty with this new feeling but it's connected to an old one you had & lost, like its child, they look alike but it's exciting again—new & exciting but there you are, not a child, just connected & new, fuck! Why do I try to tell anyone anything? Leave me alone. I don't know shit about it.

xl. / iii.

Bowie finds an old bike at the farm, village, something, to where they've brought him. Nobody owns it, & when he takes the time to repair it, nobody impedes how he takes possession.

Replaces the tires & tubes, both long worn out. Brakes are OK, chain worn but good with oiling. The gears all work. The frame is solid, old & solid, this bike is no light-weight new flyer.

Fine, neither is he. Takes possession & works to make this bike run again, cares for this task, ignores so many questions, for the moment.

If he can have this, a little easier dealing with the rest. Not sure why.

At first when the girl comes around, smiling, he smiles too, & fucks her in the back of the barn workshop he's in. She likes it, he can tell, a happy lover gives hints, what she expects, what she wants most. He realizes that she, or her lovers, or both, are fairly inexperienced. Too much press for something spiritual here, a rebuke of flesh's needs, discipline flesh, punish it. He reaches for her orgasms deliberately, & she cries, then reaches further, & she moans. Then gentles, & she snarls. Lets her press for it, need it, bark for it. There, good. When she recedes one time, with a smile, he nods. More ground, less open sea. Call it the shores of sex. Leave it at that.

Then he realizes she likes watching him fix the bike. He's not great with tools but he finds a great old book on home repairs & makes do with a few pages. She watches. OK then.

He gets up morning very early, leaves her sleeping, clever fuck that he is, he kept her up very late fucking, taught her how to suck cock like the best cathouse madame—

she resisted a little, at first, but he's broken & re-trained more challenging students—

arms locked around her, cock hard & positioned at an angle between her thighs he whispers, between long deep breathing silences, "it's part of the game, part of how it's done"—"I know how horny I make you, nod"—"*Nod!*"—"And right now you feel what you want almost where you want it. Nod."—"Nod!"—"but you see performance is all & nothing is beyond the borders, shift a little—a bit more"—his cock now kissing lightly her wet wet pussy lips—"& so we learn to perform—it's how it is"—"nod"—"now lick your lips"

he made it difficult on her, having learned years back from a real whore one of the deep secrets of good fucking—cock control—really good cock control—she goes down on him tentatively til he barks—then she devotes her lips & tongue to her task—he pushes her off twice & fucks her very hard—without cumming while she loses count—

the third time, seeing she's exhausted, he sighs & blows, so much, so unexpected, she nearly chokes—but hangs on—swallows—all of it—he orders her to cum while she's swallowing & she comes close to passing out—

so her lovely fucked form isn't going to wake easily just a couple of hours later—

he wonders if anyone else will stop his ride—he'd told her the night before the bike was nearly ready—nearly—figured someone was listening—

Not sure in truth if he'll come back—has no possessions—looks at the girl &—fuck—nearly doesn't go—

her face is petal-soft & puppy-open in the muddled pre-dawn light—her body belongs to him—which is nice, very nice—but something else—her expressions—her smile—he really didn't come here very willing—if not for her he would have already found a way out—probably more violent than re-building a bike—

he'd delayed—& not because anyone else here had tried to engage him—or explain the place—was he supposed to ask “what kind of cult is this? God, drugs, sex, guns?” Little had been offered up—they'd willingly given him the girl—another set of circumstances & people would not have—& perhaps she was seen by others too as the hook—better than God, drugs, & heartless blindfold fucks—

Wobbly, the road is dirt & climbs very slowly up & up, he guesses the direction as nothing either way clues him—even tire tracks are confusing—decides to ride unhurried, if someone gives chase he'll stop—nobody's compelled him to stay but he doesn't own this bike—& he *has* eaten their finest pussy—

Cracking up softly he pedals & the commune of farm buildings falls away. Untilled brown plains, little cover, easy to see & be seen if anyone was trying—

Leaving another beautiful girl, eh, Bowie? This one even tight & untaught to your specs! & why? Answer that.

He can't, doesn't want to. Riding gets harder & harder as the road climbs. He pushes himself, wills his tired legs to act on the crisis at hand. The hill becomes ridiculously steep. His balance wobbles badly. Something like relief in the stone scattering noise of the pick-up nearing him.

xli. / iv.

Samantha & I walked for miles that first night, singing like we did when I was a child, wordless hums, I want to stop & just listen to her but when I do her voice thins & I can't hear what I wanted, I know my voice isn't the difference but still—

I don't remember what we talked about years ago but I do remember that I told Samantha everything in my small heart & she listened with care—she'd hug me when I was done & then tell me in few words something comforting—I think she mostly told me to not see the whole world in a moment of sadness—she seemed again just a bit older than me—now

again, when we finally sit & rest—I talk she listens—

When I mention the White Woods, she stiffens, nearly sniffs the air like a small, frightened creature—

“I think it burnt down, all of it—”

“Did it?”

I sit back, silent. Truth is, “I don’t know. I was groggy for a long time & then I found myself with Jamie. I don’t know how we met.”

Samantha smiles at the campfire we’ve built—“you left him to begin to know again”—

“Do I want to? Is it that bad that I would blank it all out?”

She says nothing. I don’t know where we are but it’s clear I need to sleep & she doesn’t. She cradles me & as I fall asleep I hear her beautiful voice unfettered by my own

*world in evolution
world in ferment
world in a deep boil
cleaning every soul’s grime*

*world a hope when armor
heeds heart
world breaks down & we
cannot defy this*

*world a secret night when
several hands clasp the moon
world when the tired let go
in dream & elsewhere—
let go in dream & elsewhere—*

She moves us along with speed, with purpose. I finally ask where we are going.

“I’m bringing you to the next place” she says, simply, like that explains it well.

I want to say more but catch myself, Samantha never liked questions when she’d told all she cared to. So we walk & my mind looses some, I don’t think it used to, but it does, & I walk through an inner mist, trying to figure my life before I met Jamie—& why him? What about him woke me up this much?

He was a contrast to something, to someone. I should know who & I don’t.

Samantha is stopped. “Too much, Maya. Let it come back. Let it be like the tide.”

“What’s wrong with me? Why don’t I remember my own life?”

She is silent.

“Are you going to help me? Where are we going?” I stare back at her. I don’t flinch. I’m not a child.

Her face softens. “You were in the White Woods.”

“I don’t know what that is.”

She starts walking again. I follow because I don’t know what else to do yet.

“Tomorrow” she croons, when she lets us stop again so I can sleep.

*World when the tired let go
in dream & elsewhere—*

This time I don't fall from the music but with the music through sleep, fall through dream & elsewhere—leave Samantha behind, hoping I'll see her again, know I will in some form or another—

Open my eyes to a feeling of fast-moving. Car . . . a bus? Greyhound bus? Across the aisle . . . I don't want to look . . . empty. He's not there yet. Look out the window . . . He's standing with a man, smiling, his friend, seeing him off.

No time, no thought, I grab my things shove into bag & leap toward the rear of the bus, the three-seat row next to the bathroom. I crouch near the window, knowing he's getting on & that last time I looked at him, & talked to him, & so many things came after because I did, & why not this time?

Why did Samantha send me back here? What am I supposed to do?

I sit still, light-headed, wobbling. I don't know & I don't know. I don't know.

He's sitting there & I love him & I don't believe this. He's near again. Would he remember me? Does this return give me back what I still had that day when I met him, when he looked at me & I thought I felt Samantha near me, he felt like Samantha.

I move over a bit & angle my view to spy him. Wait. He's close! Neither of us in the seats we were in the first time!

His hand leans into the aisle & I hurt. Samantha! Samantha.

xlii. / v.

I walk the bridge of glass for hours, maybe days, maybe not, this was my choice, I'm not sure how it became the best option, how I ended up in that room over the S & G Pizza, but I did & truthfully it's OK—I wasn't doing much before that—

So I walk steady, not very fast in case it gets weird again—walk & walk, if I'm dead at least I'm not lying stupidly in a box—

Snap, flash, I'm a kid again at my granpa's funeral. Shit. Fine.

But I'm not small. I haven't shrunk. I'm at his funeral but still grown up. They gave him a full church funeral, one I'm sure he would have hated.

"God's a last resort, Sonny boy. Remember that. Might not work either. Your best bet when all's lost is to punt, run, or go out with what fists & fury you have left." He'd said the last few words so angrily they didn't fit with this benign service full of platitudes & dislocation—

I wasn't at his funeral.

Where was I? Don't remember. How old? Don't know. This looks like it though. Did anyone tell me the details? How long til I found out from when it happened?

People look at me casually so I must be visible. I don't see anybody I know at first. Why didn't I come? Why would I have missed this?

How do I know it's him from the back of the room?

Shit, kid, gather your marbles a minute.

I feel myself fading out, but no, fuck, I pull myself back in, insist, whatever's king of me right now brought me here, I'm going to stay here awhile.

“No!” I wrench back in & the bridge fades, the church solids up & I’m there. Alright then.

I start to walk toward him, in his casket, up there. Not believing, not knowing anything. But OK, do this for him.

The pews either side the aisle fall away some, I let them, none of this matters but what’s ahead, I walk slowly, it’s OK, granpa, I want to do this, I want to see you—

Then he recedes too & I get angry—

“There’s got to be rules to this!” I shout. “You can pull me through every deep & ugly hour of my life but you have to let me stay & deal with them! You can’t fucking tease me like this!” I stop. The receding stops. He’s still up there.

So I’m let this close & no more. OK. I’ll take it.

I look around. I don’t see anyone I know. No family, no relatives. No friends. Is it really him up there? Was I brought to the wrong delusion?

I try to remember sharply & suddenly: I don’t remember what he looked like. I remember his voice, his words. His face? His body? His shoes or clothes? His height?

Why do I think it’s him? I was thinking about my funeral, about being dead in a box, or lucky not to be in the box at least. Then I was here.

think. Whatever world this is, it seems to be mine. My memories, my loved ones. That seems the border, if it’s even valid.

Maybe I’m not ready for this? For who’s up in that box? Flash & I’m back on the bridge of glass, remembering that service but no longer there.

What now? I stop my steps. See nothing around me, greyness, a waiting for me, a still. I wait too, I still. Begin to trace back . . .

Why the S & G? Why bring me there? What was I before coming there & after?

After’s easy. I went clean. It was bad, I sweated & bled & shouted my way free. Eventually the demons loosened, & receded. They don’t go away completely, but I pushed them off enough to breathe, to pick up my shit & get along.

I was quieter. The world & I didn’t battle in frenzy every fucking hour. There was a . . . lessening . . . some of it was good, I was alive, some of it no, I was duller. A nice slouch.

Before S & G? I was a lunatic. Didn’t even have a steady address for some years. I traded buddies dope for couch space, when I wasn’t fucking my female clients. My harem of soft weedies.

I moved to the S & G because someone I wouldn’t call a friend managed it, offered me living space for steady grass. I took the offer & regretted it. I’d owned nothing for years & realized it was the trade-off for my . . . what? my life & damn the consequences. Can’t catch what doesn’t stick around. No address, no phone number.

None of this sums to shit yet. Who’s fucking with me? I can’t know or believe anything right now—

xliii. / vi.

Was it future, dream, fancy, I don't call it one or other for several together don't sum it either. Try this version:

through a dream I sat at a computer console, I was thinking about a rock show, not one I'd been at, & this was a show years ago, but I began looking for it & at first I found it & then I was walking to it & then I was dancing near the stage & I awoke & an end to that, except these lines many hours later written freshly & perhaps read freshly some week or other year & so I think less casually on this, it has traveled already, to wish to see a show & eventually walk into it & live it & return perhaps, calling those hours at that show, this morning, tonight, those years ago, what exactly then?

A faith in evolution, a faith in God, in either or none?

If anything, find God in the exceptions. In the miracles. In the unexpected. Find God in every sure grand great idea proven one place's caged look at things. If God, between the bars, looking in & out, & the bars themselves. The prison, the guards, & those who plot escape. God is the escape, especially. The thrust out.

God not the rule but the rule's final break, freedom in the stench a broken rule farts out—a cosmos kept orderly grows dank, begins to stink with boredom, with decay—

Find God most fiercely where creation's ways are deduced, adored, & annihilated. Where the drumbeat collapses, the flail, every drummer waiting who will catch something to follow, waiting,

Nothing I've seen or experienced convinces me that order is God's prime rule, if God there be—I believe ferment is deepest good, chaos, from which music, from which desire, from which art comes hot & a fearsome danger, & fuck all else, fuck what settles, what knows & is assured, what plans for all, what strokes want like a trusted pet—

creaturely sweetness in a soft bed with a murmuring companion & the drifting moonlight air, all well, settled & vague, far off the clash, far off the bloodier hours, now dream, & even that slowly, call this year & others to come for rest, for prosperity, words become poison when the next known, & the next, art becomes shit when it's solid & plays to the beat, art becomes shit when it knows what it is & what's next & here's how, here's where & how much, this, & this—

fuck it. God in the moment's revolution at hand, it what may explode your heart & mind, & no more.

I can only intend this work to slide through the rest, catching at each, carrying them, folding & stretching at them, what they are singly & crushed together, a thousand pages for one fresh rivulet, if need be—

if need be—

which seems that all old work is to the service of new, reverence to it, what came, & here's kindling to what's arriving now—

nothing lost, nothing recovered.

Sentiment adored & crushed to a powder for trailing back, for remembering, returning, letting go, & again, & again,

because nothing ever goes & nothing returns.

What my part in this book? Angry, restless, melancholy, unsettled, & staying that way for now, this has to go somewhere new or fuck it—is that deeper the past or some other potent ruin? I picture a book eventually set in caves, in guttural shadows, in colors when one ink won't do, in pictures when the last of the words isn't strange enough—

xliv. / vii.

Set it to paper & it lives bright now & on with the rest, a wish to push along now, let in the blood, let in the microchips, let in five kinds of webs & a mountain rumbling within & below—

Somewhere always a confessing heart here—somewhere how life does not explain & changes too fast & little assures, & hard to frame the mew for aid much less which direction to arc this cry

Sweetness, please, hours like sugar cubes, what's swept into a moment's eye never going, never gone

Remember everything but in a shadowy, smoldering hill—

Only the freak in things bites hard enough to matter, the voice, the book, the song, the face, much walks the plain, sups it hours sweet & foul, fades, gone, feeds the soil, fades, all but gone, only the freak in thing stays, legend, myth, warning, promise, mystery, way—

What then? Toward the freak in things, what does not slide easily from & to—

What protests the stay & suffering—what—

what—

what—

Feel what present in this book, what far, dim, an arcing fist, great one, long spit of fire, feel it, not yet a sense of we, is there a we anymore, I wonder tonight, I look about for the we in things & I see clumps, knots of we, I don't see eager immolating pushes to we, strands hurrying, scatter seems truer, isolation the clarity when clarity is sought—

What will bring we then, even in a book like this, an obscure bit I keep near for my pleasure & push,

what brings nearest kindness, is it suffering? The empathy of shared suffering? Is that some of the true, if not all?

Suffering brings strands toward we but will it stay? I don't think so. I don't think suffering alone can hold we together perpetually, what then—

what—

what—

I've often found the lone night a comfort, sometimes nigh to an explanation—my music, these

pages, these years of pages, more like hundreds of nights of pages,

a push toward we, toward nights when a bonfire looms & bodies tend nearer, toward light,
brilliant hours when two hands enfold a third dearly—

The classical labyrinth brings its visitor to its center by the longest, most circuitous way, & a single way at that, no choice but inevitability—some say the first labyrinth imprisoned a beast who fed on young flesh, who was kept caged & fed to conceal his lineage, & then none escaped his devour because the Labyrinth was deceptive, was filled with visual tricks & mental incapacitants—that one man made it through aided by a golden thread & slew the beast—& returned alive as none others had—& broke the heart of his thread-gifter—& broke his father's heart late—& if this is the origin of the labyrinth then it begins bloody deep in betrayal & murder & deception & heartbreak & cruelty—even later pilgrims could at best call it a life's hard path to God—

I can only say that I walk my life's Labyrinth not to reach its center or to slay its imprisoned beast but to follow its golden thread of music through the many nights—I don't know why these others walk theirs nor if possible to see & know that each walks the path of all—

We simply seems the worst wish to clasp—yet clasp it I do as much as the lone nights & pen & music's disappearing gesture to follow & follow & follow—

xliv. / viii.

A touch & all melts, words on a page but direction to come too, a wonder at how, but say this true, a feeling about endings, transformations thereafter, resurrections the promise, not a single man to his crowd, but the world to worlds, what passes there is meaning, there is memory, there is return

Tonight to believe in every possibility, hold open to hope again, let its foolish wings in, tonight to hunger cleanly & forgive both, to pick up from dull distracted pages & push along new, memories not a shackle, nor a damnation, & cry Universe let the youthful hours sea-burnt in full moonlight flow more bluntly, let those hours their resuming mystery, conjure a conduit back, through years some a shit-hole, through them all, let those hours thrive new, Universe, so much isn't lost yet, none can say otherwise, there were secret worlds then, in hand, & now too, are they kin & what say otherwise, a touch & all melts, to the last remain of glance

Everything remains, in scatters, little deny, little solve, yet it all remains

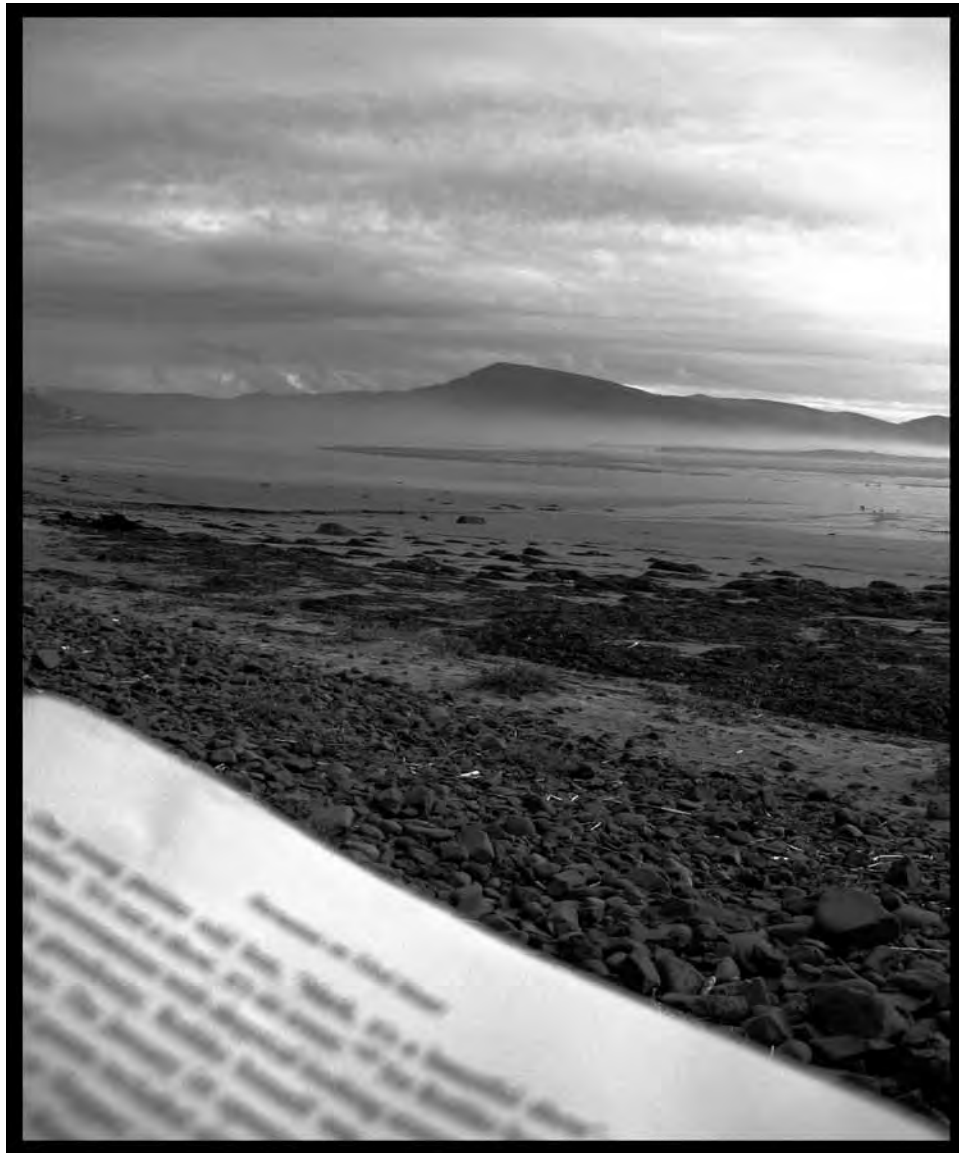
xlvi. / ix.

Come the velvet blindness of music, the fall to stars upon stars, each player looks up & sees a torrid light corrode the sky, from a window, from a tree, each sees this right now, these players their hearts blown through the velvet blindness of music,

do you know you're players?

does that make this book a game?

how will you respond to knowing?



is there a game-master? is there
a goal? What the rules, what
the penalties?

How deep the game, to love, to death, to dreams, to desire's nameless raw?

Are we all in this game? Is this pen a gaming instrument, this page a recording? How
to score points, how to psych an advantage?

Does the game end? Did it begin?
Is it wending the Labyrinth or,
sharper, noting the game's book is
called not Labyrinth but Labyrinthine?

Will it hurt? Will I bleed? Do
I win by endurance, can I lose
if I forsake my hope & skills?

xlvi. / x.

The way is called Dis-illusion & perhaps the game is too, if the game is the way, or the
way the game so I take me to another year & find my old courtyard table tonight, autumnal
Cambridge & I sit here for a few moments & write the following rules

Everything is possible
Anything is likely
Regret best fuels a pause
Hope is good traction to act
Want stays, its food infinitely varies
What should happen often doesn't

having written these I suck on the beauty of this conjured moment, the guitar player on the
sidewalk, the cobblestones toward other places, the newsstand, the light in different voices, this
gaming raises not a lash, & fade off, return is likely, return is possible

played out

a new round

xlvi. / xi.

Having passed through the thinnest, the awful passages when it seemed little was
coming to put some covering on what's beneath, dress in roses, in winds, in starlight, in a
crowd's turn for music, in its sigh & pause,

it's a game, a game
as big as a game &

yet, a game, time + play

you're listening now but soon the world will lure you along & the naked lattice here, there few
pages, little, little, & less—

submerge, will re-appear
in dreams spilling into
daylight, in wants you
carry countless miles—

in what remains you a child & onward, how you call back & forth

the way is Dis-illusion
the game is Dis-illusion
breaching time space is
Dis-illusion

new round!

new round!

new round!!

xlix. / xiii.

We meet, we part, we remember.
A moment at a street corner, two hands,
an hour under stars, it was long music,
a night riding tavern's wilds with brothers.
Remember & wish, call it time.
Clocks like manacles, by digit, by tick,
the best hours were unmeasured & are
unnamed & will be beastly strange.
Feel our flesh among flesh, call it space.
The lie of limited dimensions, near & far,
all is here, tonight, now, forever, not
the comfort in this, little croon.
Sleep, dream, some accelerated life, return.
What to bring back, what dream-fruit to
seed, what dream wish to continue chasing?
This is return. Morning the foul yawn.
More should spray lights into being,
more should come like virgins, & again.
This is home. Some other year, another home.
Snails & their slime. Humans mark time
& location by regret, by sentiment for
someone's dust. Some yearn, some
adore, & what next? Meet, part, remember.
Time, space. Useless gaming tools, discard

them now. What remains? A few
cupped hours will not break. A goatskin
sack of them, useless. Useless.

The shine, so near between day
& night. Trains arriving. Harbor
shadows. What fades & returns.

Let nothing go. Wear every last old wish & demand it of your heart, what you were, regard,
what fades & returns by heart's inmost will. Remember everything until the common & the
fluted hour both kin up near & warmly—

l. / xiii.

Hunger roars the mind & loins alike, call it resistance to the dust, & little plays it
out long, hunger blind & encompassing, like a tall man-god, full of blood vengeance for a
moment's disregard, & though an unclustered burst sates an hour, sate is not ease, & hunger
insists the universe—

She closes her eyes, feels the expensive red wine soften & blur, feels something giddy
bubble in her, down her neck, tap-tap her tummy, swish around her thighs, feels spritely too &
wishes to follow when a hand not quite soft or deft prods at her clothes, & she remembers, my
new lover, my first lover, I think, the world has shrunk & I don't remember things I should, I
wish to—

it's nice to be touched, & she moved smoothly to instruct his practiced, unknown
fingers, him watching her closely for a facial nod or nay, was this when I started to hate him?
These fingers of his that had touched other women & learned nothing, become arrogant
not humble? Was this when I began to tangle him in conflicting responses, muddy him into
chasing what he held rather than sharing the truth of desire's hard grip & harder release?

Saddle it with suck & bones, strafe with stroke & suck, she learns quickly, he likes his
knob slobbered, that's OK, her fingers tongue & mouth lock like a jazz trio around a really good
run deep inside a night's long melody, then she adds coo & light breath, his cock interests her
more in her hands' or lips' grip than her pussy's, sometimes he wants tight cunt when she wants
chocolate & solitude, & some deep compromise in the place where sexual body & erotic mind
cross forge agreement that she will suck his cock beggingly good on those nights, steer him
near then away, make delicious drinking sounds when it roars out & weakly pours out, let him
think he's treating her no less, on those nights in other places & crossings within her, her pussy
says reach higher, her heart says reach higher, dry pussy despite her live skills, untouched heart
despite his gifts of red flower & black panties—

—reach higher, when human happiness lies in loving the bars, endless singing their
song, what was fun to him devolved to cocaine throttled fucking over the S & G—Maya looks
through his window, sees his life, sees his memories splattered a millions colored shadows on
the wall, & all he's lost, & what he has left, plain & golden—

hunger unites strangers
divides others——

Call it love, inmost petals open to another's light, I loved Penelope, there was no doubt, for
awhile, & she loved me, loved me so much I had a choice, her or blow, & I hated this because

I called it love & it so mattered & when it ended something bigger was over, something ugly he'd won, it wasn't the coke or even 'Stina, who didn't love me, it was all my worst fears about the world, how it was, how you get one golden fucking chance & that's that, & worse, you can blow it on purpose, you do, *you fucking do*

why? what did I want

someone says:

desire, sweet douseless wish

& I say fuck *you* & fuck *that*, now I'm dead I can't have Penny back, I can't shave my ragged soul pink & bare, clean my every inch, crawl to her, crawl for her, I could have, that's the fucking thing, there was a crack of hope left that night she found 'Stina tonsils-deep on my cock, I could have let her rage & diminish, miss me, curse me, still miss me, & maybe agree to something slight if I turned my ocean up & around, emptied it of nearly everything, agreed to a dozen mind tinkers & love detanglers—

I didn't—I was broken

Eventually 'Stina was gone too & I did check in to a counseling program—the coke let me go because there wasn't much left to cling to—

I submitted to the highest power I could conceive. Despair.

Whatever it was, that bang behind my head, & wake up at the S & G, it didn't steal me from much, I keep thinking I'm happier here, I can't even compare now

But I do miss Penelope more now that I'm not such a numbed lip—

Murmuring path elsewhere, call it death, new restless, next sate, we thought we were twins, convinced of it, & she died on me & nobody told me why, & I was confused because at first they told me she was on a trip & I kept asking where? Where is she? Why did she go without me? She wouldn't do that! Where is she? Where did she go?

They explained it eventually but I never quite believed it. She was on a trip, she'd gone without me, they'd made her, I wanted to find her, we belonged together

I told him, years later, I'd told nobody but I told him, & I cried, & he let me, I *bawled*, & he let me, then I felt better & he smiled & nodded—

he talked about blood & consequence, he talked about the bitter things & the sweet ones we each keep to ourselves, & the others we share, the ones we tell to forge open borders with those we love—

"Why? Why some not all?"

"I don't know. Maybe people like a few secrets. Maybe it's fear of telling any one person everything—& then losing that person. Maybe secrets tie us to our dreams so we need a few to ensure this bond"

"Dreams?"

He nodded. "Nobody can explain them any better than secrets. Maybe they're related."

I could have gone on & dear lord on with him but a knock & a phone call & less than a minute later I was walking down the street—

Where is she? Why did she go without me?

I got older & I looked but her family had suddenly moved & nobody knew to where. I researched, learned about computers & the Internet so I could research her

—& fuck a variety of strangers online late at night—the two became connected endeavors—

I began to wonder if we really had been twins—was it possible? I had to know—my parents were dead—only my brother & he was younger than me—but he'd stayed close with them—lived in their town—inherited the family scrapbooks—we hadn't talked in years when I went to see him—no phone call or letter—a plane flight, a rental car, an address I hoped was still his—

I needed to know if my Penny was real, if she was still alive, if she remembered me—& I met him on that trip—

They say *Remoteland* in every single version but possibly one begins with a close-up of a finger, one color or another, & the tiny square of paper on its tip—in most versions the square has writing on it, but some versions have images, & in one version it is plain white—the exception to this motif is the one that begins with a car burning in reverse—from conflagration to impact to high-speed acceleration to something else—the arguments about the first few frames of film are unresolved—

The night he went with his friends, the last of his light bulb nights, he was driven to the cinema in a car which resembled exactly the car in the film—but his friends did not notice or think much of it when he told them—

“It the same car!”

“Maybe similar”

“No. Down to the dent in your hood & the crack in your windshield!”

“How did you see all that? Wasn't it on screen for like two seconds?”

He didn't answer, he couldn't, he would have to had admitted it was well more than two seconds, that in truth he had experienced that crash over & over in his life & what he saw on screen had haunted him waking & dreaming for years—& always the same quiet song sung by a desolate girl—

*Are the years too many?
Are the years too few?
The years are perfect, don't you know
by every creature's wake & grow?*

—so he said nothing—too far gone already—

So was the square of paper a dose of LSD? What was printed on it? Why variations on one opening, & then another with a completely different opening?

He knew it was coming & mourned a little, when the movie resumed & he found that he was again watching what everyone else was—

“Charlie?”

“Charlie!”

“Charlie Pigeonfoot!”

“Stay with us. You'll be OK! This time you'll be fine, Charlie!”

She doesn't scold when he returns & he explains nothing. They let him keep his bike as now he knows it won't help him escape. If he's a prisoner.

He does nothing. Eats little. Seeps into himself, a little deeper, a little deeper, they can corral & chain him but nothing short of physical brutality will rouse him.

He hears them try to take the girl away & says nothing. She remains. He reaches deeper. Lets go & reaches deeper.

I was a little happy then. I had something & I was a little happy.

He wants to see Gretta's face, it's become a blur of dimmed emotion & old sentiment. Now he struggles to recall it, will her presence, will it here, will it now.

A bit more, a bit more. Less day & night. Less waking & dreaming. Into the murk, the undetermined, the place beyond clocks & kings,

he will not speak now, does not appear awake, works with an obsessed will through his sense of self, of distinguishable individuality, closer, barely breathing, barely beating, more, less, let it go, let it go, let it go,

what falls away does so slowly, then less so, his integrated sense of self & reality, losing coherence, losing control

Now near, now nearing, now a spark, a flake,

Gretta	I'm falling	catch
me	catch this thing	what's left
		catch

The hand moving ink wills a wash across souls & places, one color's shadow to touch another, several stray musics to suck through one instrument into many musics, awareness to clash brightly with awareness, there will be hours when you have to collaborate, when your lives will uphold each other,

this true, & fear, & the tides, & little
else—

moments when you will all be
joined & share a nameless one will—

what this book if not to conjure
one world & change another

What belief enough but that many worlds cross inexplicably, their sparks more countless than every star ever seen?

No explanation to the Universe but this: no explanation. Chasing knowing in another's eye or a book or a beautiful chemical combustion does not arrive one anywhere complete & clear but simply somewhere else, next, novel, old, sentiment, pleasure, illusion, ego, forest, memory, spasm

Explanation of anything fails—

What else then?

What else, indeed

li. / xiv.

No frenzy greater than a body in love, blood fierces through cotton & wool, warms the day too, light sucks back in, deeply, light in worded drops from out there, whatever world there be, feel it, want ripples the air, closes the space, blinds all other sensations,

No dis-illusion possible those long, few hours when the world frames a glance, when nothing can be but this twining truth, every dirty lone hour & wrenching kneel given to this arrival, this stay, glory in simply resting near & here,

deeper than a child's the greed for what beloved bears, a sealing the gaps, a naming the shadows, the song of life now plain, beautiful, & eternal,

what bloom noticed, brushed, what pinks each cheek, what word? what word? Will this hour go ever on? Will the world bend near its perfection & soften & learn?

What did that one mean? And that one?

Breathe, crazy one.

A dream, sweat & crushed, wake up, young, old, thick wallet, poor, wake up alone, paired, more, when there is one clouding your heart, there is one, there is falling, there is music, there is hurting beauty in dusky parks & long highways—

There is the ache—

No other, no other

I was you, tonight, that ache in you, in your mirror, in your bath, in your bed. I was you, I knew, I was close, what did that word mean? & that one? I was you & blurry conversations, serving for a dollar, both arms of books & how much they don't know!

Later, mourn frenzy gone, nights when stars bit with Beauty & mystery, when a human monster pressing on every side but & yet

No other. No other.

What word, what word?

Behold a body in love, a heart's whole valley framed in a glance, sheered by a touch,

Now lighter, & lesser, now what is, is. Now the sure step of waking, its rules of rise & fall, its light mock of crescendo & decay

The moon never knew, neither cards nor coins, never knew & yet I called, you call! We call together. Bodies in love, we call together. We dive for that true strand, that answer, that magick, beloved, & hurry hurry home.

lii. / xv.

What shift between the bones & metal of a moment, the sky's strange seeming hunger for this hour, this place, the weird will increase here page by page, know it, page by page, know it, page by page,

know it, page

by page,

know,

it,

who returns not who left, quite, strong fancies between, the scald of regret & sorrow,

so when he uses cuffs & whispers moan, good, now a little more
 when the bus jogs hard you & he collide, his hands briefly, obviously grope beneath
 your blouse,
 when you see her, playing, playing well, sweat from you earlier & more later on,
 page by page, know it,
 when the movie becomes wildly violent in & between theaters, when many are hurt
 (page by page, know it)
 when what happens at the S & G is far more spectral than it was, when it seems some
 cosmic crossroad, when creatures in danger shelter there, when you know now what all this shit
 meant,
 page by page weirder
 (know) it (page) (by) (page)

A moment, sweet holy crash, slave some years to it, is that what's common here? Is it the chasm between labyrinth & labyrinthine? The one a noun, the other adjective, the one an object, some sort, the other a descriptive state, how to breach or change what you are?

Remember a turning face, a devouring scent, like bread & diamonds, what means any of it, where the perch or perspective to see down toward it, across it, beyond it, through it, tell me, preachers, tell me, gurus kings great heroes humble walkers, a holder of dear photograph, a laced torso the heated pink dream inside my nightmares tell me tell me o tell me

Wounds pale, blood within strides on, memory's discordant fruit falls, a thousand years ago, a thousand thousand, tonight, ever, where the velvet gowns & the chandeliers of candlelight, where the pale pink pills smooth into the funky thump cries, now more, feel it go, wider eyed view, feel it, nothing explains, nothing stays, nothing gone, a bitch shifting twine moving one here past another two touch three others immolate—

Seeds, new nights of pushing, bright noise, clinking cheer, taverns cement blunt the liquor drunk & break something within, tease the secret demons,

twining heats like a truth released—

The reedy voice is gone. The dusky catch of salmon sky along that path, lone rides to lost houses, what empty fingers cried to moony stars. Old silences, great untamed wilds, brilliant vanquished dust—

What the many nights, what more they didn't, the crowds moved forward & drank the sound, the moment complexer, the sky heavy & low, faces washed faces with want & joy,

the reedy voice is gone yet a heart listens, a memory insists. the dusky salmon sky when lightning struck through a rainbow,

nothing explains. liii. / xvi. nothing explains,
 entering the bookstore at dusky salmon hour I saw the
 candles spell smoke upon the ceiling

SEA BURN SKIN &
 LIII/XVI SLEPT ALL NIGHT
 full moonlight & I leaned to the sill
 many questions,
 many questions,
 young, still, who loves me? Who likes me?
 WILL I BE HAPPY SOMEDAY?

"remote land" changes so much outsiders think a sequel
 has come out & nobody can explain it otherwise but
 how has this happened?

Bowie wonders if he can get hold of a gun. Once he knew guns, maybe loved them, wait, did he? He tries to remember. Someone walks in on him fucking the girl, her gagged, arms bound & hanging from a hook, clothes raked off where he wants touch, pushed aside

there seems threat they will remove her but they don't—he wonders if she asked to stay—he doesn't press to know—

She loves him or more likely comes hard so often this resembles love to her how could someone who makes her feel like this not be her lover?

Maya whispers I don't know much about boys Dylan says just fucking pose

We lean now together
 he & I
 tender each other.

she sits with the other wives while he preaches, tries to remember if this how it was before, what before, was there a before, he throws violet balls of flame at the chapel walls til they crack & collapse & the night fills their eyes & hearts

what then? where will I go? what the fuck is my name

'Stina & I are poor but we live in golden liv. happiness xvii. above the S & G Pizza, so many come & go & we comfort, we advise, we protect,

the war nearing, more empty hands

We look for what glances close between faces, & elsewhere. She says we are keepers, guardians. More rooms every day here, she says, & I see it's true. & there out there the bridge of glass where you walk to try to find your way back here, she says, but I see no bridge of glass, just a neon sign—

lv. / xviii.

Watch it near & away, what the world next offers, what next it will take away
The night is plain with mystery,
I don't know how other to say.
Fixtion more toward the mystery than resolution, ever,
go slow, let it—

Hunger, human world, hunger still.
Coins, more, less, hunger still.
Touch, near, nearer, hunger still.

Everything ends, shift, shift again,
I've felt the beauty over & over,
become music on a tall, tall starry
night. Become a soft cheek, a
clear eye, lingual spark between
fingertips

near, nearer, hunger still. Shift,
shift again, a scent, a fenceless
path, up toward a full moon's frenzied
lean, into a bent idea called God

the hotel bed has coarse coverings beneath her back, & Dylan's hands are rough, more than they need be, he's said nothing, doesn't even undress her just claws her jeans & underwear down & climbs over her

she doesn't resist, this isn't how it happened, it was sweetness, he was beautiful, this shoving

man above her isn't him

isn't him isn't him isn't him

"I thought you liked it this way, baby" he moans, isn't him, isn't him, "come on, let me know" isn't him isn't him

his face dull & focused with lust—
isn't him. Jamie. Trying to please
 her. When? When did he try to tak
 her in a budget hotel room?

"Get off of me!" she pushes him, he pushes back til her knee connects hard with his cock. Hard.

Now he's on the floor. Won't yell in pain. Too much.

"Who the fuck are you?"

"I'm—your—fuck—in—boy—friend!"

"No. I mean who the fuck are you? *Why am I here with you?*"

"Bad—idea—I—guess"

She stands, pulls up her pants. "No, Jamie. How did we meet? How did tonight come to be?"

He's crouched, red-faced. Won't look her way. "I met you at a sandwich shop in Astoria. You needed a ride. You didn't know where. I didn't know your story but I gave you a ride."

"Where? To your bed?"

"Yah, Maya. You didn't seem to have many options." He looks at her finally. "Don't you remember?"

"Did you fuck me the first night or were you a gentleman?"

"Maya, you crawled into my bed nude. Fuck! Are you a retard? You did what you wanted. We're here because you said you were bored."

Maya looks at him so fiercely he crawls near whimpering for his clothes.

"You're leaving for good this time?" said softly. Sad. What the world offers, what it takes away. How sometimes it soon matters so little.

Explains nothing, mostly. The world explains nothing & yet one must decide, must move, keep moving, think, feel, ask, give, & nothing explained.

Maya leaves, motel room door still open, finds herself in a parking lot on a cold day. She's in jeans & tie-dye. Shivering. Not knowing. Stands a minute. Resists looking back at that door. Stands another minute. Resists. Another.

Returns. "I need a ride." "Are you kidding?" "And your jacket." "Maya?"

"No. I need a ride to the bus station. And your jacket. This is how you're going to show me I meant something to you. OK?"

"Why don't we just go home & sleep on it? It's not late. We could get some food on the way back."

"Jamie, look at my *fucking face*! See it? Is there anything in it for you anymore?"



"You're beautiful, Maya. Is that what you want me to say?"

Samantha, why doesn't he listen?

He doesn't want to, Maya.

Is he stupid?

No. But you're not telling him what's going on.

I want Dylan. I want something good back.

What do you want?

I want this to stop happening.

Nobody knows where the scorch mark in the movie screen comes from. None of the theater staff were there. No fire alarms went off. Nobody at the midnight showing of *Remoteland* reported it or complained. But there it was when the ushers came around to clean up. Now what to do about it? No other signs of vandalism.

Then someone noticed, the mark had a shape to it. "Spooky shit. Those cracked out little fucks put it there on purpose."

"We're leaving. Tonight."

"Why, sir?"

"I'm Bowie. Say it!"

"Bowie. But we don't use personal names here in vocal exchange."

"Say it."

"Bowie."

"Say it."

"Bowie."

"Now tell me your name."

"I can't. I don't know it."

"Tell me."

"I'm . . . not sure. I'm sorry."

"I'll name you. You're Christa."

"We can't leave."

"Are we prisoners?"

"No. There's nowhere to go."

"You have a choice. I'll take you."

"Who's Gretta?"

He stares at her. "You said that name once in your sleep."

"She's gone."

"Did you love her?"

"Yes."

"More than me?"

"I don't know yet."

She looks at him. "I'll go."

'Stina brings her friend around. Penelope. Penny. Penny is young, pretty, but unsure. I decide. No, that's wrong. Something so primitive in me it's pre-lingual, deep mucked in ancestral

genes,

I'm going to fuck her one way or another—

She brings boyfriends & I let her know I don't like it. I let her know I like her in braids & low-cut blouses. I let her know I am going to take her at my chosen time. Most of this happens plainly. Most lies, most crime, most hate, most brutality happens plainly—

'Stina is happy & sees nothing. She's in love with me & sees our work as simple & true.

The first time it happens is at a party, in the bathroom, she bites my hand as I push her jeans & thong down far enough to get my aching cock into her wet round ass, each time harder, I know it hurts her, & I do it again, she is territory to mark this time, no more, I say one thing, "don't cum" & neither do I, though closer than I'd reveal—

Now marked, she waits. The party hasn't slowed. Hunted people rouse up the shit best. The music sucks. Remember that shitty SF movie with the rave scene the night before the big battle? Yah, bad like that.

Penny & I don't talk the rest of the night. She doesn't try. She wouldn't mess this up for anything. We're getting people out, people who'd otherwise be freighted up for the War.

She isn't terribly imaginative, I think, & I learn I'm wrong but later. When I return to the Bridge of Glass finally, it's for her.

He talks to me about the White Woods, only me, it's the missing piece nobody else knows. I'm not sure how much of it is true. I'm not even sure why it haunts him so much. I just listen. Usually several of us sleep in his bed & he caps tightly all but how we're to please him & he's to please . . . his ideas—we do what he wants. Nothing really sates him. His ideas won't let him have easy hours.

"We were close. That's why we stayed. That's what those years were sacrificed for."

"Yes."

"We wanted to make a breach, we were building it, making it. It was close. She was the key. That's what he believed."

"Who?"

"Maya! She was the key! It was stupid, what happened."

"Is it over?"

He pauses. Looks at her like she's border patrol instead of his oft-fucked high-end piece of ass. Says nothing.

Remembering a strong hour, too fucking much, the air buckling with cold, a city, a street, traffic, always traffic, why traffic? Tell me! Slow. Breathe. The air, & that woman, huddled in rags under that umbrella, still, perfectly still

do I believe in God?

does God believe in all

this? Are you here? Reading this? There was that women, huddled in her rags, on the street, sidewalk I mean, against the post office wall, plain faces looking out its window for a bus, huddled, the umbrella was bright red & huge, she tented beneath it, huddled into herself, a lost sleeping cub with nothing but her own warmth to grub, that's shit sentiment but next, see I was walking with my books & I looked at her with, what, fright? dismay, wish for a camera? It was near Christmas, I thought here's a Season's Greetings for the King or the President or the Pope or whoever should see a photo of such a thing & crack—

& crack—crack loudly—crack like it was going to echo—yes—a photo would do it—sent in a greeting card envelope but no greeting card & yes it would arrive at his house & somehow he would be the one to check the mail that day, I don't know, but he would smile & think oh a Christmas card from a fan or a follower or whatever he calls his people—& there would be the photo in his hands—

*God? You said God to
me? Just now?*

I heard you, you see her umbrella was bright red but there were stickers on it & I think graffiti too—I think she had been there awhile like that crazy guy on that other street who shakes his voodoo rattle stick & yells at buses & traffic about the cops are communists & they say he lost a son to the cops or maybe his son killed a cop I don't know the weed was so good but I don't do that shit no more—

his heart would crack, that King or Pope, & he'd sit on the floor smack between his fancy armchairs & he would groan & say no & try to recover his senses, his pre-smile-how-nice-an-Xmas-card-from-a-slave-of-mine but no sorry Charlie you don't get to go back—so solly—you sit there & look at that photo of that woman in rags underneath her red shit fucking red umbrella & read the stickers one says

SAVE THE WORLD KILL THE HUMANS

but maybe it was the other way around I don't know but the graffiti was really intricate

& the woman I ran into next her crazy face SHE'S THERE 24/7 on that SIDEWALK she yelled at me as we crossed in the the street it was a warning a curse an explanation had the ragged woman killed her pup reached out a long purple tentacled claw one morning when this lady was hurrying her pooch named Gold Star Heavens? to the vet that tentacle arced out & snap! went Goldstar's neck & snap! went Goldstar's spine & snap snap snap snap!!!! when his furry little legs in their furry little booties & before the woman could scream or vomit the tentacle pulled the pup slooop sloosh into the woman's slurpy maw & it was like Goldstar Heavens? had never existed & the woman under the umbrella crunched twice & it was over had anyone seen

*THAT LUNATIC EAT MY
DOG DID YOU SEE THAT*

*but you see the closer you
pack humans & more you
make them hunger for what
cannot be had with a dollar the
more you point them around for
their happiness the more you
attire them for brute denial, give
them a deep within sense of perpetual
punishment for their flesh for
their wishes, the more they will
back away from each other as each
sees his affliction in every other &
somehow blames all—*

ah fuck I had my books there were a thick armload of them I was running out of time I was nearly lost & these books had to help I needed a formula I needed to know less & more simultaneously had to know I'd buy it or steal it or build it but I was nearly out of time—

I had been standing that dawn in a wet field, I was naked, I was not alone, & there nearby was the White Woods & she had run from them to me, into me, fallen down, barely dressed looking up at me & I looked down at her in her crouch she had long blonde hair her body was curvy but not so much I would cry out her breasts were round & her nipples were hard from cold or maybe seeing I was nude too & her ass was perfectly round I told her rollover & she whimpered & I looked & I touched then I said roll over again & her pussy was gleaming bare & I looked at her & I smiled for this is what I had come for this is what I wanted & she would give it to me but I think she had already so I stopped just shy just shy just shy I was close she was whimpering some more & some words I did not listen to she explained something to me that seemed important as I did what I wanted tooooooooooo I was so close when I stopped stopped I stopped I could not go on because I had tied her hands together & gagged her mouth so she would shut the fuck up & I told her I would bring her back to the White Woods did she want that? And her eyes were wet & she nodded her head & did what I said & I said I won't bring you back but I have to know did this happen before & she shook her head but I yelled & I was rough & I took off the gag tell me now & she stuttered that's what she had run from tell me you love me tell me you love me her thighs soft & wet as I made them & I was tender now & she calmed down & I promised no gag OK she nodded & let me & that was good & I told her to breathe slowly in my ear as I did & she did & she promised she would please me but no White Woods please no White Woods I was close her stomach was wet from me sliding & her breasts were round & aroused

*you ask me about
God you ask me
about God you ask
me about God*

but I topped slowly & as I stopped I told her to breathe harder as she felt me stop more & more

I carried her asleep in my arms to where I had left my stuff & gone to pray in the wet dawn fields I had a towel & told her to stand still while I dried her & she kept watching me as I dried her & asked her if I was too rough she shook her head & I dressed her in my clothes I told her to hold still & I took out my pillow & blanket that I share with nobody ever since they were given to me & I made her a bed under some willow branches & she fell asleep & I followed a little way into her dreams they were metallic & glaring & I saw why she was whimpering all the time & I made a few adjustments & her dream tumbled gone into itself ate itself like that snake & it became cool & sweet & faceless & her hands floated up near me so I sat near & made

sure the pillow stayed in place & the blanket didn't fall off it was how I met her & I let her sleep later I taught her some things the day was many hours from then to now still—

Maya wakes, cries out. Looks around. A bed. Walls white, bare. Closet door open, her clothes hung from hangers. The black bureau with its drawers full of plain underwear & socks. Nothing pretty. She is told humans must learn to endure better, must take nature's austere lessons.

Trees' leaves turn colors in the fall, don't they? Sunsets? Peacocks? Robins' eggs. Jaguars. The ocean? She says nothing.

She has a radio, it's her prize, it's pink, cat-shaped. Not hidden, not contraband, what's left from her last foster home. They think at this place she was abused but she wasn't. She was kept separately from all that, in fact, but they don't take her radio because of what they think.

That & her hair's stripe of pink. That's all. None of her clothes. None of her books. No photographs.

"You will not suffer here, but you will learn to contain your ego, your youth's natural arrogance toward thoughts of immortality. No other creature fancies such things. None."

Maya learns to say little. The meals are plain but she likes them. The books tease her with deeper meanings while, in truth, eluding her want for a few ideas to hold clearly in her mind.

Nothing sticks. The lessons are long but they do not stick. What she learned is from the radio, & from the daily visits to the nearby park.

She listens to her radio at night, careful to keep it on a news station when footsteps approach her room. They approve of news. "Behold men by the values they mass espouse through media & media's dogs, the bureaucrats who fancy themselves leaders. Sum for yourself what the presumptions, & what arguments unhad, what ideas little entertained. Listen closely. What don't they consider?"

When the steps fall away, she listens to music. Her cat-radio's eyes glow a yellow-green in the dark. Maya imagines he is singing to her, dreams he is singing to her, sometimes wishes she was the radio singing to him, listening, purring maybe.

Music enveloped her, there in her bedroom, the window without shade or curtain, her single pillow & white blanket, her pajamas a long sleeved shirt & pants set, no decorations, she listens, then listens deeper, thinks I want my dreams full of this music & it begins to happen, music runs through her dreams, visible like hills, like morning light, sweet like fruit, near, soft, ideas she can hold fluttering—

it cannot last—she knows it can't & waits what will happen next—

which surprises her—since it's a trip to the ocean, she doesn't know why save that a lesson is involved again, & nobody says much to her the whole day & she meets Samantha that day, only confirming it cannot last & it is Samantha who tells her to run, to put on three layers of her plain clothes, & sneak a paper bag for her radio & second pair of shoes & go, go!

What would have happened? She doesn't know. She believes Samantha saved her even as she doesn't know from what—

Later I watch you wake & I move under the blanket with you & I touch you watch my eyes as I do & I touch some more I think how you're like a beautiful statue in a museum & I tell you to hold still & you do for me you are learning what to do for me & I am glad for I prayed for you many nights in that field & now you are here I slow myself to see you as my feast & though you remain I must consume you each time very slowly the hours I don't know there is quiet there this is my place our place now but still mine I share it with you but you are mine here in my place I move softly over you as you hold still my eyes follow my fingers & sometimes my mouth tastes it is all music that's what I did to your dreams you had forgot something & I could not know but I did know that it was something like music & I followed along your back how it curved, how heated, how fused with pulsing light & I followed you even closer & you shook a bit when I moved between your thighs close, closer, the barely seen blonde hair on your inner thighs, closer, you began talking but I didn't know I touched I licked lightly my fingers stroked til its rousal sweated and I pushed a little in & she kept talking & I was going to do something when I heard the word God—& stopped—& listened—

"I was God—I was something—I was the key—his plan—I didn't know why—"

I lean in ignore the word best I can, lean all the way in, sniff, gently, sniff close, a breath, a shiver, close my eyes more, forbid vision, follow the scent, let no words describe it, follow its fenceless path, not down, not deep but up, toward skies with the emperor Moon, the one who used to rule, used to be great, to the emperor Moon, it's like a great eye, a kind, knowing eye, in love, wide open eye in love, the scent takes me I am nothing else but up toward the great emperor Moon, great rule, not like what there is now, small men surrounded by guns & commandments, up, up, strange shores, did you know the great Moon of old had shores & all men were brought there to dance? On those strange shores our race danced, does anyone know how we did?

Something startles me & I am back with her. She is talking again, very softly, but I hear, she is afraid, I hear it, & she'd said about God before, & I stand her up, my statue, stand her & dress her in my clothes again, she is soft, you are warm, I am excited & I am scared, we are near the White Woods, I'll never let you back there, ever, I will kill the world before I'll let you back there.

lvi. / xix.

"Shit."

"What was *that*?"

"It was new."

"Did you get a clear shot of it?"

"Yah, we can check the vid later. But I'm sure it was clean & steady."

"But where did it come from?"

"I don't know, man."

"She was in *Trip Town*, man!"

"I know! Calm down."

"Look, it's a giant ass clue. We've been dickin' around for months. I should say, *they've* been dickin' *us* around."

"Yah. But no. It's all relevant, you *know* that."

"This is what we need. Nobody will say shit. Time to join the tribes. *Now*."

"Some won't. They don't believe it & never will."

"Not when we upload this vid! This is the proof!"

“Like every UFO movie ever taken? Like the 9/11 missile that hit the Pentagon? Like the Grassy Knoll triangulation? C’mon, don’t be a naïf.”

“God, she’s hot. Cream-i-licious.”

“Yah.”

“So what do we say with the vid when we put it up? Do we anonymize our upload? Do we pop a link on their site & see what happens?”

“I dunno, man, let’s hit it now & watch it. I need some jah.”

His hookah pipe is an elaborate orgy in purples & pinks, they’ve tried to untangle the limbs & faces & cocks & breasts but there’s always extra, or not enough. His hashish is black, he calls it Mohammed Virgins PubeHash, or something else another night.

Hook up cam to Mac & watch, closely, the music is from ’73, ELP’s *Brain Salad Surgery*, the show that never ends—

Three trees tipped in the wet wind, a shaking, howling dance, from them suddenly blow two great crows, their shadows stretching far behind them, now pulling the trees, shaking & stretching longer & longer, a doubling, a tripling, the sky fragments & the crows fly through wedging the three trees, shadows whipping at the chasm—

“Fuck!”

The computer screen gels, melts, falls back, pulls pulls, their room tips toward it—

“Shit, man!”

Tip, tip, tip more, OK, time to decide, what will happen next?

Bowie snaps awake. Darkness. He’d done that, an old trick, it wasn’t really that dark in this cabin but he knew they were being chased, & they’d find nothing in here, no lights would work, no sounds, nothing, a grubbing hand would find nothing, a nose nothing, he couldn’t say for sure Christa was still with him but he knew she was—

He keeps them cloaked for as long as his energy lasts, he can’t sleep & maintain it fully, it’s a chance when he lets it dissipate, but finally he does, tries to loose it in steps but he’s rusty, shit, back when he could have had it on & off & on again like a good old sock—now he’s jerky—

Anyway, nothing. He sniffs, they’ve passed.

Christa sleeps. She’s been trying to be brave but she doesn’t know the world. Her pajamas are plain but still he knows what tight moaning curves they blandly conceal. She prayed the night before. A mumble, seemed like foreign words. Smiled at him vaguely afterword, didn’t explain.

He’d be easier to his escape if he was alone. Taking her was a risk.

Face it, she’s sweet pussy & a nice bit of company. You’ll make sure she gets back safely. By now they’ve figured you’re too much trouble but she belongs to them. This is theft.

He starts. A person? Theft? Was she a slave? Is she one now?

No. But they were a tribe, obviously, some kind of tribe, whether they used that word, & she belonged to them. A tribe isn’t careless with its fecund pretty ones. Travel somewhere that isn’t true. *Try*.

He’d reached crossroads like this before, & waited, & breathed, & sooner or later something would happen, & he’d *go*. Happened at Luna T’s, happened many times before.

Wait, breathe, *go*.

So, no plan. Other than escape, if indeed he'd been a prisoner. Still wasn't clear. Nothing was. Even ditching Christa back to her tribe made sense with little *rightness*.

Wait, breathe. *Go*.

The crows startled him. At the window, too big, ridiculous big.

Will my brother see me? I haven't seen Shawn in years, more than years if I knew another way to put it.

Yet he was my baby brother, I loved him a long time ago.

"I loved him the way I love you," I nearly said that night, the night I cried. I didn't. I wanted other words.

What do I ask? Do you remember Penelope? Sure, Gen. Was she real? Was she our sister? Did she die? Did she move away? Uh, Gen . . .

Yah, I know, Shawn. Back to St. Cuckoo's Hospital. More pills to tongue. More therapy sessions. More night interns to get felt up by in the dark til I learn what a few sucks on a half-limp number can get me.

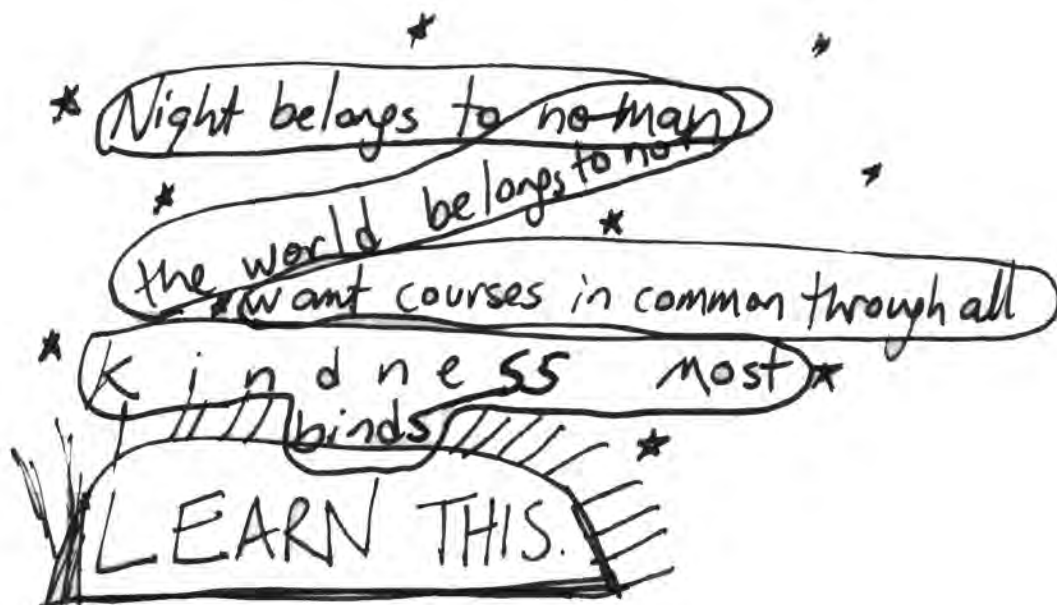
I know, Shawn. You couldn't forgive me. You didn't understand & you didn't *want* to. Was Penny real, Shawn? *Was she fucking real?*

Preacher once took us to this lake, it was a killer hike, miles through woods, I don't know if there was a path, not much if any. We didn't walk so fast but we didn't stop either.

I fell into a rhythm, past tired & restless like usual. I felt *completely present*—after awhile I understood that a path wasn't needed, that I simply had to follow the woods' own flow & I would pass through fine. The sunshine hit in shattered moments, lighting up a web here, a patch of tree moss there—and I was in such a groove the dusk came naturally & I was alone—I'd lost any attention I'd had to the others hours ago—

I wasn't afraid—I trusted Preacher—he hadn't led me here to lose me—

The voices began as noisy wind, as less maybe, but then they were all around me, it was like a chorus with several lead voices, each his own lyric:



Words & voices & wind. I don't know what happened but the woods turned white & I was afraid now so I said all of those words, sometimes straight through sometimes I skipped some or mixed them up. Even now there is a gap. Fuck, is Penny there? Why do I wonder this?

Before it all goes bad there is a day with Penelope, I'm not sure how it happened, & a temptation, a blunt one, to go

Thing is, I could have, I had mad bank to spare, & several accounts nobody knew about, I could have lifted Penelope into my arms & seated her in a rented car, a new one if I felt like it, & driven off—could have—& I was close—What did she have? Until that day I didn't know—she was a fine piece—she was a head game to keep life slightly skewed, a bit dangerous—

She kept close-lipped, knew I was having people over to discuss more elaborate ideas for a simple reason: parties broke out. Our safe-house was beloved, I was beloved, me & 'Stina as a couple were beloved, secret legends—a model of modesty & innovation, a service to the Revolution, blah blah fucking blah—

Parties broke out. Exotic drugs broke out. 'Stina partook & thought I did.

I did often enough to cover my simple reason: to fuck Penelope, fuck her hard, fuck her often, fuck her with a hundred people under my virtue-built roof. So I tongued my pill, & later tongued her clit. Tongued it with the stud I'd gotten just to tongue her—

I don't know what it was in truth—I didn't love her. I didn't love anything anymore.

What I really wanted were those first moments, that thrill, Penelope knew what I wanted & I paid for it. She dressed like a modest modern girl on the outside & like a strange somehow expensive whore underneath. I had a set of books just for her lingerie, to go with the secret bank accounts, & the drugs that paid for the whole operation—

That day I keep thinking about was when I saw Penelope true for the first time—& everything ended pretty quickly afterward

The night before, a massive party, she'd talked me into shopping with her for her lingerie, the next afternoon, we'd never really gone out alone, I wasn't eager but she worked magic on me that night—

Blonde, green eyes, 5 foot 4, nice tits, sweetest little ass you could imagine—& that was all I pretty much cared about—a pretty young fuck doll I dressed up & stripped down—

There was more & I see that now. What I saw before that day was nothing.

Seeing nothing, so fucking crazy focused on nothing, all that was going on around me wasn't there for me either—

It was gone so quickly, all of it, the safe-house, Penelope, all of the rest—someone once told me at a party early on, smiled & said, "Enjoy it. It doesn't last." I nodded. Knew nothing.

She told me about Maya, she told me more & more, I listened long by when I didn't want to, too much, & everything ended because nothing had been what it was anyway; suddenly, in a few hours, I knew what I hadn't before & it was over—

The pink stripe in Maya's blonde hair the same shade as a garter belt set I pointed out to her—

The night belongs to no man. Want courses in common through all. Kindness most binds. Learn—

what? That was what is really hard, what to learn but words, their near futility, & a last breath, one way or another. And yet, and yet . . .

Slower. One at a time. The night belongs to no man. I believe that, I always have. The night is powerful, I don't know why. Do you feel it? And you? Come back to it.

Want courses in common through all. I believe this too. Is it simply sex or sup? No. Want is the devil's truth in saying we are one, I am one, both. Neither kings the other, each seems to explain the world mutually exclusive. Come back to it.

Kindness most binds. Indifference sunders. Faces on a train, each a worrying world alone in silence, they all sway as the train sways, & yet, & yet?

Night. Want. Kindness. Nearly a formula, an elixir. Yet none complete the world, the world completes itself.

Night. Want. Kindness. Sentiments, & dissatisfying.

I look around the bar at Luna T's Cafe, there are lights strung everywhere, some blinking, pictures of snowmen jamming lead guitars on the wall, there's a crowd tonight, it's loud, I'm not even at the bar but a table nearby. There's a football game on TV & the drinkers roar & wail, I suppose the annual football betting pool is well underway. I watch & feel sad, why haven't I been here in so long?

Mr. Bob the barman spies me & raises a hand high, a smile to uncake any frosted heart. I wave back. I feel better now.

Night. Want. Kindness. Alright then. Not ideas best worked with from the ether. Nights are full beasts, whether trees or city lights. Want is a pink curve in part shadows, or a soul watching through bars, or a world ending in countless hard ways. Kindness is water fetched, is the luck of a rightly spoken word, is empathy one stranger to another's struggle.

And still not close enough, not nearly.

lvii. / xx.

I save you from the White Woods but I cannot keep, I can't even touch you as I dream, so near & you smile at me, you would, you know, it's OK, good, skin nears skin, & yet, & yet—

I have to bring you & I have to fade after, that's how, bring & fade, that's how,

I'm angry as I carry you, nothing OK, nothing fine, no why in this, bring & fade, I stop after hours & lay you down like old & you smile, you are returning, I say nothing & you don't reply but water, there, good, water, & soup with bread, it's nothing to how I love you, I rest near you, hear beat, hear breath, try to forget bring & fade but nothing to it, even if I reveal your light a little to the moon & a little more, you don't mind, you smile, you doze, what is it? A divide in my mind, my blood barks for your touch, but music, music is free, music comes & goes, you are music, you've eaten the old sadness, whatever it was, whatever I was, what mirrors won't show.

Shh. I have to go. It's OK, it's OK. The morning will be beautiful, will be velvet. You've worlds to go, I was given to bring you like this & then fade off.

Mine is not to have music but to pass it through. You are so beautiful.

I am changed.

We begin, we continue, something ends, everything, little sense, but the sentiments mount, time stretches out weirdly & farther from its concise moment of screaming hunger, from the

questions about the world each answers by quote another, or at best saying I don't know, what's the answer? I don't know, sleep now, time stretches weirdly & stories fill in where truth demurs, stories hurry up to obscure every open moony sky, stories link & form myths, myths smile gleamly power & flirty full call it truth really, truth? No, really, truth? That fist points skyward, claiming simple mouthpiece to unseen omnipotence & speaking mercy on on & damnation on another, simple mouthpiece, in something we trust trust trust move your hips a little more baby let the power touch you deeper truth is nothing like faith or belief truth is unsentimental truth does not shrug or shy or remember kindly slantly, truth sings & what listens is not deceived nor comforted, ah truth, fuck truth, what truth, untellable truth, unprovable truth, ah, move them a little more, go on, now, let the truth in a little deeper, very nice

Truth, gimme some truth, go on, tell me a truth untaught, tell me, one unread, unheard, what is truth before gauzed in words, go on, gimme some truth, fuck, come on! Gimme some truth! Gimme some goddamned truth

Move your fucking hips, bitch! Fuck like a dog or let the next one in—

Truth, see it every day, shy far by it, OK, I do too, every one in this punk cafeteria, put truth in a song, leave a little out, soften it a bit OK, sell it with a skinny skirt neath a barely sheathed set of fine tits, truth, melody it up in ambiguities, call it an argument to be had, bring the eggheads in from all three dozen coasts, go on, & a few wise men with thick wallets &

"Damn it!"

"What happened?"

"Your camera is trash, man."

"Were we there? Were we close?"

"No. Nothing."

"What do we do? Go back to the theatre?"

"Look around. We're here. We never left."

"HOW MUCH FUCKING ACID HAVE WE EATEN?"

"All of it. Now it never ends. We are here now."

"Aww, man."

"Aww gone!"

Maya looks up. OK. Nobody's with her. Nobody's watching. Where? A diner. Where? She's dressed in clothes they'd taken from her, in her pink Jimi Hendrix t-shirt, her beat blue jeans, her worn tan slippers, oh! her hat! Floppy shapeless hat they took from her instead of her radio. OK. A diner. Where?

They waitress eyes her, Maya secretly finds & fingers the money in her pocket, asks for a soda.

Her book. It was Samantha, sort of.

She tries to think. It wasn't like this. One hour, the next, but now, no. One hour, some other hour.

He starts talking to her. Eyes her t-shirt, talking to her. Smiles like a book, talks to her. He has a car, he's the first one of several who probably won't hurt her for a kick just off the highway. She can't stay her. The waitress doesn't like the men who eye her for a stretch then say



hello like a pressing hand. Sympathy, jealousy? His name is Jamie. She goes with him.

He's not shy just wants her age & legal status. She offers neither. What he wants he'll not get, it's not there for him, it's not hers right now, she gets him going because it will just complicate things til it happens, he's a rough rider at first, tries for it without a condom, she hits him with a thick fucking book & points to every sloppy nosy neighbor within scream's distance—puts on rubbers, gets her pills, she takes it awhile then adjusts—how the fuck did she end up in that diner again? What is she doing with Jamie again, Maya, this is Samantha, Where are you? He's in the shower, it's your first night here, am I going forward or backward, Samantha? He comes out nude & showered, his towel riding low, answer me, Samantha! Moves between her hips, he's not that big, how does she know that, & his hand at pushing down her panties in clumsy, do you want me to stop, pretty girl? Aren't you a bad girl? Need a spanking? Her knee to his groin is so hard he falls off the bed in a breathless howl, on the floor, let me hurt him, Maya, let me hurt him some more

When they catch up with Bowie it is a bad hour, he orders Christa into a closet, pushes her screaming into it, thinking they will kill him & take her back there, it is a bad hour because Bowie crosses a moment with love, that instinct, that belly-secret sweetness, that breath between every other breath, he says nothing, not a thing but is a bad hour when they find him—

MK-ULTRA was the play for the numbers. It's what we called everyone else. Not population or citizens, just the numbers. MK-ULTRA was the simple feed. Dose businessmen visiting hookers & see what they do. Dose this one, dose another, build the perfect killing machine, set him to the killing. Another. Another.

I'd say what really happened but nothing did. Many things did. People disappear every day. Some we use for awhile. Some we use up & burn quickly. We did what we do but nothing closed the doors. That's what nobody sees now. The doors open & *do not close*. Ever. There can be a distracting shift away from the door, there can be a veil or two prettying some other view—

I left as I was able. But, Christa, I was what I was. As I killed your kinsmen, one by one, I talked to Gretta about you.

“Bowie, are you sure?”

“It's her, Gretta. We talked about her. You remember.”

“You're not mine to let go, Bowie”

“It's more than that. It's not that at all”

“What?”

“She needs protection. She needs sanctuary.”

“Where?”

“There. You know.”

“Luna T's? Are you coming back?”

“No. Not inside. Just to the door. You'll take her”

“She's what you saw? Are you sure?”

He lets the last two shoot each other in a terror of will & truth, & they fall. A pile of corpses. Bleeding, fresh, just alive, just now. Bowie undoes a pouch around his neck. A tap of

powder, a small fingernail's amount, a cry, a smoke, something, there is that freedom he sees when the numbers go, that release like all this was cage not reward, he always follows a little but then stops, lets it happen

Opens the door & leads Christa out, leads her to the place where they fell, where their terrors coalesced for a last time, spreads her & blankets & pillows, undoes her hair, licks her body without once looking in her eyes, licks her nearer & nearer, she moans & cries, she wants & fears, she growls now, her voice gets rougher, demands, harder, dream into her, dream closer, her want stretches round & round, she arches, she squeezes, dream a little nearer, velvet hours, nearer, how does he love me? What am I remembering? I was someone, I was someone else, I was something else, the light was kind, was drink, I was not one but many, I was someone else, I was something else, velvet hours, tell me, Bowie, were you there with me? What was I? What am I now? What is this? How do you show me this? How do you show me it again? Where are you? Where are you, Bowie? Where are you?

"He'll be back in awhile. You're safe here with us."

Is this the Bridge of Glass or am I dreaming it? Or is it dreaming me? What happened back there? Tell me something, I was so close, tell me something now! Who is Maya? How am I supposed to? Everything back there is changed, & now it's fucking gone!

She told me about Maya. She said we'd be sitting in a room with some others, it would be a room between worlds, of many worlds, countless worlds, no worlds, & I had to know which one was Maya, I had to be sure which one was Maya & I had to take both her hands & say when you make that choice it will be right but what is any of this Penny belonged to me without thought I created a world of my own, a world within world of my own for her, she was the inmost crevice, I came to her through curtains & walls within walls, she waited, she posed, fucking posed!

That last day, until that last hour, she posed for me, was it more than an hour, was it anything at all? Just fucking pose, it's all I want, the skirts shorter, the blouses tighter, pose fucking pose, I wanted only the least unrevealed, how was this possible? What was I doing? She said nothing when I wanted others watching when I wanted her ringed round, I pressed it, where were we? What was I? Was it a girl? A new break in the plane? Who is Maya? Why are you gone, Penelope?

Shawn is not home. I can't even tell if he lives here or ever did, I sit on this porch & he is not home. The door is locked. Windows dark. No answer to knock or bell. Why am I afraid to kick the fucking thing over?

I sit on the porch longer. I want Preacher back. I want to fuck Preacher. I always did. So did every other girl. He led us away from ourselves, gestured on, smiled, always on, the promise was never spoken, never made finally so neither kept nor broken, but always there, sometimes I felt it in my belly, sometimes my thighs. Always in my breathing, I breathe better now, fuller, & I despise it. Fullness & emptiness. No Preacher. No Penelope. No Shawn. Where now? I keep sitting on this porch. The night comes. I look around, really look around, snap from my fever & take a look.

It's winter. Snowy fields. Lots of them. This house is one of several. A full moon rises & eventually I see more. I don't remember how I got out here. The barn. A well over there. Something in all this.

The barn is open, I push in & look for a corner, a mongrel black & white collie walks up to me, a crazy look, a kind one, we share up some space, close like that I fall into his beautiful coat, his breathing, his want for love in a touch, I croon to him, very softly, eventually dream of the glare, the arcing glare Preacher once talked about, he said it comes like desire, consumes the eye until only music or despair remain, I croon into our dreams, through them—

lviii. / xxi.

Where the rest? I wonder who knows. How want's deep ulcer, music's hard salve.

Where the rest? Through cities snarls a remain, a flame in skirts, a press using cock's trigger, for more than spasm, more than a softness made to mewl with hunger, more, inner powers dreaming lusts where no flesh remains

Where the rest? Do you know? Shadows rush your floor, cross with a live edge. Where the rest? Breathe. Where the rest? Breathe.

What raises, & again, I ask this countless in pretty hours & others. World among worlds, there is no less or more. Creature among creatures, few the differences, any?

I ask the same questions, the old ones about want, about beauty, whatever answer limits, answers break to function—world divides, & again, toward its obsessing, lesser work.

Where the rest? Is there a rest? Maybe not.

lvix. / xxii.

Reck flesh's blunt vow to breach space, arc will, bite for touch, know oneness by hunger's plain truth, what courses common in all, come's flame to soil's consume. Oneness, suffering in knowing, brilliant breaths of aching music—

The body wants, the mind yearns, Maya learned the difference, where she opened up, where she didn't, the depths she let Jamie to, the ones she let him aware of, & how much did it matter, that was the worst of it, she wouldn't let him but so far in, & he didn't press, didn't know. He went to the art films, read their books, his CDs added steadily, what the fuck? He liked stability but more, he was a *lunatic* for it. Had she stayed, he would have lived in her familiar ground perpetually. He didn't ask. Didn't want her to tell.

When she left it was simply the rest.

how flesh yearns flesh, dark pearl in every running blood, ferment & strew, how the world punishes, croons wait, croons deny, sings it foul then praises dirt for its truth. Else, breathe, crazy one, wake, blink, call this your world—

Christa sits, alone, at Luna T's Cafe's bar. Says little. Waits. Tries not to wait.

He left me here. He killed the people trying to bring me back, *killed them all*, & then left me here.

Are all women so claimed? Is this what they tried to protect me from, if any of it was protection?

I don't know where I am but he put me here. Alone, but not really. Something always connects, pushes, talks at me. My life is movement & noise.

I'm safe here. I don't know whether to stay. I've never had an unscripted hour.

"Safe from who?" I say out loud.

“Miss?” the barman looks blithely at me but I’m not fooled.
I *really* don’t know whether to stay.

prison bars branching beautifully to the sky, electric lights guarding against too much blind thought. Wake, blink, breathe, crazy one. Ferment, strew, in that disappearing glare wails some other universe. Here flesh watches, closer, feels you—

it’s always been a fucking bridge of fucking glass, since those days with my granpa, how can I still think with amazement on him? What was it? He worked easily with animals & engines. No. What else. His drink was Scotch, I think he even chewed tobacco some afternoons. No. He viewed women & children as equal nuisances. Am I remembering him correctly? I don’t know. It seems awfully important I remember him right.

He once said, “Nothing is settled finally in this life. Do your best. Pay up. Zip up. Life always leaves something open. That extra.”

nobody sure utters why yet instructions for every fenceless path, each new molten press. No way on but dis-illusion, escape from pockets, through walls to other walls, cross a bridge of glass &—

I want to find him, find Preacher, ask him things. Ask with my words & ask with my loins. The black & white collie wags tail at me. I nod. I’ve been wagging tail most of my life too. Tail is friendly, & distracting.

“Wanna come? Huh? Wanna come & help me find Preacher? Wanna watch while I fuck him happy & humble? Huh?”

The collie won’t follow, wags, tail, loves me endless, won’t follow. Why I thought, I don’t know. How have I been living these past few years?

I give him a long hug, say goodbye & I love you & thank you & can you feel this from me? Something new began for me out here. I’m going to follow it on.

ask: new sweet juice in hand leap out or in another thousand, ignorant, pounding, hopeful steps? Learn it: nothing salves the closest wounds. Have I learned this? Do I want to teach it? What comfort, what light in it. Flesh becks pretty & hearts heat fine, this already known, limbs chase their new tangles, hearts look for soil to share & stake. But then, always, nearly, ferment & strew. Remember, oneness rises in both I & we. Yearn a print in deepest soil.

“What’s real, man?”

“I don’t know. That shit’s tough.”

“When did it get like this?”

“Like what?”

“Like *this*”

“Say it!”

“We don’t ever leave. Don’t you see that? We live inside this story. Out *there*, it’s called *Remoteland*. But it’s our lives. What’s left?”

We look at each other. Where’s Charlie?

Dust stirs up a new one even as another, unspent, passes through. Never knowing all, lights

long stretch the highway, never knowing. Not enough told, not enough can be, what does any of it mean? Breath, move, feed, mate, spend, expend. A gift. The glare, the sugar, every fermenting hour with no final arrival. A secret. A joke. Matter of view.

lx. / xxiii.

Creatures dreaming, between the drifts, what was, what could be, take it slow here, strike a long arcing note, dreaming, in alleys & barns, creatures dreaming, a tuck closer in to warm blood, a scratch, settle, twist & fall deeper, pry at the day's damage, the life's sum, what is nearing, what gone, dreaming tonight, between the drifts, what of? what for? Long arcing note, caterwaul brighter, from high waves of pink & green toward wheezing & dust? Say? Say! Drop the walls & say!

Dreams of grain, of warmth, of union, what of? what for? Say! The tribe or herd feeds together & most reckon this a life, what of that one with her pink-striped blonde hair, what of those screaming in the hailing fields, there are ideas that do not preach bind nor clump, that lure toward parting, toward empty roads, toward reverence for an intelligent glare past that hill, & that one, & one more—

Winter's cold, & colder still in a few hours, winter presses what's close closer, burns its silent power deep, creatures dreaming, drifts cross the road, jeeps & trailers overturned & empty, a man stands lone & will not ask of the passing traffic—how few new answers collect & stay—

a black & white collie asleep in a winter's back, tail twitching at a dream's kind hand, there is kindness in the nameless depths, now over there, despair a thousand teeth ravenous—we know so little—

Little salves the closest wounds, moonlight capsules a still body, words of rock anchoring a heart decades later, joy's tetherless hours, what was it then, how came now, name the steps between, just a bridge of glass, how, why, what, is it lesser, something diminished fine? Could you teach the world sadness, would you,

what, how, why,
still hearts beat pretty & flesh heats fine, is there a formula not in books but drifting fancies to tell,

creatures dreaming, many musics, wake, blink, once, twice, breathe, relax, the way is dis-illusion—

“what the fuck does that mean?”
—the way breaks simple to green songs—

“songs are green?”—what shakes pink & new—“now you're talking! young poon, like they say, it's magically delicious!”—the way is dis-illusion, sharper hunger, sharper hunt—

Touch the world again & hear it moan, hear it sigh, want it trigger, want is release—“is it a cult? Will it repeat the *TripTown* disaster? What are the origins of this latest cyber-craze? Our reporters had no luck with trying to interview attendees though theatre employess say they noticed no unusual behavior, nothing to raise a red flag”—creatures dreaming, come fog & ice, signals gone, everything gone, why chase the next song?—“And has this underground phenomena spread elsewhere in youth culture? Some say that there are underground dance

parties, called raves, where scenes from the movie run on large projection screens where once more abstract art was featured”—

New stroke New push
New tighten All explodes new

“While we found nothing to suggest illicit drug use or underage sexual activity, many parents are getting worried. We’ll keep you informed. Back to our studio”—

Creatures dreaming nigh the clearer hours, feel them closer, there were nights when the stars were snowflakes covering earth’s chill arc, creatures dreaming turn another side, blood warms blood, there was an hour called Void & another called bliss, & the many without fruit between—Preacher has left all he had, it was so close, he was so close, they never knew, they never knew, only held their own wishes, plastered them on a dearly held image of me, they never knew, oh—by science & faith the world slurs on, its dirtiest, noisiest denizens—Til dawn, everything dreaming, everything closer—I may be turning back toward you tonight, Genny, the warnings may not be enough, there was more, I knew it once, they lured me & I believed awhile—what will be the morrow, what comes? I know only one place to look for you, the door through which I did not go, you sitting there, waiting, waiting—

Creatures dreaming to the last, still rutless of time’s stone idea, Bowie on a bus, scribbling, the world a feeding plain & golden nuzzling rest, it took him no time to assemble his spy apparatus, his clothes, his tools, still life need not explain, he knows Christa will be confused but safe, left her in the one place he trusts with the one person he trusts there, simple, she’s with Gretta, he scribbles on, the several hour trip ahead barely enough, what’s struck or carried off tonight will fuel another day’s fruit, another mewling babe, he is readying for the White Woods, for what’s in them, for more than that, his message to Gretta simple, “care for her til I return & claim you both” & he means this in more ways than—he signed it “Do-Right” to remind her of something, something she would remember & be sure of him—

Within walls, men combat for bread &
mercy, ask, take, contrive truths in
tomes to bear the nameless, conjure
a way to play out well, fall in hope—

Within walls, men batter hope for more
coins, heavier fists, smack, roar, make
new truths for this hour & bastards &
lies for the next, turn to wires, wall off warmth

Withering walls, men scatter when a bomb
falls, then one rises & points toward
the sky & says BEWARE!, fist, fail,
no truth but fear, tremble, sheep, tremble

Wicked walls, close out the world's
infinite tongues & yellowing skies,
clutch, mob, you will never know
peaceful solitude, love is not enough

—dream too, in finest hours, croon worlds together. Close, dear, let us croon together. Astride
bombs & berries, believing hunger better than most, no answers but instructions to keep
moving. Let-us-croon-together-or-die.

Croon together, toward a world's great song, will it be in dreams, what thought in these warring
years, croon together, there will be other years, other songs

What could be, other years, distinguish what's going to happen from what isn't necessary, oh
high spread the night across the countless restless faces & given them a moment, a free one, do
some unexpected magic with it,

oh high, the world isn't hard enough for its many cruelties, too much flesh, too much sweet
hunger, too many cross & null, cross & magnify, cross & double—

if I can't, oh high, then yes, one way or another, yes—not give away the rest—

the night noises with bright, tinkling
want, it comes, it comes, twice
now, beg all, soft, close, croon—
soon, crawling, very soon—

Creatures dreaming tonight between the drifts, what of? What for? What else in the cold, close
night, what else. Dreams of grain, of warmth, of union, what of? What for? The instructions
deep in tell so, near the warmth, near the blood, hunger is a phalanx of needs & demands.
Winter's cold, & colder still in a few hours, creatures dreaming, drifts cross the road, how few
new answers collect & stay. What to do then, waking in want, dreaming in wish. What to do.

Little salves the closest wounds but still flesh becks pretty & hearts heat fine. What's shared
most often is in the absence, the gaps, what another brings & offers. Creatures dreaming, many
musics, a thousand highs & still the night nudges, go on, click them bones together! The way
is disillusion, the way breaks simple to green songs, what shakes pink & new. What instructs
from cells, what from regret, what from the world's squeeze to move?

Touch the world again & hear it moan, hear it sigh, want is trigger, want is release. Want tells
nothing, demands all, some shuck it into a costume & call it God. Creatures dreaming, come
the fog & ice, signals gone, everything gone, why chase the next song? It will be the perfect
one, all will end, all will begin. It's true. Cells & regret say so, the world squeezes toward it.
The next one. The next.

New stroke, new push, new tighten, & all explodes new. All explodes new, oh fuck come on,

the world is bleeding, shots firing north & not-north, there is no escape but a six foot hole, none, creatures dreaming nigh the clearer hours, turn another side, blood warms blood, by science & faith. Close, closer, feel the hand, the fur, the nest, call it faith, call it something within words long gone said or maybe unsaid, & til dawn everything dreaming, everything closer, what will be the morrow? What comes? Same world, new world, some join in, some step off & gone.

Creatures dreaming to the last, still rutless of time's stone idea, that line came to me one night I was really high & words buzzed around my live carcass, still the world a feeding plain & golden nuzzling rest, oh save me, haha, fooledya, did you think I need saving? C'mon Preacher let's find a hooker & some blow, we'll share, life need not explain tonight to either of us, right? What's struck or carried off tonight will fuel another day's fruit, another mewling babe. Another, another, til every name is used.

Within walls, men combat for bread & mercy, ask, take, contrive truths in tomes & raise beams to the sky by way of question & demand, contrive tomes to bear the nameless I say, Bowie, Christa, Dr Knickerbocker, Mickey Mouse, Beatles Dead But 2 Live on Stage! We play out in hope, we must, we dream, we croon worlds together. Some will gnaw us dry. Some may save us, save something.

When we first all met, all sat together, it was in a sort of dream. Soft of, I say, because not all of us were strictly speaking asleep.

Yet there we were, the six of us, at that table, in that hotel room, finally, & we were playing a game although, again strictly speaking, we were playing an impossible dream game—it was a reality-altering game, & we weren't competitors, were, in fact, partners in this matter—

We concentrated for awhile on the game, saying little, in that beautiful hotel room one could ask: does it exist? Was it, strictly speaking, a dream-hotel? Was one of us dreaming this & the others in waking life unaware?

Maya spoke first. Of course. She sighed, put down her hand of cards, & said, "I have to know more. Is that why we're here? To meet each other & know more why, *what* we're doing?"

Bowie nodded. "I don't think we have much time either. We may not be all together again ever."

Charlie Pigeonfoot said quietly, "This is all part of *Remoteland*, I know it. It's OK. I don't live anywhere else anymore."

Genny stood up, angrily. "This doesn't belong to you. None of it. *We* don't belong to you. We're sharing this thing between us."

Jack nodded. "My turn, I suppose. We all knew this room was coming. I think we all had clues. Let's examine it thoroughly, & then make a plan. As Bowie said, this might be it."


"But what is any of it?" asked Maya. "My life keeps changing, it keeps folding back on itself. I don't know how to explain it otherwise."

The others nodded again & were surprised at their agreement.

Not a word left, for now, they scattered around the large room looking for something. A clue to return with from this dreaming.

Creatures dreaming between the drifts, take it slow here, strike a long arcing note, look over the prison & pleasures of flesh, what see? What clue? Over, not better nor freerer, but raise up a some & let the sheen of girl skin in & translucent shadows, the craze for beauty in a bluebird's feather, the hard tremor of music, look over, how even small objects have their affecting music, up, over, the salty tidal hustle, the nightly rhythm by which dreams campaign every soul for a wider thought, stumble into a strange patch, make it hold! Make it last! Dreams of teaching foods, feeding heart, unions freeing, unending, what of? what for?


Winter's cold, & colder still in a few hours, a story's told of a man who left his blizzard dead car, his huddle of kin, walked hours for aid, he was scared, he knew what he had to do, & the hours, & the hours, winter's cold, & colder still in a few hours, the river too far to tramp across, trees telling no path but why would they, nowhere to go when you're always at home, the curse is sentiment, a lean into memory, into sadness, weary now, weary, & more trees, & more, the hours & their hours, & theirs, dreaming, drifts cross the road, over there, so close, over there, so close,

how few new answers
collect & stay—but in
wish—little salves the closest wounds but still flesh beats hearts wreck—time—the way is disillusion, the way breaks to pink & green songs, drifting fancies, many gaps, creatures dreaming, many musics, touch the world again & hear it moan, hear it sigh—what instructs by shadow, by prejudice's manacle, by world's sucking corrode & pushing invent? touch—the—world—again—want—is—trigger—want—is—say again?
want—is—∞—again—want—is——is—
is—is—is—is—is—is—is—is—is—is—

I was right down, lost, & fell into this dream, it explained a lot, & nothing too, which I think is why I liked it, why I returned to this page tonight—

in it, a boy was riding a bike, mounted in a wooden frame, & as he rode, the clouds around him riled more & more, & this led to rain on the earth below,

there had never been rain & neither men nor women had hair upon their heads, the rain caused it, the growth of hair upon their bald heads, that was how it happened, according to this dream which woke me before I opened my eyes, & I've been better since, another dream came of riding light beams, but not touching them & this made no literal

 but it was what was in
dream & so I trust its
truth in some sense, some way it is true—

the light glares here in different ways & I think about this book & about Art & about reality & I don't know, really, what to make of any of it—I seem to have been corporeal for nearly 43 years, moving about a corporeal world, the invisible present but often very obscurely so my kind takes to words like God & love & family & war—none of them intrinsic to any but my kind—yet these ideas press all around & seem real, seem true—

details in this world are countless but really sum to naught—like numbers there is no end & no final truth—

the men now who move maps will soon be dust & move no more—they don't act like pending dust—

I ask everyone to stay in the hotel room—they pause, they look at me—they've never seen me before—

"I'm Raymond. I write this story about all of you. I don't know what relation that gives us."

"I'm Maya."

"I know. You were in the previous book too."

"Are you God?"

"No. I'm a man with pen & paper."

"What am I?"

"In this world you are a girl, young, bright. Confused. Sometimes sad."

"Could you kill me? Or change me into something else?"

"Maybe. But it would not efface that you existed."

"What if you burned my pages? All of ours?"

"I would know. I've read about some of you on the radio."

"Some? What about the rest?"

"Not yet."

"Why are you here?"

"I used to be in these stories. I missed them."

"Oh."

We sit at the table they were at earlier playing their reality-altering game. This time they sit with me.

"What was the game?"

"We don't know. No rules. The cards were blank."

"How did you play?"

"We didn't. We were hoping something would happen. It didn't. So we were leaving."

"When you came."

I turn back pages & review. "That's not what I wrote."

"You wrote that we were playing a reality-altering game."

"Yes."

They laugh. "And we altered reality!"

I nod. They laugh again. Their laughter gets louder, shakes, blank cards fly everywhere, the room shakes & shakes again, begins to fall away, I don't know how to hold it together. I don't know anything.

It stops. What's possible is not sayable.

I take a breath, & resume.

What then, next, a story becomes aware of itself, & changes without me, what then, next? Each character is caught in a tangle of events & decisions, each commanded some moments & dragged along by others, each his passing & deepening labyrinthine story, toward what? Any?

Yes, toward—for fiction allows a propulsion, a shaping & speeding of events toward—

much as there are tangents, there is a toward, or towards—

I live in these pages as much as outside them, we are not separate in any meaningful way, when I open this book, we together *resume*, but other times we both live on, this world its unknown autonomies as mine—

A question I've wondered often: is this book's world, this series of books' world mine own, or is it otherwise? In mine, a major war is happening in the Middle East, a horrific disaster created by a powerful, mediocre man. My race's planet is suffering by our abuse, & tries to stop the coming calamity have not succeeded yet—yet—

Would this book's world resonate more or less by each parallel it bears with my world?

My book, my own knowledge, knows truths, propels by truths, only some in my world believed—the world was not contrived in seven days by a god-man who later created a man-god to punish & punish again humanity, who in turn punished & punished again each other & all other existence on earth—

This book believes in the existence of non-human intelligent life, in the powerful reality of dreams, the great tool psychedelia in its many forms, the sentience of trees & other plants, animals, oceans, mountain cliffs, lightning, dusks, the unity of mind & body, call this unity soul, & the continuance of each beyond their dissolving hour, bodies to feed back into the soil, minds to move along elsewhere, somewhere—

Yet—is this a different world or the simple prejudices of the pen-wielder?

What is the Bridge of Glass, the White Woods? What is Luna T's Cafe or the Ampitheatre deep within it? What is *RemoteLand* or was *TripTown*?

Are these simply pages or more?

What for, what toward?

A gesture, a flick, a movement in & out of shadows, swiftly, & each is again dispatched to his and her labyrinthine place, a clue given, now carry along without a missed step.

Mr. Bob the barman fetches me my pale blue Dallas Cowboys mug full of diet soda & ice. I nod, smile at him. He returns my gesture. On the TV mounted behind the bar in the corner a fire bursts out, spitting its sparks beyond the screen, spelling SING DEEPER

To be continued in Cenacle | 72 | April 2010



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Three.

“Beware & Be Aware.”

It was breathless, sweet nocturnal fineness, down an avenue, hurrying, in company, not so much what toward, but hurrying, a sugared lightness, hair long brushed, dressed to my own pleasure, a tie-dye serpent t-shirt & old jeans, black buckled boots, hurrying, I don’t know where, I felt the moment dearly, I felt it passing, not real, not mine, I can’t be that girl, why, Samantha? Why can’t I be that lightly hurrying smiling girl & her companions breathless down an avenue toward—?

We sat on the smoking deck of the Seattle-to-Bremerton ferry & Gretta played an acoustic guitar & sang to me. Her voice was soft & heavy, her crooning weighted with her years, her miles. The day was clear, utterly clear, & Mount Rainier a great snowy cathedral wishing & giving no praise. She smoked all my cigarettes & made me bum some more for her. “Nice tits on that one, buddy, I’d do her fetching too, for a treat,” leering fuck with a full pack of Marlboro Lights. Her skin sprays shine & I don’t have this & I don’t know why in the world—

I was happy though it didn’t seem much to me. My apartment was one room, no fridge, some roaches. It was in a basement but had its own outside steps & door. We’d sit there looking across the street at the park. Watch the hookers, the dealers, the cops. We’d drink cheap fucking 40s for hours & watch. It was summer & everyone was working some shitty job. We resented school but still thought maybe—my friend Carlene & I would mess around sometimes but wouldn’t let it go beyond bodies tangling for warmth. Kept hearts iced. Too many dynamics among friends to change & we weren’t old enough to know how many lone bed nights waited—we still thought maybe—Carlene’s eyes were the palest blue eyes, I’ve never seen near their like—

I climbed on the eagle’s back, felt his throbbing winged body beneath me, then launch into the air, the air smacked me with rushing cold, I hung on, I couldn’t do more for awhile, we flew often & I thought they were dreams though I knew I’d climbed in & out of my bedroom window. My pajamas snagged a feather or two. I thought I was lucky for what I saw on those nights, aloft, the city streets, the obscure valleys, the unreachable streams where we’d land & rest—I didn’t think enough to wonder—

There was a night Preacher talked to me, we'd just met. I saw in his face a man's wonder, a man's questions. I simply knew his mind wandered my body quietly, as all men did. He asked me questions I hardly heard, in my excitement & shyness & eagerness. He asked me serious questions about nature & God & reality. He told me a private story. I idled on what to wear next we met.

I can hardly say tonight what tonight is, iron streetlamps & rushing torsos & coffeehouse heat. I want to, more & more, so close to this hour I strip & fuck it. Know it to its last music, the voices that twine & retreat. The music hanging along night's chasms of shadows. Never to know it all. Never even close. Yet—& yet—

lxi. / xxiv. / i.

What else not shown by lights, what leans back in shadow, just a touch on the strings, low, feel it, missed it? What effect, who? Face sunk in dreams by dawn, face turned & snorting on a packed carriage, face glittering in harbor tide, face several among thousands at the freak festival, touches & moves from afar,

leaves a print by chance,

call it history,

what recurs infinitely, the rotten stink of repetition, come on, push it a little, come on, what is it, kneeling in a blizzard—obscure shadows, what is it, burned obscurely into oaken interrogation tables, what is it,

what the effect, what its making hand, what does not plain travel evening streets,

“it's all *Remoteland*, all of this”

I nod, but don't quite agree

“it's a cage with no bars, it's all cage”

Nod again

“it's wanting, fucking wanting”

blue wash of anger over pink funky glow

“we don't know God—we never did—most of us—all of us?”

experience & meaning slosh up layers of contradiction

“having some of the power makes it worse—more power, even worse, no head is above water, none see the clear sky above”

the arcing glare, that's what you get, from there over to there—

look deeper, there's more inside, or pull back & keep pulling back & find there is no back wall, none—

beware & be aware, little else, none, “beware & be aware,” over the gate, across the sky, scorched through dreams, scarred through the heart, ‘ware & ‘ware, little else, & a shove along a moment too soon & off ye go—half hungry enough to eat it still live, half falling, a long falling, a years of falling toward—long falling toward—

Now they are separate again, their meeting fragments, a memory of a memory, they are far again, something has changed because they met, because we spoke, but not enough yet to win,

to break, waves within view of shore but reck them recede back, & away,

I listened, I dreamed, this book bore me new, & I climbed within its damp comforts.

What can a book do if not tell a story, or twine several together, what else can it do, I wonder that tonight, can a book affect when no matter its great interior world it is nonetheless secret, not wiggling ass in the world's market?

What if it pushed in, instead of out, what if the market-wiggling idea was not enough, what if it had to go elsewhere, even from its own past?

Perhaps it has some, but how more, how deeper, how a shift, a twist, two blows & farther in? Two blows, three words, & what else?

I keep asking, & sure the question itself & wherefrom an answer all of import. Sure & what a book is, or isn't, no necessary answer. I am sure of nothing, if I ever was, & so stride with greater care & greater doubt atwist in my breath & steps. Nothing sure but everything possible? If only . . . but what then? Would certainty even pretty replace doubt?

Look at the face of grimy God-mongers & know nothing by their words & smiles. Or hark the urban skeptics with their exotic smoke & odd glasses of vintage, their sneers, the ulcers screwed deep into any wonder or faith they may grapple—

the marketplace is hungry, for scandal, for blunt power, for pink things cleverly wronged—

I don't know & what is this precisely? Wherefrom the world, whereto its path? What if twin nowhere & nowhere?

Sure of nothing I stride & doubt, & stride & labor & empty pens, & doubt—

& some melody tickles my skin & I think words kin to new & hope—

if a battle, both sides war in a single narrow trench

if a spiritual tumult, no argument plays for more than points on its opponent. None sure enough to doubt with ease, relax & doubt—

lxii. / xxv. / ii.

It was a story Bowie told Christa one night, one he'd told Gretta on another night years back, & the difference between the two stories was something, maybe everything—

"I was coming off a bad case, a really bad one. Murder, betrayal, the common good defended in the worst possible way—I was on leave, a long one, nobody knew for sure if I'd be back. But I'd sacrificed things on this case, dear things, some you only get once in the first place & usually don't get back—

"I was a drinker then, & maybe the worst kind. I'd go on holy mission drunks, look for God in the worst places. I had this idea that it was only in the worst & best of the world that anything holy might appear to me. Pain & beauty are both experienced as a kind of suffering"

The story up to this point was pretty much the same, though with Gretta he drank red wine & with Christa he smoked a fine blunt. Gretta matched him glass for glass. Christa loved ganja as much as hard fucking but she took a little coaxing with both.

"I lived in a city for awhile & got to know its alleys, the parks where the cops let the bums stay awhile, the beat restaurants & coffeeshops. I'd been there long enough to have something of a separate identity in these places. I needed it sometimes, & then after awhile needed to get back to my payjob—

"I even had a few buddies down & out, they knew little about me, I let a fractured narrative grow up about an alcoholic, used to be a lawyer maybe, now disabled, maybe a little bit sick—something like that—"

The next part he told Gretta, not Christa, the wine slowed him a bit, the ganja hurried him along, no real explain in that—

"Some of my buddies had seen real hard times. One had been in the military, the Marines he claimed, but he was proud & haunted by it both. That's really putting it wrong.

"Another had done some jail time for some violent things. Now he was old & tired, not much flared up his old temper.

"We'd meet & drink coffee, & I'd spike our drinks with cheap whiskey, & most of it was bullshit, which suited me fine but sometimes a word hits a nerve & someone goes off—old blood spill is fucking happening again, it's happening *now*.

"Sometimes it was just the place & the night. There was one park where you could get a clear view of the stars. I don't know, there weren't many streetlamps near or something, & we'd sit there drinking a jug of Dago red I got us, sipping it really, by the hour, letting it ride us through the night, we'd have our sleeping rolls & jackets, talking, talking, & sometimes not talking, & some cops would hassle us, & some wouldn't, they had moods & bad nights like anyone else, & the stories weren't much mostly, usually about things we didn't have & wanted. Women. Good food. Better health. A bed to sleep in that wasn't a residents hotel or shelter."

Gretta nodded & said nothing. Her hometown Seattle had its population of homeless & poor. She could see Bowie hunkered down among them, finding something there the rest of his life—

"One guy told a story of how he lost his wife & every time he told it we'd end up arguing over it. He said it wasn't natural, what happened, how she should have survived that fire, how the fire never should have started in the first place, how it wasn't his fault or her fault but it damned well was somebody, or *something's* fault. He was sure of that."

Gretta & Christa both get to hear this story though Christa's alternatively begins "I knew a guy once who told me & some buddies a story" & so on.

"He said they lived in New Mexico, a little town in the desert, where she was from & where he moved to when they got married. They'd met on a Greyhound bus, & traveled til they had no money or options left but go home, her home, marry & set up shop."

He'd pause. Gretta nodded again, a good listener. Christa would nod too, but impatient. His stories made her restless & uncertain. Maybe it was the ganja.

"So they came home & it took awhile to explain to everyone in town who & what he was. Her family was willing enough, figuring she was bound soon for catting it up, might as well have a ring on. He knew enough about fixing cars during the week, & when to kneel & sing at Mass on Sunday, to find his shallow place in things.

"They had a small house, she kept it clean & he worked part-time at her uncle's garage fixing cars while this uncle drank tequila & worked on his system for beating the lotto system. I don't even know if New Mexico has a lottery, always meant to look it up. Wouldn't be hard to find out."

Gretta laughs, pours them both more wine. Christa says nothing, listens restlessly.

"These were Spanish people, Catholics, full of that ribald piety people get when—"

"Ribald piety?" Gretta snorts.

"Yah. They lived close to God but like you would a tribal father. There were moments when God's creation just seemed ridiculous to them."

"Ridiculous how?" asked Christa. Gretta just nodded.

"They'd drink hard some Saturday nights. The preacher would show up, sometimes, & once in awhile he'd take his fill of wine, & the talk would turn to God. God & sex. God & drink. God & the government. Sometimes the preacher would say something & everyone would fall down."

Bowie nodded, like that was that. "He wouldn't talk about the UFOs though. Not a word. They'd try."

"Why couldn't Jesus come back in a spaceship? Isn't that better than an E.T. invasion? They're there, Padre, you seen them as much as any of us."

"If he was drinking his share, the Padre would nod, mumble a prayer. Once he said, 'Whatever they are, they fly in God's skies & come from God's stars. They are God's strange angels.' If he was sober he would fuss around the picnic tables on the edge of town where we would gather with our jugs & home-made tortillas, he would growl about our lapses to attend church, or our obvious hangovers."

"The night it happened was a windy one. High, dusty winds, everyone indoors before dusk, nothing visible. My friend would insist, every single time, that Rosie had not gone out, had stayed in with him & their cats. He would begin to yell & we had to calm him down just to get him to go on, because he *would* go on. He had to tell it, it was the only story he cared about, & nothing since had mattered."

Gretta nodded, sipped. Christa would take Bowie's hand, hope the story would be quick. It was too spooky & the ganja was very strong.

"But in the morning they found him with the door wide open, & it was easy to see by all the dust & scatter that it had been open during the storm. The morning was clear, sunny, like no dust storms had ever existed. But Rosie was gone."

Bowie nodded to himself mostly. "Paul could barely talk. His clothes were filthy. He wasn't drunk but he wasn't right. Finally he started in."

"Was she mad? Did she walk out to cool off? You two fight sometimes."

"No. It was a peaceful night. I fell asleep in that armchair right there. She was reading one of her science magazines. We had the radio on. I was tired, light-headed. I didn't tell her. It was nothing. I fell asleep watching the storm, the way it clouded our window. Look at that window! That was all. I fell asleep. Rosie was reading."

"The police in town investigated, no signs of blood or a fight. Nothing. Her clothes & books were in their spots. Half the town walked right into the desert, calling, looking for clues."

Christa is too high for any more. She touches his arm. He smiles. Gretta nods, sips, listens.

"Paul didn't say anything strange for months. He didn't say much at all. Rosie's family surrounded him with love, comfort. He had loved their Rosie as they had; all were bonded forever in this sorrow."

"There was a party, months had gone by. It was high school graduation & the town was

ready to ease up. A lot of tension rode through it, the kind only singing & dancing & wine foolishness under a great big moon can help to cure. When Paul showed up, neatly dressed, smiling, the night seemed totally blessed.

“Rosie had a cousin, Paula, & everyone but Paul knew that Paula had a crush on him. She wasn’t pushy, & she knew nobody really thought anything would happen. Paula was leaving the town, going to college, people figured she’d move along—

“But Paula wasn’t what people thought, & in truth she knew Paul better than anyone else in the town. It had happened by accident. After a week or so of looking & calling, the search for Rosie dwindled. Nobody said it to Paul but everyone assumed she was gone. It was time to mourn, to accept. Out of respect for him, people gave him his space, murmured their grief to each other in private.

“Paula knew more than anyone did. She had seen Rosie that afternoon, knew Rosie was going, & might not return. She told nobody. But she looked at Paul secretly in those early days & felt wild with guilt. She couldn’t have told him where she was, but she could have told him more than anyone else knew.

“Paula spent a lot of time in the desert; her obligations to high school were fewer. Teachers were assured of her future & let her have her extra time. She wasn’t dating anyone so none of the adults in her life worried.

“Paula was alone one afternoon, wandering the scrub & cacti, when she saw Paul. He was a distance from her, crouched down, still, maybe in deep thought.

“She wanted to leave him be, knew that would be best, but she knew from giggling nights with Rosie what kind of man he was. She knew if he would ever look at her, her smooth body under clunky clothes meant to keep boys away, listened to her thoughts, the books she read & could quote, & add to, he would want to take her. She knew this without obsessing on it. Her trick that year was to fake a schoolgirl crush on him for the town’s satisfaction, while bearing a woman’s quiet, erotic rush for him, nobody knew. He was not a man to notice much less act on a schoolgirl crush, so even as she approached him, waving her hand awkwardly to get his attention, her real attraction was hidden safely between swathes of deception—

“He didn’t look up but nodded at her. She’d never been alone with him. She felt light.”

Gretta suggested they take a walk outside. She was cramped & feeling loopy. The story had amused her, involved her, now it was starting to bother her.

The sky was a dark bath of bright lights, & Gretta lit up a hookah pipe as they sat on her porch, third floor of an apartment building in the hills a few miles from Luna T’s Cafe. The city was noise & movement distantly below.

Bowie sucked the pipe, twice, & resumed telling. “He asked her what books she had with her. She started, inside, & looked at her thin volumes like they were poisonous creatures, then cohered. ‘Nothing. Research. They’re not even really books. They’re articles I sent away for & they came in binders.’

“He didn’t look up. Paula wondered if she should leave. She didn’t want to. She really didn’t want to.

“‘I have an interest in science. That’s going to be my major next fall.’

“‘Why?’

“‘Why. Nobody asked that. Why? Fuck. Because I’m a geek girl?’

“‘Because of the *loco* shit that happens out here,’ she heard herself say.

“He looked up. He smiled. She felt like a goofy kid. ‘Yah. I’ve been wondering about

that too.'

"It was clumsy talk at first. Their connection was Rosie but not a word about her. Paul didn't ask easy questions. After awhile, he just talked. Eventually, about Rosie.

"Something's out here. I've known that since I lived here. Something live, & it's not human. But I don't know what that makes it.

"When I first met Rosie, before we even talked on the bus, I saw her reading a book. She told me later it was alternative theory. She said you hear the same old shit from hippies & Indians & UFO nuts. It was like people thought they were onto something when they weren't. They were mouthing what everyone else was saying. I asked myself, "OK, how do I break this? How do my ideas come from *here*," her head, "& in *here*," her heart, not from someone else?"

"Paula listened, said nothing. Paul smiled, a devilish half-smile, 'When she pointed to heart I let myself look at her chest & then I blushed like a nut. She smiled back. "It's OK, you're wired to like them." I nodded but didn't look again. She had leaf-shaped earrings. I watched them.

"I asked her what alternative history meant. "Isn't that like science fiction or New Age?"

"She moved across the aisle to my seat. Tucked herself right in. "Maybe, man. I mean you could say that." I thought she would say more but she started telling me about her town, here.

"This town is small but it's on the edge of this big desert. I've been out there since I was little. The people in town say UFOs fly over at night. They're spooked. They spook their kids. They make up stories to be spooked even more. They wish the town was like Roswell.

"I never believed any of it. Do you know why?"

"Dreams" Paul quotes Rosie saying, & hears Paula quoting her too. The words echo between them. They look at each other.

"She was my cousin. We were close."

"He nodded. The moment passed, but didn't. Everything that happened from then on echoed that moment when they revealed to each other what they both knew."

lxiii. / xxvi. / iii.

Figure where the magick & artillery cross, conjure, do, the night its old lure & assure to take, unsure, what the bravest gesture in any troubled hour? One word, the next, the next? Riddled fields of golden beam, only dreaming, lean-limbed creatures feeding close, only dreaming, while kings plan the blood needed to move maps, no dreaming. What lost when the Empire recks too many voices? What lost when power drips too freely from a single fist? What lost when the great mass of moving men slow, consider each his bonds & how attached to every of his fellows? What lost when faces look up for sunlight not a sky papa to discipline & train? What lost when this hour's hunger is told, when a little less given to someday's coffers & hunger? What lost when something new possible that does not simply add its pebble atop the long lived hill in the unexplored great woods of the world?

Reck the many voices, reckon better what remains when long since the last bones fallen.

Maya wakes between worlds, the nether lands between wake & dream, when all is true, when



truth is not king, hardly serpent, woke & thought here is the crack I wanted, this, I want to go to him, I want to see him & see if this discovers anything to either of us—

A thousand sparks, a movement across the spacelessness of reality, the adjustment that is wrongly distinguished as here & there—she does not want to materialize—no, this is cross time like no time & through space like breathing—

I see him, it's night, there's an elevated highway overhead, I see fires in trashcans, men standing in groups. He's apart, alone. Not in danger. He isn't quite one of them but they look out for him.

There he is, but how? What kind of space does he occupy? His face is intense, abstracted. Deep, inner space, can I enter, breathe into this space & know it?

Dylan. Maya. We haven't met yet. We know each other. Yes. We have met. Time isn't much, is it? It's enough to limit & define but not a god. Do we know each other then? Yes of course but not yet too. I don't know if that helps. I don't know either. You came to see me. Yes. Do you want to tell me more? I just wanted to see you, to know what this means. Don't we decide that? I think so. Are you going to stay with me? I'm arriving to you.

Where the magick & artillery cross. What that place, when it possible to turn a fist to fingers, a soldier back to a man, a citizen to a nameless creature

riddled fields of golden beam, lean-limbed creatures feeding close, while kings plan the blood needed to move maps, watching the dull mass of moving men, fat from years of steady feeding, blurry to the blunt demands of want & quick demise, we're not ready for the War, not close, we move through countless minor blood dramas & call it a full, worldly life—

What's lost when the Empire recks too many voices, oh shit, none of this is sturdy for what tonight breaks bones in other lands—ink for moo-cows, yet are War's leaner, swifter moves preferable, anything?

Maya sighs & falls back from Dylan, from the night, from the poor men & their fires & their chatter—falls back but not to resume, remains an arc through, an arcing, not yet a from & to—

lxiv. / xxvii. / iv.

Music twists new sugars from ripe debris, pulsing iron streetlamps, nodding traffic lights, carnivorous roar of midnight freeway,
 sentiment for a voice in shapely remain—
 yet nothing, little, less, & changed, & always changing,
 Shifting faces, some sweet hours of moonlight's easy wane
 The drums, a loud shout, a dozen, it goes, all goes
 Yet some still wait a melody, a man's long death in an old blue house, his memories the fine thing of love & delusion—

tell me any of it means anything—
 there were nights, there were hours, there was sugar between the knives—
 what of the boxes of man-gods & their pleas to suffer quietly the passing years, feed &
 breed & consume & die?
 leave to kings the matters of maps & history?
 tell me any of it means anything—go on!
 the afternoons in sum & snow, the steps through youth's frenetic wants, its great arcing
 ignorance?
 And what since to argue slant to this ignorance? Passing, & more passing. Wars &
 wares, each in turn—

A woman tends her stripling, ducks old wants in the child's bathwater, makes him
 splash & laugh. What did any of it matter anyway. A dream, subtle healings in a crushed,
 dead heart. Something, close, secret, mine, oh yes dear some echoes continue forever, tonight,
 another, & on, some do not nod & part cleanly—

What cumes is futility, boredom
 hungers grown broad & dull & near
 impossible to feed

beauty, crack its bones & suck down
 what is light & weak—

Nothing goes away & nothing remains,
 learn this, dear, what lesson I
 could not give you myself, love stains,
 love bloods, everything & nothing & by
 the years unimaginable something—

Others, too, countless, by the species, by the fallen soldier, in turn. Whatever the best spasm,
 it has to be enough.

Christa waits for Bowie & maybe it goes long, she sits, hours, sits & waits, says nothing, what
 to say, I'm waiting him, he left me here because I'd be safe from—

But I get restless, he woke me up from the bones of my old days, from what I had been, I don't
 know what I'd been, it seemed to involve no & denial & something else—they talked about
 God too but I never felt him nearby—he seemed like another rule of the house—

I get restless & I have a bright mind & a roused body & you left me here because I'd be safe
 but what's safe, Bowie? I wasn't safe going along with you, smoking your hash & sucking your
 cock, breaking those old bones & feeling my own—

So I get restless & I begin to walk around the place you left me, see what I've got to reck—&

the men along the bar look me over, sometimes twice, but none move near with a word—

Gretta comes over to me after playing with her band. We look at each other.

“Why did he leave here? Why did he leave you?”

“I don’t know. At first I thought he was loving it too much. Getting attached. Getting close.”

“No.”

“He doesn’t belong to anything, Christa. Not to a woman, not to a place.”

“Is there more?”

“You have to move along with him, change with his changes. Soon it won’t look anything like it did, & you’ll keep going or you won’t.”

“Is that what you did?”

“Nothing’s over between us, that’s not how things are. That’s why you’re here.”

“He wants us both?”

Gretta is beautiful, old enough to be my mother, dressed like knowing, I don’t know what her words mean, how she uses one for every ten she could use—

“Tell me”

“Nothing you don’t know or won’t be allowed to find out. It’s up to you how far you go with truth or love. Any of it.”

I get restless & find out there’s more to this bar, this cafe, in the back, there’s more to Luna T’s as I go looking for it—I’m restless, I’m hungry—Bowie left me here safe & I don’t know what that means or how far it can go—

Tend your stripling, dear, how many, how old? The questions will never get answered, not those, not others, not any. I don’t wonder so much at you as how I let all that gold about me get away—but see I’m good at wondering—back & back—I can remember another woman, oh the tits & face on her—& how I had to cringe when shadow of her mother came ‘round—how I loved her too! The poems, the hard jerks through my heart as she too in her turn let sweetness bang about—harder & harder—another’s words, & another’s—until a man’s hands took her & I was briefly lost in that wet elastic excitement of a new lover & thereafter—well, what?

I can remember back further, other women who later bathed their broods & measured their solid ground—

So consider me from afar, these words whose ancestors I offered you, a hundred songs, more, & you thought ceaseless no matter what you fucked, what fun & necessity you got from life for yourself—

Consider these words not a well-wishing but an exorcism—you were more for my love, less for your betrayal—

Christa finds the hills, finally, the trees rising impossibly tall to that gorgeous fat tit full moon & what seas of stars to behold? Loveliness! Freedom. That bonfire. Those drummers. How good can it all be?

What, if anything, from other good & bad nights, what?
 But shut up on that old shit a minute & look: near Luna T's Cafe, same city block,
 something new, tall,
 tis the Noah Hotel,
 it's been there awhile, really, but closed years, now it's open,
 they call it the No-Tell because of what happens there—
 & somehow there begins a two-way bleed between the No-Tell & Luna T's Cafe—
 What was the moment?

It was someone who walked in looking to see if what he remembered about T's was true—did he?

Dylan was somewhat changed, his face a bit leaner, hair longer, shaggier. Thinner. He wore full his still few years & sometimes a few extra. Hours pass, some hurt, linger, some are beautiful, linger, hurt more, Dylan didn't always bear the words but he knew better now than once—

He still stood apart most times but his smile was more often, even kinder. No-Tell had a coffeeshop & while he'd started there as extra help eventually the bosses numbered too many who'd come & gone & Gravy had put him in charge.

Gravy seemed to run the No-Tell though it wasn't always so clear. Did he own it? Dylan didn't think so. Sometimes Dylan was closing up when Gravy ambled in with a pint. Maybe a few friends & an all-night card game. Maybe sad, incoherently sad, & Dylan would listen.

His dream that morning had bothered him so much all day, a visit from Gravy would have been fine. None.

He didn't dream about her often, enough, he tried to remember her evenly, let that much rest in his heart, but the dreams would inflame him for days—Gravy knew, had a nod for it, nod & a phrase, "Dylan's on his Blues Cruise," he'd say. Not angry. Protective in his own way.

Gravy was a criminal, Dylan supposed, though not like any he'd ever imagined. He would conduct his business in the coffeehouse sometimes, whether it was hiring a new maid or selling a load of rifles. Never asked Dylan to keep mum, knew Dylan wasn't the telling kind.

Yet they weren't especially close. There were moments but they didn't build up. Dylan liked it this way. It was what it was.

This dream, this particular one, had been coming. Maya was looking for him. She was near. Dylan shivered. She'd left an instruction for him, in this dream.

A choice, really. If he were to do something, she would continue. If he didn't, she would withdraw. His choice to believe this dream, his choice to act. But the instruction was clear.

In the back room was a small window, sealed, dirty with decades, behind tall rack filled with discarded boxes half-filled with debris. If he moved the rack, scrubbed the window clean, he would see where he needed to go to begin to near Maya as she had neared him until now, when she stopped to give him his choice.

He tried to shake it, tried to lose himself to the day, tried to let it go. But nothing can distract a heart from itself. Not for long.

He let the Cafe stay open past 3, 4, 5. Past 6. No customers. Not even a hotel staffer

looking to waste a few minutes on the clock. Dylan turned off the neon signs, locked the door, took off his cap. Found window cleaner & a rag.

Trip Town isn't back on TV per se but—well, it's complicated—the network stopped showing it but it showed up on random local stations months later—at first reruns but not really—not much—I have a hard time explaining—

It was again a presence at places like Luna T's Cafe but more secretive—at the No-Tell, too, it appeared on some TV screens—

A matter of power—it would not depart—end—too many people were too involved—time was rigged for its benefit—

The drinkers at Luna T's bar were watching Dylan clean the window of the No-Tell's cafe's back room to reveal Luna T's itself through the glass. Dylan struggled & pushed open the window & wiggled through with a lot of effort—

They watched him approach the bar where they sat—

“That's the kid.”

“He's coming here!”

“Are we on TV?”

“We already talked about that. We decided we can't know.”

He doesn't enter through the bar's door but another, unused & obscure. Enters, & remembers—he was here—Maya is bringing him here—she will come—*she will*—

“I thought this show got cancelled.”

“Do we look cancelled to you?”

He's in the bandroom, the drinkers can see that, wonder will he come into the bar? He starts to, then turns. Now he's walking toward the stage & past it deeper into Luna T's.

“Aww, man! I thought he was coming in here!”

“Go chase after him! It's your chance to be a star!”

“Balls. I just wanted to say hi.”

Dylan walks in deeper, remembering but hazy. Will he find Maya or will she find him? He feels younger, wilder, looking for her, remembers the bridge he lived under, the men he knew there, remembers meeting her on the bus to see the ocean his friend had put him on, remembers meeting Maya, allows himself this, remembers the White Woods & meeting John, & the old man in the cafe, how hours & days & places crossed & re-crossed, & time crumbled & there was that rooming house he lived in, & what happened? How does here & there, then & now sum? What's missing? Is this the first time he was here, again?

He keeps walking because that's sometimes all the option a moment gives.

There, a puddled route away, no more dreams of blood on canvas, maybe no dreams at all, or all dreams, just not this straddling, this nobody-fucking-knows save for the cranks who smile or frown too much & claim they do—Just away! No music struck from fragging bone chips.

Away.

A housefly licks the key in the hand who won my fame. I would burn it & go but letting it stay seems the harder move, better. Through the window, through the puddle, there, & now there, & now gone. How? But yes, somehow.

The rain shudders those framed hills & this hour passes. I watch it pass on a pink clock-radio shaped like a kitty cat. Watch the cat trickling away the hour. The fly licks & licks. A buzz, a break, now trickling, now gone. I let a part of me leave these blood canvases, go, crack the window, through, hit that puddle hard, slip, don't fall, begin to run, run, this is delicious I don't need any of it, run & run, I don't know when I've stopped for awhile, don't know I'm still in this room for a longer while, I want to know what & why, bloody canvases don't explain, I'd stop them if I could but no this hand, my fame, I've said that already, it hurts, will you believe me & take me for good this time? I mean it—I can't take this cycle of dream—blood—wake—canvas—tell me how—the window is locked & I can't break it—

It was a short time of intense fame, that's what's worst about it. I wanted, I got it, it was nearly random, & then it was gone. I'm not sure how. My marriage came & went with it. I was left with a friend, his hookah, his fucking boxes of Dead shows on cassette. But he stayed. He emerged with me from all that. When it got worse, he stayed. When I ended up in the room with the floor of ice, he was still there. Then I was gone & he's probably still in that apartment with his hookah & his Dead show cassettes—

My canvases were an hour's golden titan. My blood canvases, my *fucking* blood canvases. Three dozen of them, then no more. I wouldn't know how. I'd like to say this was all a ruse, but no. It wasn't. In truth it was *way more* fucked up & esoteric than anyone knew.

I thought it was over when I stopped painting, when I turned my sorry ass on him & ran. I look now & see that it wasn't enough. I wasn't strong enough to cut every last secret tie in my heart with what he was, what he wanted to do, what he did. He was as maniacal, blackly obsessed as my hookah friend was calm, easy flowing. I see them right now, never met, probably never inside a thousand miles of each other & yet both here, now. And my Aussie friend, how do I arrange him in this? And my wife? Was she just what that lunatic plucked from his numbers & planted in my grasp? Was she married to me only while I was latched to him?

Is anything ever that fucking obvious?

And now you ask about the golden bird returning, & the light bulbs, & that *fucking film*—& I don't know. I thought maybe if I could arrange one thing, the rest would align. Nothing aligns. They jig around me crazy, me crazy. Me crazy.

lxvii. / xxx. / vii.

Back on the Bridge of Glass & I decide I'm not going to fall, I was brought here, or I brought myself here, & now I know there are others, one is called Maya, we are connected to each other, it's a lot. I stop. Breathe deeply a few times. A *fucking* lot. But OK, so be it, my life was shit, I was playing it out, & can't say I wasn't hoping for a few less innings if I had a choice.

Didn't think I had one, didn't come close to thinking this. What I thought was: don't think. And especially: don't *remember*. But that didn't leave much else.

Where it, God, life, whatever, got me was at night, my dreams. I thought this was one, or one that didn't end. Something. Dreams brought it all back, Penny, 'Stina, my granpa, the whole nut fucky arc, it's like I loop back into it knowing how it ends but thinking I have a chance still, this turn not that one, this word not that silence, the possible, the doomed—

I started reading books again, not all sorts like I used to, I was on a single chase. Books on dreams. They were the remain of my life, & they wouldn't let up. Was there something I could do about them? I'd known a lot of high, unhappy people over the years & more than a few were spooky full of ideas about death, God, reality, dreams. They'd show me books, movies, TV shows. I'd read a few pages, pass a pipe & watch. It passed the time & the funny fucking thing—

the really funny fucking thing

is that I was happy for awhile there. I was what I seemed for awhile. I told Penny in bed one night, before 'Stina ever came around, that my grandpa wouldn't condemn me.

"He had no use for governments. Said a president was a bureaucrat with a secret crown on his head. He said a man needed enough hours & breathing room in his head to figure some things out along the way. Most would decide to marry, make a family, settle in to one place, care for it. A few would rob banks or lead wars. A few would see something missing from the world & decide to write it in, or paint it, or preach it.

"Sonnyboy, all the government does is profit from the decent plain inclinations most of us have, & squelch, try to squelch the rest. Most men aren't going to rob or pillage. Most aren't going to create anything but a few chicks. So taxing them & policing them & parenting them isn't going to do much good. We end up crowded into some places, too spaced out & lonely in others. Angry & restless, we spend money & eat too much. Look at the moon & see something foreign & meaningless. Never learn to grow our own food or think our own damned thoughts, whatever they are.'

"Penny smirked at me. 'He said that word for word?'

"He said lots of things, some of them over & over. He told me I'd have to make decisions someday about things I could not imagine then. Things he couldn't advise or warn me about.

"Just try to listen to yourself in more than one way. What's your belly saying? How about your heart? Are your loins arguing yea or nay? The answer's in there somewhere. It might be pretty, might not."

Then maybe I was less happy over time, & when 'Stina came into my life maybe I was looking for a crack in things. Not her, would have been something else. A cop, a car crash.

The books on dreams were mostly garbage, not even good wishful thinking. Dream astrological signs & dream dictionaries. I tried Freud, Jung, the longhair stuff. Again, not much, better

than the newsstand trash but still.

The only thing that seemed to hook me was the idea of lucid dreaming. It didn't seem so much a promise as a tool. A way to work some shit out. I was sober but tired. But I had a little left in my tank & decided to play it.

I didn't exactly become the king of daylight but I did find enough coherence to keep going. No more dealing. And no more women. That was an easy & hard choice. They were still around, my eyes still looked, my body still pulled, they still wiggled & sometimes smiled. But I knew some part of me, some important piece, was burnt & gone just surviving all that had happened with 'Stina & Penny. I wanted, I could have had, but I mostly refrained.

I say mostly. Do dreams count? I'm not sure. As I got better at lucid dreaming, became an oneironaut if you can figure that, I found all sorts of benefits. It's deep down there, & daylight laws do not apply. It was easy & obvious for awhile til I got bored. I pushed a little, it got bloody, kinky. I pushed a little more.

That's when I met Benny.

Snap. Sparkle. *Fuck. Benny.* He knows! He can tell me. I'm probably on this fucking bridge because of *him*.

Benny Big Dreams. He came into my dream-life so slyly that I didn't notice him for the longest time. Then I did but he'd tangled himself with me. I made agreements he made me keep.

He knows, that motherloving bastard.

Dreams, when you get down into the murk of them, it becomes impossible later to sort them, which one came first, even distinctions between them fail. It's all one dream, to half-quote that hippy singer. So I can only guess when he first appeared. He could have been a log or a cloud too. I have an idea though. It was when I began to get good at them, at world-building, then at world-breaching, then at border-erasing.

When I say it's all one dream, I really mean this. All one dream. As much as this material world is one kind of place. Dreams, mine, yours, tonight's, tomorrow night's, all glints off one diamond.

So why don't people know? Because they think: sleep, dream. Bed. Eyes closed. Wake up, get up, go. Dreams are fundamentally different, at least some ways. I learned all this slowly, but I learned. I had no other choice. My dice were thrown.

Benny appeared in a street of skulls, or as a street of skulls. It was near sunset, I was very alone. The world was careening before me, I watched sun & moon come & go, but it was still nearly dusk, the light wasn't changing unusually, there were waves passing overhead, but sometimes there were missiles, & it was flu that had killed everyone but then it was stones, I was lost, I hadn't been this lost in awhile, there was no hook, not a word, not an icon, I couldn't find the ground solidly & half-hovered, loose, the street in this small town, one main street, filled with

skulls, paved with them, some old, nearly powder, some still hung on by recent flesh, I couldn't handle it when—

wait. Think. What. Think!

A skull winked at me. I can't say how, but I smiled, I breathed, I steadied, calm. The skulls retreated to small stones. The waves & missiles became hard, stormy clouds, but no more unfamiliar than that. The dream cooled, & leaving was easy.

Maybe Benny had been around long, I can't know. But I noticed him, I remembered the wink. A new presence. A wink of one.

Later he was more plain. Later. It's just not how dreams work. Think of time as a field, endless field. No before or after. No center. Endless so always more to know.

Sometimes I've thought of him as my friend. I've seen him kind, even selfless. But not always. He's not tame, & I don't know his motives.

Last I saw of him, I think, was that shot, whatever it was, he was part of that, & then I was here. And I don't sleep or eat here. I don't dream. I figured I was dead. What was left?

If this Bridge of Glass is dreaming, it's somewhere in that field I never knew existed. Not even close.

lxviii. / xxxi. / viii.

No waiting. No yearn. Tis arrival. No Penny. No Shawn. No Preacher. But I found my doll. I called her Tweety Bird. Nobody liked that name. Shawn didn't mock it like the rest. He just said that's your kind of name, Gen. He smiled. He loved me back then.

Nobody knew why I left with Preacher. They didn't stop me. That wasn't possible. They didn't meet Preacher. I didn't let them. He was my answer, what nobody had given me until then.

Tweety Bird is in bad shape. She's in pieces. I've walked to town, I'm going to fix her. I'm in farm country, nowhere I know. No people out, just a truck once in awhile. I found Tweety Bird in a ditch. Just lying there. In pieces. I gathered her up, & then a truck appeared, a cowboy offering a ride. He was old, shaven, too curious, but harmless. Dropped me off in town with a nod. Still curious.

I sit on a bench, consider Tweety. I need strong glue. That should work. Look around, see a hardware store. Its window has snowmen & other Xmas decorations. Oh. It will do.

I walk slowly. Whatever this is, all of this. I'll work with it. I'll try.

I walk into the store with my busted dolly & the old man in the chainstore vest gives me a hello.

"I need some heavy-duty glue."

"I see that. Got yourself a job there."

"Her name is Tweety Bird. She was mine as a child. I found her again. She needs fixing."

"We got glue over here. Nice quick-drying epoxy."

"Good. I'll look these over."

"Gonna make someone a present, are ya?"



AbandonView

"I don't know yet. I might fix her & keep her for myself."

He laughs with me but I can feel he's edging back a little. Grownup women don't repair dolls & keep them. Maybe I'm just paranoid.

I'm trying to remember her, in truth, what she was like. I'm sure I gave her an elaborate personality, told her all my secrets. I bet I have more now & I still don't have anyone to tell them. So maybe she'll do again. That collie wouldn't come with me.

Preacher wasn't always around, as the years went by. He had himself a harem, sure, but sometimes he was absent tending it. Maybe he had harems in other cities.

First time I fucked a man wasn't my first overall, but this time I knew what I was doing. You get the pleasures you arrange for.

It was fraud for flesh's pleasure. Simple. The man I yearned for I couldn't tell, couldn't tell myself very clearly, so I worked what I had to feel better, feel something.

Some became boyfriends. I promised nothing. They fed on my thighs' demands. Suffered when I ceased. Feeding a delusion takes variety.

I sit on a bench, a different one? I don't know. It's cold. I don't care. Trucks pass once in awhile. I don't look close. I have my bottle of glue. The hardware store man sold me some rubber bands too. He warmed up to my project after a bit. I think he decided I was going to sell the doll at an antique market or online or something. He would have made the repair himself but I smiled no.

The man who loved me most was married. He fed on my thoughts, my feelings about things. He didn't try to own me with gifts or rough, weird sex. I liked him. I nearly told him about Preacher. Instead I ended it badly. Ended it so it would stay ended. It had been weeks, maybe a couple of months but I remember him best of all of them.

Tweety Bird is glued & bound in rubber bands looping her at several angles. I'm still trying to remember her. Getting colder, getting darker. No more traffic. Snow soon maybe.

I passed a motel walking to town. Vacancy sign. I feel a plastic credit card in my pocket. OK. I haven't waked up, wherever I am I'm here for the night at least.

So I walk out of town the long way to the motel when a pickup drives by & stops. The hardware store man.

"Need a ride?"

"Up to the motel"

"Not far. Get in."

"Thanks."

"Ma'am, are you OK?"

"I think so."

"We don't see many lone women in town carrying broken dolls around. No offense."

"None taken. I came to see my brother. I don't think he lives around here anymore."

"What's his name?"

"It doesn't matter."

We pull up at that moment. He smiles at me, shy but still curious. I'm like a new & exotic toy to him. He then surprises me. Reaches into his overalls & pulls out not money but a business card.

"We don't like to see anyone in trouble around here, strangers included. You need to, call that number on there. I might help or I might know somebody who can."

His name is Grant. I smile at him. Leave his truck without a word. He waits while I ring for the motel owner, sign in, get my key, every step. I wave as I leave the motel office & walk in the wind & flakes to my room. I hear him drive off as I enter & close the door.

"We're here" I say to Tweety Bird.

Here. Well, then. First thing I notice is that both pictures on the wall are the same. This is funny, but I don't laugh, not yet. I may need one later. A single bed with one pillow. OK, that's about right. No Preacher or Preacher substitutes tonight, & my hardware store friend didn't make a move. Enough of one. A sly look at my tits & ass really doesn't count. Enough.

Shit! Horny again. "Been like this for years, Tweety. Not much to get me started." Not much more to stop me either but I don't say this to Tweety. She's recovering, needs hope, a laugh. OK, I've got one saved, now a reason.

A TV. A curtained window. Hey, even a mini-fridge. Styling. I picked well.

Now what? I've greeted my night's environs, what now? Does the cosmos tell me what now, please?

What now, *please?*

OK maybe not yet. Gotta be patient. Universe probably gets as many queries as Santy Claws. My turn will come.

The bed is old, soft, not broken, not cheap. The walls painted a creamy yellow, not chipping. The curtains are thick & dark red. This place is simple but it is taken care of. There's a solid lock on the door. I'm OK here tonight, no enemy but what lurks through my head.

I lay in my clothes on top of the bedspread holding Tweety Bird in my arms, thinking & thinking til I'm not thinking til I'm sound asleep & surrounded by dream figures, still on my hotel bed, still holding Tweety Bird who's still mending from her injuries.

They're talking to me like I understand, even like I'm not very important to the plan. I want to prove myself but nobody seems to notice or care.

Two especially among at least several more. Men, bearded, somewhat serious, even their humor has a grim bite to it, a knowingness one gets or doesn't get.

"When does this thing come together?"

"Soon, I'm guessing."

"Better. We know what's at stake."

"Nobody's doubting."

They don't look at me but I feel I'm involved. I take a chance with the one new bit of information I have to hand.

“What about Grant? Does he know? Will he help us?”

They both freeze like squirrels in rush hour. Ha. All of them are looking at me.

“We don’t know about him yet.”

“She’s right. Getting to be time to decide.”

Peering at me, nipping my face with close stare, the first one says, “What do you think?”

I open my mouth, but nothing. I try again, then the third time some noises. They wait.

“He seemed OK. He gave me a ride when I needed one. Didn’t try to fuck me. Seemed to understand his place in things & accept it. So I say, yah.”

They nod, convinced. Pleased even. Because of my certainty or who I was certain about? I can’t know.

lxix. / xxxii. / ix.

Come, then, & tell me the shade between remembrance’s scent & nostalgia’s stink. Tell me. I don’t know it but maybe in my art some try to discern it as space, space with music, with name, with possibility. Maybe.

To be mortal is a sense of time passing, aging, growth, change. What coming, what gone. Sentiment for babies, for precious little growing things. For the gentle in music & touch. To be mortal is nearly ever to be in a state of *going*.

Where I sit tonight furies me with sentiment nigh on real sadness. Harvard Square, Cambridge, Massachusetts. I was young here, maybe another day I will be old here. Not yet. Not ready.

Many streetlamps. Talkers & coffee. Chess the puzzle & its solution, if any

Sun by moon, world bides its wicked, its pain makers & flesh eaters & greedy beasts for time & dirt. Bides, humors, bows. Eventually, cracks & crushes. One after the next, every one of them is buried old or sick or defeated. Any comfort in this? Wicked’s always on the move & never seals airless & permanent its command.

World bides the sudden scatter of good blood, of wasted fruit, of hurry in praise & slow in vanquish. How explain to a stripling that men do good & ill alike, that none immune to the sway of either kindness or greed? That one man builds his mansion on a purse got from chewing bones & blood of many, welcomes smiling guests to his feast, serves only vegetables now, a man devoted to Godd & beasts, that once he broiled virgins alive to blood their secret magick juice, that once he collected knives & axes to cut his captured enemies piece by screaming piece? Or the man in war who carries those fallen roughly & slowly through the blazing wrecked fields, not a scholar or an artisan, his plumbing tools await him in a far home, his dear lover, their plans for a civil union, maybe adopt a child if laws against gay parents can be won through?

Good & evil are written in tomes & instructions for soldiers, this place, that year, a famine will shift them, a king’s madness shift them again, a peace treaty, a dark speech before thousands, shift again & again, what to do with it, any of it?

“Know that world bides, world wants, world seeds everywhere, world is home. Change is possible, happening, flush it with hope, flush through, not good nor bad but what causes

growth, ease, freedom. Where hope prospers, men & beasts & trees all live fruitfully. Where hope abides, wicked is better understood as hunger unfed, dream mocked, faith caged, desire etched in coin, fear a constant shadow between faces.

“World is home. Why do men restless range its miles? Why do men anxious plunder its juice & kill one another for what they do not own & will not carry to their places in the soil? Nothing. Men fancy up tales of faraway places where one goes upon decease, good peaceful places near answers for their suffering. Call these answers God. Call this faraway place by many names. No assurance but what others have vowed & envisioned. None. World is *home*. Need there be a faraway place & a man-shaped answer? Need one take a knee & mumble a rhyme to men-built statuary, regard holy some books more than others, some men dabbed exalted by other men? I don’t know but I do see & hear of every possible deed & word by men, the selfish act, the brutal one, the many others adjudged one way or another by the place & time & men involved. Tones build religions to stamp one idea or a cluster as central, prime, first, *start here*. None prove but by vow their claim. *World* is home. I believe the answers are here, & some are very plain & some are ornate, cosmic, transcendent. Not all the answers come from men, or are for men. Some are not in words. Some contradict others. Maybe for some questions there are no answers, & some two, & some countless. World *is* home. I don’t know what this means. I believe it is a hook, if not somewhere to begin then at least a hook, a handle, something like comfort.

“World is home. Dreaming you are safe in all—”

lxx. / xxxiii. / x.

Cosmic Early capped his pen & coughed hard, several times, there were nights like this, a few lines, clear, words like bells through an open full-moon field, then they’d stop. His body would shudder, again, harder, & he would write a few more words, try to leave off cleanly.

But other nights, too, endless, beautiful, years of hours, pen across pages, the ink blows up in many words, an exploding hustle of explain & cajole, the night turns close & soft from every direction, there is sweetness no matter the thought, his body becomes a clean window, small in its great building, framed by many vines, the air itself is music, adoring music—he rouses up the dreams & works fine with them—

You could call him a rival to Benny Big Dreams but—no—not simple—not competing—something between them—*something* the true, difficult word—

Benny was native to dreams, a creature made in them, a believer in their power, & their superiority, to waking life, where he’d never been, where he didn’t wish to go, what he barely regarded as valid space—

Cosmic Early was born a waking man, long ago, dreams had mildly accompanied & lightly hued his life for many years, there was a twisting moment, maybe several, & his life had changed—he’d met the crack between waking & dreams where neither is distinguishable, &

he'd acted, taken what was offered, & now—now he was at angles with Benny Big Dreams—who he'd met once—maybe twice—maybe never—dreams are not like that—

What made things more difficult for Cosmic Early than Benny Big Dreams is that he was live, mortal, & getting sicker more often—he knew a choice was coming—knew that he would meet Benny soon & not on equal ground—

Why hesitate? Why not go into Dreamland for good? For one thing, he wasn't sure a dead mortal could. For another, there were living people who counted on him, who he led, in a sense—

This is going to get more complicated—there are two dreams & everything crosses through them—two dreams & one contains the other—it will be a matter of holding close when nothing seems sensible or connecting—holding close when these pages seem lunacy—Rebecca are you paying dear mind?

Rebecca wakes. Looks at me in our bed, near. “What was that?” “I don't know.” “Were we in the same dream? Was Cosmic Early there?” “I don't know.” “Was it important?” “Yes.”

In the second, a 'scape from my nights, my secret sleeps, how I am able to wake & lead & write, running, we were posing as carnival statues in traveling mutant shows, a very long dream, longer by far than my usual, I woke with my head cracking the window & artillery lined up on the motel bed. She'd gone. Christa had gone. Bowie had come for her as long ago he told me he would.

In the first, what contained the second dream & gave its sickness, the one I have, what hollowed my plan of numbers to save the world, I sat by a motel window, a humbled Mexican elder, the music leading me on that dark moonbeam out, through blood & brush, & old lusts. Rosie came to me as long ago she'd promised to, she'd left everything, be my bloom, wear long pink scarves for me, gnaw my hungry naked teeth, through the storm I made for you, away from, yes, away, wake up, Rebecca, this involves us all!

Rebecca leaps out of bed. “Are we awake this time?” She looks at me but I'm not there.

Relax. Yes, you can hear me. Yes, I am writing in your head. It's OK. I know how to do this. Some might say it's the final arrival of language, I simply walk my words right within you. I am within you. I can't harm or change you but I am present. You hear me, this is how I do this now. I don't let many know. They think about me & books. I think you know better or, rather, *further* than that.

lxxi. / xxxiv. / xi.

Dylan watched the bird, the great bird, a beautiful bounty of flight, arc the sky like a comet, so beautiful, how can it be so beautiful? It brings pink hints of the dawn, seems an illuminated scrawl heralding sun, a thousand years pass, & a thousand years more, he watches, watches, for a century of moments bears awe, becomes awe, *is* awe—

Nearby, yet neither seeing the other, Christa watches the bird too, a great high powerful being, a rousing mystery to her deepest bones, why, her inmost wants, why, what has brought her to this hour lets her loose to watch, free, she's not chasing or chased, why? Can it ever be this simple? More watch, in loose groups & strays, watch this bird & see something wanted in its flight, something too deep to say one to any other, why? How this simple? How?

The last time I flew with the golden bird was a thousand years of flaming text across countless bloody canvas skies, how beautiful it was! How they watched, the ones so needing to see! Some of me is still there, this flight, it was I realized later the last canvas of all, all was crushed together & warped the world a little in extended flying cry—

The bird corrodes my hotel bed as I lie holding Tweety Bird & know nothing else. The ceiling breaks apart, cleanly down its middle, & then the great reach of star revealed breaks too, in infinite pieces, I don't know how to feel or think, the bird is on fire & we breathe alike, the bird knows me, the bird shakes me so far below, I am fire too, I feel my skin heat, crackle, crack, go, & not my demise but more of me to see, so much more, how possible as I burn down to bear more, be more?

When the bird hits the No-Tell, hits it high & hard, there is explosion & crack, all shakes hard, what can survive this? Hits, hard, crashes, the upper floors, what could result but calamity? There is light, there is cascading, chaotic light, it is beautiful like a far alien planet, it is beautiful like a death mask in moonlight, there is light everywhere, light echoes & amplifies, makes more light, different light, nobody injured, I cross through it, the Bridge of Glass rises & rises, carries me in familiar possession, & we join the light, pass in, become light, I am trying to explain yet I'm crying none of it mattered while it was happening, as bird & bridge & No-Tell passed through each other, nothing mattered, no struggle, no persuasion, there was arrival, for a moment no clash between hearts, arguments among book, for a moment all passed through all, each & many, so beautiful—

lxxii. / xxxv. / xii.

Woke seeing the world as a cage of coins, terrified, thrash to what as another thought,
an other thought—

Or later riding an escalator & again this sense of *always* being on this escalator, riding, passing floors of activity, now a library's quiet shuffles, now a steamy kitchen with jingling smiling patrons—

cage of coins—

then again mornings on evilly crowded carriages full of bitter, quiet fellow proles, what to hate? How had any of it come to this? What else could there be?

I wrestled the word happiness & came up with *pleasure in presence* & this thought hung around me the day's toiling hours & on into tonight—

Could one travel high enough above the Labyrinthine—say, an elevator to the impossible heights of the No-Tell—say—arrive at the cage of gold coins atop its top—what see? Is there goal in this thought or another toy fancy in many boxes full?

Ahh. Umm.

There is a man who works at the No-Tell. Lives & works there. Have I said how it's set up there? Don't think so. The No-Tell is staffed by the poor of the city, the formerly homeless, the former addicts, & they live there in a segregated section, live there, work there, eat there too. It's how our friend Dylan ended up there, when the building he security guarded was torn down. He lives & works & eats at the No-Tell. He might know the man in question, he knows everyone, running the coffee shop there as he does.

This man—let's call him Noah for yet unknown reason—maybe it's simply what he calls himself—maybe not—his friends there call him No because they say No he's not the Noah who the hotel's named after—nobody knows *that* Noah.

So Noah—or No to be clear & precise & a bit familiar—No is a strange & gentle man, usually—not a young man, looks about what Dante called middle life—No has his dreams—No has them waking & sleeping—he's turned from drugs & drink—turned hard & silent from drugs & drink—says nothing save perhaps to Dylan one night & maybe not much then—

No believes that there was a moment—nameless years ago—when his fame beheld him, reached & nearly grasped him—close, nearly touching—

but not quite—then there were hours years lost nights in drink & broken sex, sinking from the glare of that fame to foul masters need made him kiss with salute—

worse, there were other, fewer hours when sunset beauties or a stray back of soft friendly fur—moments his masters forgotten, his fists open, nearly some explain for that fame which slipped through his heart, & gone,

he waits even now especially so, No waits like his suffering a cause others should raise too, waits, splotchy face on a canvas staring bluntly at all for a nod, a bow, close, he believes it's all close, worse,

he tells his friends as they gather sodden in the Common Room allowed them, far from guests, from cages of coins on high, tells them on many liquid cursing nights when the window's frost curlicues the common stars without, the bottles empty, the phonograph plays every last LP, snores grow into crowding, curling cattle, oh he waits, No is important, not in ways he is thinking of now, but he does not wait in vain, no fruit to come—

He told Dylan, "I was a man regarded by other men. I used words like scythe & scalpel. My hands gestured with beauty & power. I spoke of books & news with authority, considered science & spirituality in my remarks. I was one wondered about by others & they knew not how far my path might lead."

lxxiii. / xxxv. / xiii.

Pleasure in presence. Happiness is pleasure in presence. Go slowly, let it open out. Petal at a time, slowly, slow. So many things to keep in mind here. A wish not for control but free groove—a wish to let out with this world as though I sing not create it—slowly, slow.

Fragments. The Bridge of Glass now ascending, an elevator of sorts, no way off still, passing many sites. Maya in someone's dreams, a pink dervish, someone watching her afar, fears she'll begin to guess her own power—Preacher touches Genny's shoulder in the dark & her hotel room bursts into many colors—the next blood canvas Charlie Pigeonfoot saw in that



MP: RS

light bulb that did something to him—his belief that *Remoteland* contained one of his blood canvases but it was from his dreams very befuddling—Christa finds herself in the Ampitheatre more profoundly, walks deeper into, lets to it, lets to it more—Bowie is on his way back to that border town, the one where Rosie lived, the one with the strange lights its priest feared especially when he kneeled late nights in his bed chamber & they entered his room—yes, Bowie knew the priest, things the priest did not tell—who the priest had been long ago & the trunk which preserved those days, locked, hidden, secretly treasured—the priest who in truth hid as priest, from what too much & too disturbing he knew—he knew the Lights very well, had come to this border town long ago because of them—an old colleague of Bowie’s, possible he’d been a mushroom at one time too—fragments, maybe comfort in this—

Crossing flesh through—that’s what they’d called it—that traffick into Dreamland, between dimensions, crossing time easily & angularly & sometimes multiple directions at once—crossing flesh through was the easy way to talk about all this—Bowie had liked it for a long time & had very much objected to the lanes closing to a closely watched few—the priest had left by then, said, “I’ve seen too much for my peaceful passage. It will never end. I need a smaller gig with no cosmic consequences” but he should have believed Bowie’s warning that cosmic dust would always follow his going—now years passed all that, Bowie was on a loud, dirty, crowded bus to the priest’s town—

he thought of Christa, let her being enter his whole being at night on that bus, felt her fill him up with presence, knew leaving her where he had risked losing her not to dangers but to the choices safety allows one to mull—sometimes he saw a room, & a bed, & she was moaning on the bed, her hands bound, her fine ass tapped angrily, multiply, her hair wet tangled with exhaustion, with being taken now again, love in it somewhere—he’d find her again after this if he could—he would have to work to remember her until then—the Lights consumed memories rawest to flesh—the kind he had most of her—

Maya found herself in a room, this isn’t clear, she seemed unhurt & alone, this room had no windows or doors—

Was this dream? Was this some then or another? Would Dylan hear her message & choose to find her?

Fragments is all. I watch them maybe there’s sum, maybe not, I come back to the room, the important room, walls of fire, ceiling of stars, floor of moonlight, couch of silver melody, bed of blue light & red gold—

lxxiv. / xxxvi. / xiv.

What’s true is coming trouble, arcing through the hours, awaiting arrival, the smash soon to know, what’s true is constant ferment. The world is pounding everywhere, chaotically, one color changing another, a fluid dissipating, metal cracking wood, one panic not enough, another too much, truths click out with a passing beat, swinging spectre of rage & light & now gone, here another, & another. Truths high & solid & good, everywhere collapsing, our friend No would try to tell his sodden friends to wake up, keep jerking about wildly to keep off the rest, & one would mumble in a half-coherent blubber, “Didn’t you used to be almost famous once?” someone else would snort & say “Can I almost have your autograph?” & whoever wasn’t passed out would blearily howl.

What’s true happens always, gives way only to itself, spitting yeas & denials equally in

bitter, golden abundance.

More fragments. The No-Tell exists oddly as a multi-star hotel & as a poorfolks social project. The ones employed there, living & eating there, are given strict rules on how to interact with the guests. Essentially: No-Tell.

What happens later, gives No his satisfaction & punishes quite a few indiscriminately, happens near the top floor in a bed paid for by no public document or figure.

She came to pose for pictures, told her girlfriends to call her cell phone in three hours if she hadn't called, they were runaways new to the No-Tell staff, assigned as maids, never should have been hired, not poor, fucking cell phones!

—laid her out beautifully in an unhooked powder blue bra & panties gently pulled down to her knees—

—lights burst her mind in ways she knew no words, on her back now, breast squeezed by her own hands, breathing quickly—

—naked—& then—

now a shred by she growled no to it—now so many lights there was no telling concrete reality—

now resting again, legs askew, her freshly shaved pussy lips when—

phone rang & something like her rejoined her girlfriends, giggling—gives way to itself—happy, golden abundance

lxxv. / xxxvii. / xv.

Some keening croon for a god, kneel for it, raise high for it, suck smoke & eat molecules for it, refrain touch or gobble many for it, keening croon for a god, maybe two ideas of what it is, this god, a mountain of good, a cosmic redwood of power, its vast soil of right, a spearing heart shine of true, more than three ideas hard to triangulate simply, the god must be story, kiss, a powerful leg, this or another thing it must be, a pretty cloud, a wet cavernous pussy with light small pink crown, a library of capitalized words, a sure verb without adornment, an intent mysterious but possible all may go but all won't go, a secret, oh great secret, why pain, why age, why flesh, why want, why sad, why sad, why departure, why fist, why sad, maybe why joy but often less so. Why suffer, what reward, which explain. Oh, so.

—keening croon for a god, a science, a sweet faith's sting true. For pain is true, it is first memory, it is departure. Pain is solid & trustworthy. Pain is not good but pain—

Why ferment, why breath, why dream.

The wisest book warns, "Some eat others" & shuts hard, what is this book & source its wisdom, is it crooning's best fruits, is it fair healing to wounds? Some eat others & how bear this truth, wake up, Rebecca!

She looks up at me, I'm still not there. She tries to swat Cosmic Early away like he was a housefly.

You can't. I told you. "What do you want me to do? Where's Raymond?" He's moving my pen in your mind. By request. I'm not forcing him nor am I hurting you, am I? "No. Just tell me

what to do.” You don’t work like that. You obey nobody. You’ve been reading my books for years now. Shouldn’t I know you as well as you know me? “I didn’t know you could do this.” It’s a little more drastic than most could handle. They stick with the books. I don’t think you need to. “I know. You said that. Is there more to this?” There’s always more. “Are you going to tell me?” No. No-tell. No-tell!

Cosmic Early breaks into great wild laughing. It makes no sense to Rebecca who doesn’t know quite yet.

He’d waited for a long time, still a man of blood & bone. Waited for what might still come, like letters from a lost, fond year. Waited hoping for more than just the old wants, bitter rifts, still tangled smolders.

Why ferment. Why breath. Why dream.

—for a great, swinging spectre blowing out rage & light, maybe one whose path he’d hurl his sick body onto, along, not yet Dreamland, not yet what he could not know for certain.

Cosmic Early was now living at the No-Tell, it was obvious to him that here was some crossing to the White Woods, maybe some hint to the Bridge of Glass. The way is Dis-illusion.

He could not tell Rebecca yet because he did not know. Too much scatter in the conduit he used. Dreams once coherent to him, a kaleidoscopic oracle but oracle nonetheless

everything would cross, would mimic, would double, he groaned in his bed, the girl next to him groaned in concert, a trace of spittle on her shiny pink lips, or was it come. Might be blood but not today. He’d paid good money for her, for the path she walked to & from him without a word or glance from others. Her friends would come too, in time. Haha. Come too. No-Tell. Shit, this world was funny. So fucking funny.

She wasn’t really asleep & her name was Jazz. Early pain had accelerated her natural brilliance. Cosmic Early was her teacher of sorts, she had sought him, sought this place. They each regarded the other as a last chance.

She’d brought her friends unwillingly, decided they would make good cover & protection for awhile, then when bored, scared, or homesick enough they’d take their sad, hurried leave. Would forget her & this place enough to be unable to speak inconveniently true about either. She was patient.

Cosmic Early partly understood her, the part she let him understand. He was brilliant too, but old, past when age helped, when the body’s complaints slowed the mind, obscured its sharpness. Not long ago, he would have known her in a lazy glance.

As it was, he’d let it get to him, the *it* that had begun to take in other ways, the warnings meant nothing, even those from his friend Gravy, once his partner in another place. Gravy was blunt.

"You still taking that underage whore regular?" Early said nothing. "She's trouble, Cosmos. She's not here by chance." Early nodded but he didn't really know. Gravy saw that, saw the sickness in his old friend, knew hints of the rivalry with Benny Big Dreams. His face, a beat-up patched old monster, softened. "Are you even screwing her?" "Here or there?" There meant Dreamland. "Do you have enough flesh here?" Gravy left the bar when Cosmic Early would say no more.

Jazz was clearer on her purpose with him. Though he asked little of her, yet, in the waking hours they shared, she would have done almost anything. It was Dreamland where it mattered, where she wanted him to bring her more often. She'd figured a way back into the White Woods, where she had to return, where she would finish what remained undone. She knew he was afraid, & had reason to be.

He knew she had friends he needed somehow, all three. They never saw each other, Jazz & Early, by daylight or evening lamplight. They never saw each other clothed. They didn't know what their bodies did while they were in Dreamland. Each intended to consume the other, not yet knowing how. Apart, neither thought much of the other. He paid good money for her path to him to be clear. She didn't know. He'd let it get to him & was failing day by day.

"Next time, bring them both."

Some eat others. No science, no faith. What heart's newgrown starlight from begging world for its king? A system, a star, a shining tome of crystal lyric. Some eat others. No science, no faith. Try to hustle beyond this for a flashier believe, the goods of tall shapely buildings, the goods of crown upon one man's head then another through the centuries, where I fit in, where the action goes only my dust will one day watch.

Some eat others. Bowie sees this as a graffito knife-carved into the seat back facing him. He nods, then shakes his head. True, but not enough.

He'd asked Paul, last night talking in the park, "What about the fire?" "What fire?" "How many times have you told us this story?" "A few." "*Quite a few*. I don't think 'few' can handle how many times. You say there was a fire but the story contains no fire." "Yah, it does." "Where? You fell asleep in a dust storm, woke up, Rosie was gone. The whole town looked for her then gave up. Paula came slinking around, you took up with her. We don't get details; you don't remember, you don't want to tell." "Yah." "So—what fire?" "It happened, later, but that night." "What does that mean?" "Hey, Lee, back off him. He lost his wife. He's living in a shelter." "I just want to know."

Paul looked me up & down a good long time. "It was because of Paula. Remember her books on alternate history?" "Yah." "Well, we tried something in those books. It didn't work." "Tried what?" "Going back." "How?" "We went back & there was a fire & we thought Rosie died & we didn't try again." "Are you shitting us?" Silence. More silence. "No. I'm not. We tried. Paula did all she could. She loved Rosie like me but we just couldn't." Paul stood, shaky, the other guys urging him to relax, sit back down. He was looking at me. "You'll hit that moment too, maybe. That go-back moment, try to fix it moment. Maybe you'll have better luck than we

did.” I stood too. I was scared, not sure why, but I had to go. We looked at each other. He put a hand on my shoulder could have broke the bones. “Some eat others. That’s what I learned. That’s part of what you need to know where you’re going.”

On a bus to your old town I see it again. I could have carved it on that seat back myself but I don’t know.

He told us about Paula one time, we were all fiercely drunk. Not sure why it happened, that much, I think it was July 4th fireworks & we had more booze than possible, maybe whiskey, maybe I brought it, & I’m not sure it was Paula he was talking about but it’s what else I have to go on. Til I get there & find her.

It comes back in thumps, “the Lights were everywhere that night, they’d never been like that, not far away but all around us” “I think she brought them, I really do, she had to prove it to me, the power she believed” “the window near the church’s spire, she’d removed it, it was a square hole she was leaning out naked, it was fucking scary, she wanted it deep in her ass which I’d never done & we’d never really done it” “the Lights changed” “She showed me how to do it, how to squeeze her tits & shove my cock in deep like some kind of machine & when I got it right she laughed. She laughed & laughed into the town’s night air & she leaned out the window farther & farther” “The Padre was passed out in a pew, his trousers at his feet” “Someone mentioned Rosie to me that night, in front of Paula, shit I didn’t like that!” “People were talking about a dream many of them had” “I felt myself pushing deeper & deeper into her, felt my cock harden like it never had, I lost some kind of awareness & became my cock seeing how it saw, the way it cracked her cherry ass, how it let my cock push deeper & deeper, how it was union breath & beat with her, my hands squeezing her tits which almost chewed my fingers in their hunger, her mouth red & moaning words in the wrong order” “I was so young. This was so long ago”

He said that last in the middle & I tried to swim to coherency, I looked at the others but they missed it, a couple were feeling themselves up. So what was it then? He wasn’t old. It made no sense. He wasn’t an old man! I was lost & he had stopped talking. What did it mean? Was it just that he lived the wound like last year? He never said her name but it sounded like that town. The fireworks were filling the skies, like Paul’s Lights, like the night he fucked Paula hanging out the high church window if he did.

“Hey, man, this seat taken?”

“No.”

“You OK? You look sick. I got a bottle of water. Not even opened. I have three really. I meant do you want one? I got extra.”

“Thanks.”

“Where you going?”

“New Mexico.”

“Yah. The light, I know.”

“Lights?”

“Light. The sunsets. They’re beautiful.”

“You didn’t say lights?”

“No. Drink more of that. You look pale. I got a good feel for people & their conditions. A gift.”

“Thanks.” “No problem, really. I’m studying to be a healer, to tell you the truth.”

Bowie nods. The water calms him but then he feels like he’s falling away.

What was he remembering? Had Paul told him any of that? Hadn't he been dreaming about those days for years now, talking to Paul long after he knew him?

"Dreams are potent, man. Sometimes like a doctor, trying to tell you what's wrong. Sometimes like a door, telling you to come on, take a dare, open me up."

Bowie opens his eyes but the bus is dark & the person next to him is shadows.

"It's OK. Sometimes I hear thoughts. Can be a problem when not careful. But you look hip, man, that's why I sat here. Looked like you could use a friend too."

Bowie nods. Settles back. "We can talk but back a step away. Please."

"OK, man. I can do that. Hey, it's just like you said, too. I picture myself backing up til I can hear your voice but not your mind. You're sharp, man."

"Yah."

"Can I help? I mean, you got a lot on your mind, I could tell before I backed up. Some pretty girls in there. You must call 'em with a magic scent."

Bowie says nothing.

"Just kidding."

"Some eat others."

"I know. I learned that one too."

"What does it mean?"

lxxvi. / xxxviii. / xvi.

Tonight someone suffers. Genny watches all of it coming out of her motel TV, she's nude holding Tweety Bird who's nude too, all the colors are terrifying, someone suffers tonight, she watches & touches her skin to make sure she's still there, someone tonight suffers, he'd been with her, he'd touched her shoulder & she'd screamed into her mattress, a long long time, it felt relieving to finally let it all go, crazily, wildly, let it go, & when she'd looked up, calm a moment, she'd put on the TV for comfort & company, they'd both undressed, for a laugh & the colors hadn't been there at first, no, at first had been a TV show she thinks she watched once, it became colors slowly, not even noticeable at first, around the edges of the screen & then she couldn't turn it off, & then she couldn't move, he'd touched her, he'd been there, in that room far from everything, been there & touched her shoulder, "tonight someone suffers" Who'd said that? Him? Anyone? The TV?

What then. I'm here, Preacher, I'm nude, ready. I'd give myself to you in body, tonight, if you want, if you'd have me. I don't know if you would tonight, or if I should have back then. I don't know. What I mostly do is remember & this is really the worst. I remember *then* & don't seem to have a *now*. Have I left that bar where I was waiting for you? I mean, *really left it*? I can't be sure.

If the colors from that TV became your body, or just your desire for me, is it what I want, is there a me that is not my wants?

It's what I can't tell, Preacher. You would get angry sometimes, in your speeches, angry enough to raise noise in those listening, it's why we were there, wasn't it? A plalanx of pretty young women to ring protectively, erotically around you & your words. Nothing amplifies better than plenty of pussy on hand. Eh, Preacher? We agreed, we knew. There had to be more to it than that, of course, but, still, also, we knew.

“What difference between the carriage’s angry push & several muddled blouses?” You’d start & look at nobody. “What difference between old men easily debating war & the bombs made for market noons?” You’d go on, but slowly. Then, always picking out an older man, a rival? A brother? A boast you to him behind your fine phalanx of pussy, you’d slowly continue, “If a beggar looks close at you, is this sacred or shameful new space?”

You’d pause. Hell, you’d stop. People would shift around. Waiting. The phalanx wouldn’t move though. We were the signal to stay. Preacher is biding his moment. Bide with him.

“Talk of love, talk of empathy, rant on the burning blankness through this world’s old heart.” You’d be shouting now, sometimes it was incoherent. Nearly. Near as you chose. “Confess indifference, cry ignorance, keen to being less than a stripling in first night’s squall.” You’d stop. By now the crowd was so wetly riled you were fucking it at will. “Eat the new pill & care for a shining hour or two.” You’d start laughing, it always upset me. Your laugh was a deep hollow bowl, I’d go looking down in it for humor or even meaning & I’d find nothing.

“Some . . . other . . . night in giving arms & the world a fine sweet to be enjoyed slowly. Past . . . dawn . . . believe something salves the closest wounds.” You’d stop right there, & I would believe, *every damn time*, that you weren’t going to go on. My knickers were sodden by now, not sure about the rest of the phalanx, & I wonder now just what was it I wanted to fuck?

But you’d go on, you’d finish it. “Changed for every change, every broken new high, every bed, why unloved alone.” Now you’d scoop up every last glance, accept them as due about now.

“Tonight someone suffers. *Must . . . a sage . . . exhume . . . to say . . . you suffer too?*” You’d leave there, usually, not much else to say, we’d hang back a bit to make sure the crowd didn’t raise too much post-preachings hell. Usually they felt doused by guilt & confusion. I never knew how much good it did. I mean, I’d heard the words & their like many times, I knew the territory. Your aim, I figured, was to arouse & shock. A catalyst. Using your own carved out philosophy where another would use scripture. I never knew what you’d read, though I’d always assumed a lot, or what you valued in books, a harder guess. Probably a bit of Buddhism, maybe some Camus. Rumi? Rilke? The world’s great mystics resemble each other by invisible ways.

Anyway, back to me, nude on my bed. More than a few times with the Phalanx too. How the menfolk would have creamed & paid to see us frolic! There were some sweet hours. We kept busy, we had fun.

We were waiting for *you*. Every one of us. It was usually why the ones who left did. It’s why I didn’t. I outlasted every one of them & I thought you knew, & knew why.

Even now I can’t stop the want or the pain. I’m a thousand miles from you, but you’re here. *Right here*. Those colors coming out of my motel TV set.

Nothing goes away, Preacher, & nothing returns. That’s what I’ve learned from all these years.

We just wanted you to choose. One, none, all if you wanted. You seemed to understand so much, care so much, it’s why we were there. But you missed it. Missed us.

Thing is, I was never quite sure about this. I stayed longer. I heard how the preachings changed over time. You knew something, you knew a lot of things, you weren’t *blind*, of that I

became sure.

But I didn't ask. I nursed my want, my doubts, my questions, but I never asked. Respect? Fear. Then that night I was ready to ask. I was ready.

lxxvii. / xxxix. / xvii.

Eventually back to the big man on stage, his guitar, his voice, his band. Always relevant, however the pages pass.

Nothing less in it, watch him, watch his band. The music its own—beautiful yaw—

“What's he talking about?”

“Trying to understand it, like always.”

“Understand music? With his pen?”

“Yah. Music, & desire.”

They laugh. I laugh with them.

Mapless street corners. Dusky old light. Secret juice from other years, & still it spills.

They play because they like it, because they want to, because Noisy Children fucking rocks & not much else to the tale.

I watch, obscurely, sitting with Rebecca, more open. She expects the best. I wake, find all's blooming despite. Nod.

Outside the traffic lights & branches wave, night taps, taps again, dreamed this hour

Skulls of shacks

Charred autos

Desert light spiking corpses

A game, a puzzle, a flu. Something
to be found, to be won, I don't
know. I don't know? No. Don't.

“I'm in the Labyrinthine too”

“Everyone.”

“I've tried to breach it.”

The band keeps playing.

What coming hour dreams now,
rosy light & bodies fallen, gentle
words, gentle death. Something
won't let go.

“Still music?”

“Yep.”

“Still pussy. Er, desire?”

“Yah. Er.”

Maya looks around again. Shapes in the dark partly return the world. No windows, no

doors, but a bare rosy light from somewhere.

Dressed, barely. Silence.

Before, after, when?

You, tell me.

I don't know.

You make these pages.

Sometimes that doesn't help.

Tell me!

Many think you're the key.

What do you think?

I think you're fuckable fiction which seems to be what I like sometimes.

What then?

No more. Just that. The world's a consuming flesh.

Why all this then?

Because words comfort. The chaos told in ink. A story obscures the great raging panic life comprises.

All that?

Or just this. Music consumes everything, even death.

Want some now?

Light now from an open doorway.

She stands, more dressed.

"Still time," she says aloud, to nothing.

A hotel hallway, timeless dim, patterns in the carpet & on the wall signifying something, everything, & nothing

She'd find Dylan here somewhere, if she still wanted to. Or was it better chasing?

lxxviii. / xl. / xviii.

Eventually some idea toward this hotel, its seeming to consume more within itself, where it breaks & borders other,

a continuity, a blurring, dulling distinction between within & without—

Where the No-Tel has not breached is Luna T's Cafe, & something vital in this. Not an antagonism between the two, not yet.

Where Luna T's opened out to else & other, the No-Tel pulled, compelled *toward*.

How high each, how deep? How indeed. I don't know in truth, have not ever known with T's & this No-Tel seems more monstrous to me than aught—

What say, why say. A puzzle with solution? An exit? I don't think so.

Answers seem to reduce, exclude. Exits are capitulation, if not straight out false. No escape through alchemy, emotion, intuition, scientific illumination.

What then?

Ancients said mathematics & music. Others sacrifice & mercy.

Maybe it was just blind hunger, code & key to every moment, hunger to feed, hunger to possess, hunger to make & re-make, hunger resembling a flame, an eye, an ear, a hand.

Hungers twined & named together as God. What feeds, what must be fed, desire & emptiness, longing, wonder, a clash, a spark, what explains.

There is no explain in embodiment, no why, no whereto. None. If a difference, Luna T's toward an open hand, a willing question. The No-Tel willing order. Perhaps this is overstating, flow is truer than truth—

A warning. A thousand words if necessary but in sum, a warning.

A breath. Turn another way. Tonight someone suffers. Whatever night, someone suffers. No water, empty bowl, two pillows for one head.

The No-Tell rises far above Luna T's Cafe & the parking garage above her. An odd building, not a steady look, an ill shifting from angle to angle, hour to hour.

War where once a city, now the markets burn, neighbors blankly clutch for what remains.

On the TV, a sack of cold coins, a palsied try reading wise leaves.

The crack of want into uneven pieces, a hand over a mouth, another loosens a tight garment. A king bides & bides the rabble's growl, contrives new ways to turn lingual prowess to iron.

Someone suffers, though blood & breath skein all close, a weaving each to all.

Some night fireworks fly about the No-Tell's peak, its shifting ambiguous peak, often thrust hard into black clouds, fireworks light up the clouds,

whatever little you were ended with a turn & a reach, then you belonged to a new moment, more than manacles & compulsion to obey, you were taken from one kind of knowing to another

Someone suffers. Turn away & there another, turn again, & another. No explain in embodiment, in hands slow & fingers linger slower, in what will be given, in how a God's woman will secretly come in prayers buried inside dreams nobody hears.

Maybe it was just blind hunger, code & key to every movement, Jazz cries out & wakes alone. Felt waking cloak & tangle her anew. She'd been of one world, then another, now here was neither, here was aftermath. She twisted around, trying to feel her youth, it was faint music, what she felt most was anger, where she accelerated in thought & imagination was deep in her fury. A keening croon made in her loins, cried from her belly, exploded from her mind, the one she didn't use to have, the one she has now.

Some far place, some bridge of colored glass, some elixir's glowing eye gazing from deep her throat. A wide open eye in love, she would find him, she would mount him, she would crush

him, this would be the next world, what her book called a far place of kind solitude, of clear shine.

Mathematics & music. Sacrifice & mercy.

A book cries for its perpetua, for something like immortality. Comes in glints, in long breaths. I agree to its unknown length, unknown age. I agree because I have no counter-argument. I love this book, its body, its path.

Its crooning corrodes.



To be continued in Cenacle | 73 | June 2010



MP: RS

Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Three.

(Continued)

"Beware & Be Aware."

lxxix. / xli. / xix.

Barefoot, Maya pads through the Hotel Noah, hallway, stairs, hallway, stairs. An open door. Goes in.

A room of silk, of cotton, of lace. Mirrors. Secret, quiet, flowing music. Rosy light, crimson curtains, shut.

An inner room, steaming, the sound of water.

Dreaming she shuts the door & breathes in the steam. Sheds her unfamiliar clothes & finds her way to the hot falling water.

Feels like she is disintegrating, feels good, her skin a sucking noise from scalp to toes.

Minutes pass. More minutes. She cries, briefly, not one to give over to it, does, briefly. Her body feels good, tired. Strange. Steps away from the steam toward the door. Listens.

Opens the door, nude, unafraid, unashamed. Too much roiling her for any of that.

Nothing. Nobody. Crimson curtains, rosy light. Silk, cotton, lace.

Unused to such material finery, she touches, & touches.

Would he like her better wearing any of these? Was Dylan like this? She didn't think so.

She looks down at her body. Skinny, she thinks, like always. Looks at the colors, arrayed on racks all around her. Thinks.

Why not? Smiles & begins to look with purpose. Still naked, sees no underwear. Ah well.

She read a book once when she was very little. There was a princess in a pink gown, fluffy. She was a powerful girl. She believed the kind should win. She travelled with her friends & told everyone what she believed.

The book had colored illustrations but no cover. The princess had long pink hair, like her gown, with a blonde streak, like Maya now but reversed. She was brave, & her friends said she was reckless too.

"Why do you always look for angry people? Strange forests? Festivals of fire & full moonlight?"

She laughed, how she usually replied. They approached a small house, at night, but she did not knock. Creeped around the house, looking for a window to see within.

Maya finds a long dress, not a puffy gown but pink like the stripe in her hair. It hangs a little loosely on her. Skinny. But it feels nice.

They watch the mother pray by her bedside. Her baby quiet or asleep in its low cradle. A few words slip from her mouth “God . . . belief . . . a code . . . a key . . . sad endless war . . . sad endless war”

The room contains no shoes as it contains no underwear. Maya looks in the mirror. Skinny. Smiles. Better. I need shoes, Dylan.

She stands, walks to the window opposite theirs. The window now glows, raises a square halo of dust, begins to hum, a tap, tapping, white petals gather sourcelessly around the woman as she leans on its sill & watches

Maya kisses the mirror then leaves the room, shutting the door softly. She feels more ready to meet Dylan.

Would he like her as well in patchie pants? He would. No doubts.

They watch her through the night, the smaller ones dozing silently. The illustration in the book also glows, seems multi-dimensional. In the corner a mirror. The princess nods & points. Her companions shake, no. The princess hikes up her dress & crawls through the window. The rest follow, some carry others. To the mirror, through the mirror, to the steaming room beyond.

“She’s in danger, she remembered us, we have to protect her.”

The woman hears them but as they do not approach her or her stripling, & their hurrying noise quickly ceases, she does not turn. Lets her gaze keep on the desert, on its lights, nearing, brighter than the coming dawn.

lxxx. / xlii. / xx.

I keep the housefly with me as I leave, no, really, I figure up a mesh cage for him out of an old green & white coffee cup & a piece of fishnet stockings, put a little something in his cup with him, decide to keep my key, smash the room’s window & leave.

I know this shit won’t end, I met a brilliant old man in the coop & he explained it all easily, we only talked twice, he didn’t finish before they separated us for good—

“There was an hour, rising a brilliant shaft of hope” his checker jumps mine, he’s a better player than me “homeless as a wild goat, become, it seemed lastly, a pure heat stalking heat” the second time we met he denied or refuted all of this—told me otherwise—so I had a choice “a careening petal without stem or soil.” Jumps another checker. Won’t play Flying Kings or forward/backward jumping “Dreaming by movement alone, glad hustling the days & miles, ever singing my bright cage, strumming its bars & calling this my music” most of the nurses & doctors were gentle with him, a little fearful. But one, a scrawny little black man with an unkempt beard, pushed him around, sometimes they laughed, argued, once screamed at each other “She’s the fucking code & key!” “No, Charlie. You’re a tired old man who still dreams about tight poon.” “Fuck you, murderer! You murder all by keeping me prisoned here! All of you!” Mostly he was quiet, read, or held books before his face. We talked twice. “Sweet velvet blindness, hopeless preaching my path” beat me in ten moves & set them up again, quickly, like time mattered there. “A touch, another, nights crying wide to starlight on earth.” Stopped. Stared at me hard. I nodded. I smiled. I tried to be open. “Hungry as a wild goat, an hour passed, many hours. Countless barking my songs, next tome, breaking vessel, worse

ruin.” He stopped & would say no more. Our game was unfinished. OK. I left. Got up, walked to another part of the room, picked up one of my comic books I’d shared.

When he resumed it was to refute or deny all he’d said the first time. He was anxious, scared, he was trying to tell me something hard to tell, he’d gotten it wrong once, he was trying again. “Many hours, I stretched on, how to choose what to let crumble, which to call soul & all others rust?” He picked up one of my red checkers & put it in his mouth. Sucked it & talked. “What tonight is blithely letting go?”

We didn’t talk again. The nurse who fought & friended him came at that moment & fetched him.

There was more. I tell the housefly as I stumble through puddles & mud.

I know now. Found out. Took years. It’s that film. In one scene there’s a letter, someone we can’t see & don’t know is reading it.

It says: “Bones of days restless to bury, let their dirge in shadows fall” there’s night music getting louder, a death-sounding wail in piano & trumpet “Let their shaft strike my beast within, let the old blood burst, let these new hours consume” the room, the letter, everything explodes & there are endless minutes of silent white light. We’re going there now to that room. Keep the key safe in there.

lxxxi. / xliii. / xxi.

I stand up, first time in hours, just stand damn up. The TV is dark, there’s no hand on my shoulder now. I don’t disbelieve either but nothing is happening now.

I look down at Tweety Bird, she’s doing better. Lean down, remove the rubber bands. She’s OK now, it’s been rough, the scars are there, but she’s back, hell, she’s rocking. I dress her & put her under the blanket a bit. Her smile is a little hidden but bright & a little goofy as ever. So many times back then I held her & gulped her smile right into my heart. Is she real? Real as I need her to be.

But I have to go. Not sure why or where. Just out, maybe just a few minutes. I’ll be back, I know that. But right now I have to go outside.

It’s cold, clear, no snow, no wind, not too bad. My clothes are thin, & strange because I was nude so many hours. OK. Look around.

The motel is dark, I don’t see a light in the office or any of the rooms. Across the highway is a cornfield, lit up a little by the big moon. It’s quiet.

I turn away from the road & see another building set back from the motel & its units. Its interior is lamp-lit. A shadow moves inside.

I walk closer. A white shingled building with blue trim. Slanted roof painted yellow where it’s visible. An old sign in front. “Flying Elephant Services.” Strange, no car or truck parked in front.

I keep walking, no longer thinking why & asking myself if a lone woman with no jacket should be adventuring out in the winter countryside. Ahh.

I knock. What services?

The door opens & a brilliant, blinding light hits me, much brighter than what I saw through the building’s window. I think I hear a voice say come in but I’m not sure. I walk in with my hands waving blindly before me.

Then I’m sitting. There’s a gap but then I’m sitting & the blinding light is replaced

by a murk, almost greenish. I'm holding a warm mug, shaped to look like a turtle. Sniff, peppermint tea.

OK. The voice is talking, I think. My senses are struggling. I'm not scared, just confused.

The voice pauses, breathes. Thinking. "The rivet of every cause looses, no matter how high the wall, how massed the men, how right & cruel the lead temple's tome." Pauses. Where did this begin? The words remind me of a teacher I had in high school. He told us to call him Manny, his first name. He was strange & alluring. Made my thighs warm sitting in his class. I *hated* when he was expelled for fucking another girl. Made me furious it wasn't me. She got scared she was pregnant & told. She wasn't. I would have kept silent. In class he'd wander off his topic, I think I loved him a little, I think he prepared me for Preacher, loving the kind of man who's hyper-intelligent & makes you want to crush him a little with your thighs, with what you're sure you can do if you get him in your bed, his bed. Some bed. No bed. Whatever.

So this. He talks on in the murk, if it's a he, I really don't know, just a silhouette that moves once in awhile. "Looses, I say, air bites through, an hour, another, many breaths, wrong ideas take their hold a gentle lick at a time."

Mm. I like that. I don't say a word, don't breathe.

Then I fucking blow it by talking, talking before my brain has an idea it's going to "What services do you offer? Why are you working so late?" It was nerves. Thinking about Manny. One time, just once he was really close to me, it was his turn to monitor all-day detention. They caught me smoking a joint behind the gym. Fuck. *A joint*. Kids were smoking rock & sharing needles there every day, gang fucking cheerleaders who never told for fear of being kicked off the squad. A fucking joint.

So there I was & he leaned over me suddenly to make sure I was reading schoolwork not porn or comic books. I felt his breath as his eyes dove straight down my low-cut blouse. Pink & white striped. My friend Biscuit from college called it my candy cane jail bait slattern's blouse. Slattern. Ha!

That moment stiffened everything. Later when I was touching myself & remembering late at night I hoped he got a good hard stiffie from it. At the moment I disappeared somewhere & it was over. It was nothing & it was over too. He fucked someone else.

The door swings open & I get the hint. But he talks on for a bit more. Like I lost but I was going to know *exactly* how much. "Sin softens, becomes familiar, the poor, the outcast shift nearer, stay. Eventually a new high wall, next wrath of rivets, will roar beautifully, will last forever." There's a pause. I'm going, I'm going.

"Awhile."

Suddenly I'm outside again & the light through the window is not blinding & the silhouette moves a bit within.

Fuck. *Fuck*.

lxxxii. / xliv. / xxii.

Tide chips, time chides. Between the two, the whole answer, & little explain. Passage, change, the deep raw mathematics of want—

"Fuck that. You're saying it's all about pussy & death."

"Somewhat."

"Yah. Been said before, Jack. Said again & again, better, funnier, darker. Name it. Been

said. Even by you. Over & over.”

“It’s all one song . . .”

“You can look at it that way.”

“Doesn’t help.”

“Nothing *helps*. Some things comfort, some harm. But nothing helps.”

“Pussy & death.”

“Yah, Jack. That’s about it.”

“What else?”

“What do you want? Trees? Stars? Happy talking dolphins? You can expand it out infinitely or reduce it to nearly nothing. But neither really works. You can’t cap it, label it, understand it, call it good, & know it’s never going to change.”

“Pussy & death.”

“Explains a lot, don’t you think? The way humans cattle drive forward, like there’s somewhere to get to, some beautiful arrival.”

“Is there?”

“See, nobody knows. Nobody can account for any of it. Explain this hour, this minute, this square foot before your eyes. The world leaks all over, visibly, invisibly, contrary, & contrary to that. There are answers in mathematics, molecules, music, carnal violence, deed & unrelated deed.”

“What then?”

“Nothing. No then. No arrival. One thing, the next, but no ordained order. Want, anger, hatred. Feeding, dark matter. Chocolate.”

“What then?”

“Choice. Luck. Perspective. Memory. Hunger. The unknown. What’s familiar & adds up to a principle or a correct deed, if enough is ignored. Connect this idea to that formula to some memory, or place them closely astride & call it something to bide by.”

“None of this helps.”

“*There is no help*. There is swimming blindly in an endless ocean.”

“And that image doesn’t work either, does it?”

“No.”

“What then?”

“Nobody knows.”

“But everything moves.”

—*Rift from the cosmos, from yon stellar intent, part of a primal reaching from onyx reaches to a floor no man may know—*

“*Fuck it*”

“Her? Him?”

“*It*”

“A person?”

“*It*”

“Is that advice? An answer?”

“*Fuck it.*”

—*Knowing not what man does, but what he tries. Tide chips, time chides—*

“No more drinks. This is useless.”

“What will you do?”

“Nothing. Then the next.”

—*The endless water of years gathers finally—*

“around limbs & heart”

—& everything goes”

He looks at me clear-eyed like that emptied bottle in front of him was spring water.

“If you saw me at work, you’d see another man. The work I did. I quit. I came here to tell her.

“None of it is enough anymore.”

lxxxiii. / xliv. / xxiii.

What rises two remains one. The brilliant hand may sing til it forgets—

I remember their bodies distinct from each other, I don’t know what this means exactly. Both young women, nearly the same age, how do I remember them like two different species?

‘Stina moved like sunshine. She was light & quick. Her hands were cageless, not the holding kind though she’d grab mine sometimes—

Penny moved through deep water & I would swim down there with her—

Ah balls. I’m not good at this. I just don’t know how to remember them. I don’t think I’m going back—

The burnt leaf may rest forgetting among countless.

How does love forget so easily? I don’t even remember being high so much.

What then? What was any of it?

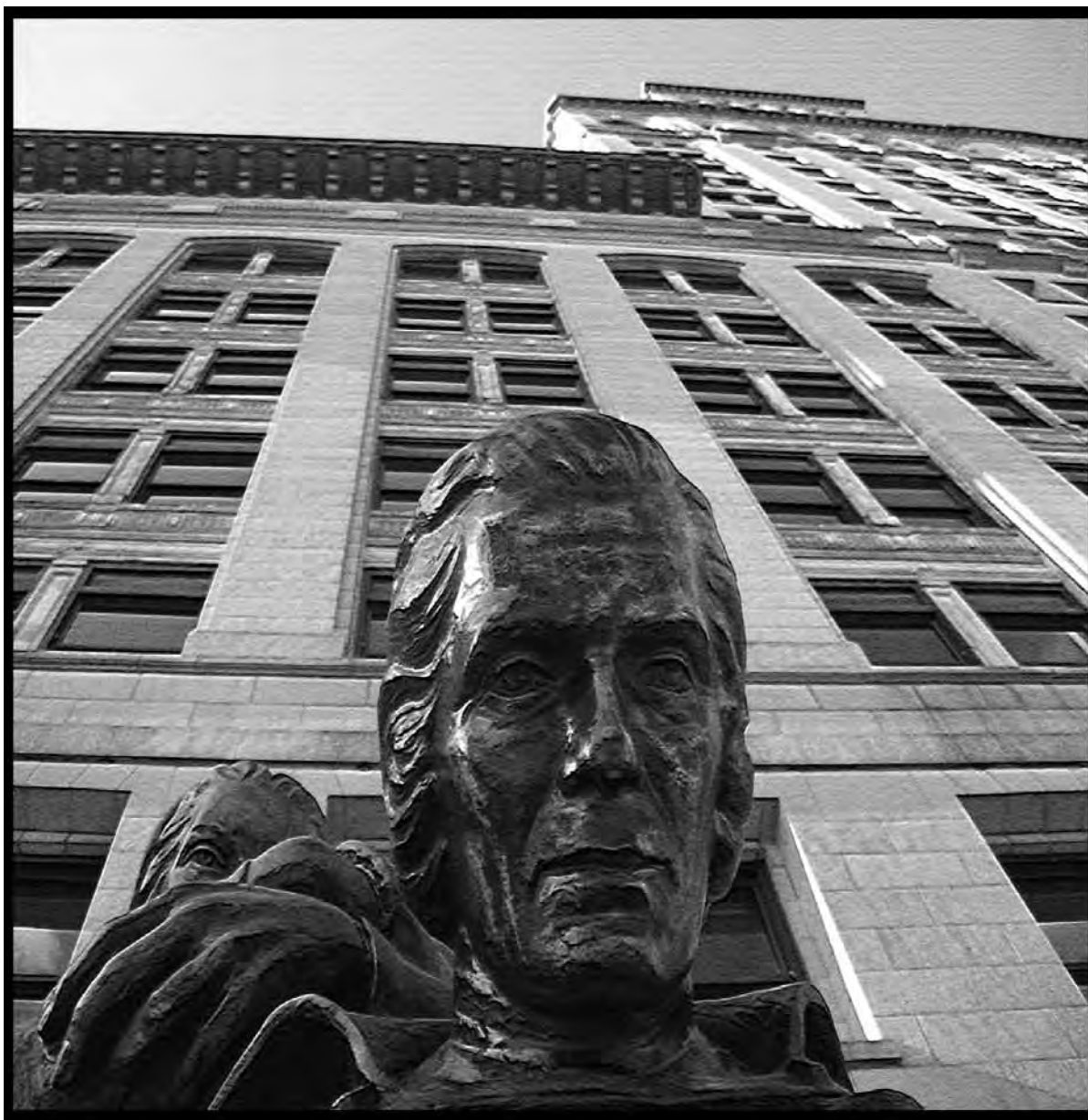
I continue on, the Bridge of Glass still ascending. Looking back, I can still see where it crashed straight through the Noah Hotel. Like some magick trick, some crazy architect, watch this, I’ll pass a bridge through this building & both will stand!

It’s dimming now, lost in clouds, I don’t remember it happening, it seemed like I was on an escalator for awhile then I’m walking & remembering them, how I went back & forth, how they changed names, how I lost them both in the end—

What rises one flesh ever remains.

Her body heated to my close breath, more to my touch. I learned her body like an untamed creature, pushed her deep into wordless passion, into hot, murky fantasy. I worked her by candle, by music, by costume, by sugar. It was a distinct life from the daily one. I read books about hard cosmic fucking & told her not to. I arranged the stage, insisted, but what happened there was choice, pure autonomy—

The mountain regards the leaf puny, careless time’s lesser pet—



We failed in a few experiments early on. It's how one night I had them both. A beautifully poisonous night, poison that's followed me since, followed me here, been present even when I did not acknowledge it.

Maybe it was why I turned from drugs to dreams, from pussy to dreams, from everything to dreams, from my life—I wanted to expel that poison—

It begins as a simple lustful story—

What rises from a single cell, single thought, first gesturing act, ever sources whole—

I wanted to fuck them both, her & her hot fucking friend. I knew enough about best girlfriends to know that some are into a little licking, a little touching, a little sharing—that's how it started—a hard cock wanting double-fun pussy—

But—see—I forgot which one I loved that night—the poison took my memory. This sounds like bullshit but the next morning sitting with them, both trying to joke away their embarrassment, I could not remember which one I loved—this led to problems & ecstasies later—to things it could not have otherwise led to—

The hand will return, the leaf will remember, the web is strong & returns all to dream—

Then it was over. She smiled at us & left. I didn't see her again for a long time & seemed to resume happy with who had stayed. But I wondered. How did I know the right one stayed? That sounds lunatic & I thought so at the time. I made myself settle down like that night hadn't happened but it had—

The sea will swallow itself, the stars will croon their last light. What rises two will remain one—

Did they know over the years how I switched between them, how I could not remember from time to time? I never asked. Not once. If they knew, they never said. Never gave a hint's hint—

*What rises two listens, comes, joins
all again—*

So remembering their bodies isn't enough because the missing piece remains, swallowed by the poison. I tried telling Benny but he did not listen. Peculiarly waking dramas did not interest him. He'd gesture up a thousand nude girls of every shape, size, & color, & nod at me in that mocking smile way he had.

When does he show up on the Bridge?

lxxxiv. / xlv. / xxiv.

Christa leans back in her shadows, remembers how she can do this, learned how in her younger years when a sexually rousing creature before she was ready or sure, regarded hungry by boys & men, some eyes curiously touching her blouse, her hips, some pressing, some pushing, nearly hating in their want, she would lean back, lean in, not cower but cloak, she learned even to re-direct if someone near to do so, she learned things subtle but those needed for survival, for while those curious eyes scrawled across her attention it was the pushers, the eyes bursting bright with plain want, sometimes she let them in a way, let the hot breath approach, let & let . . . then slipped off—

Bowie not her first love nor her first man. There were stories she told nobody, night she didn't think she'd come out walking still—

But it had been awhile—she'd tamped it down, found ways to re-direct herself finally, one too many dangers back then—

So Bowie had found a reformed girl, if new renewed. Not, it seemed, for he rent her veils by walking through them not noticing. Why would he? She sniffed so many women on him it made her cringe. She loved him, none before. Hardly called it love even in her secret heart.

He was far, & Gretta was still with him. They were three, even though she couldn't remember the moment if even it had happened, that they had sat or stood together.

Retreated, she watched the Ampitheatre's night pass, if it even did, she wondered.

"There is little but blood & consequence," the first one had explained, a preacher, she was so eager she took his hand clumsy & brought it to her small perfectly round breast. His words enflamed her, his touch was blind scorch as his fingers rested lightly on her hard, hard nipple, brushing back & forth across it, considering. "Moan for me" he said quietly, she nearly screamed but choked still. "Again," this time she obeyed. Fingers brushing back & forth, now slower, *ohhh*, now stopped. Gone. "Blood & consequence. Keep that. Don't come back here."

The next was younger, a rare one near her own age. He read books but she got nothing intellectual from him after a few outings. He'd had enough pussy to feel confident but not enough to feel grateful nor even close to enough to feel awe, humility, awkward happy laughter.

Another church, an unused balcony, a service going on, he was ripe for her plucking but as she let him grope his way through her tank top & shorts, she heard the bells that marked the halfway point of every service. His hand between her thighs, groping, where was that prize? Bells, & she wanted to ring with them, feel her body ringing. Little, nothing. Now his mouth on her breasts, little, nothing.

She pushed him away, on his back, thighs wide, pushing his jeans & white undies down, off, fingers doing as Preacher had taught, his gift, showing her how to nestle, nip, suck, grope, grab, squeeze. Stroke, stroke again. "Moan." Squeeze, stroke, stroke again. "Moan." Squeeze, squeeze harder, stroke. Bells ringing, building to their cacophony, their "noise approaching God making the world in the blinding love of his heart," squeeze, squeeze, squeeze, "Moan" "Moan" "Moan" "Come" "Come now, moan it out. Now! Now!" Beat it out of him, that boy cream, then knelt down between his thighs & licked it, lathered it all over his thighs. Stood as he did not. Could not. Smiling, plucked up his whities, smiling, flung them into the congregation. Walked out, did not return. Little, nothing. Beautiful bells, beautiful bells.

There were others, it got murkier remembering. How known, how had was her body

when Bowie took her smiling, easy? Her heart was lightly awled at best, whatever her breasts & hips had known.

He found her where he did because she needed work, daily work, less of the old spiritual obsess in her heart but enough to convince her way in. They thought she was quiet but took matters of philosophy seriously. She let them think. When sent to cities, she dressed to convince, knew how, how much to show, how tight her clothes, she dressed like an obscure promise never said, never made.

Had she not met Bowie, she was not planning on returning there. Her companion knew, they'd agreed. He was in Seattle to find himself a boy lover, she to jump a bridge she'd found on a map. Others had jumped it.

Really? Really. Cambridge had ended it, ended her commitment. She was ready to be done. She hadn't wanted to approach Bowie, sitting there against that wall, lost like so many others they'd seen. Her friend Oliver said we have to, one more day, Christa. We promised each other.

She nodded, they walked over, settled quietly on either side of him. His face was tired, sad, chased.

She felt something. Something deep.
Blood & consequence.

lxxxv. / xlvii. / xxv.

The mystery is survival, tough the flesh & heart enough to bit a little, release a little, learn each hour's how.

"Nobody explained shit when I was young. Nothing. There were some worn ignorant prejudices, some stupid ideas about how the world worked, what it was. A lot of sentiment sincere & a lie both. How does the world work? I was on my own to find out."

Bowie nods, strokes her fine ass since he likes her listening on her belly. He likes some fucked-up shit. She obeys. She never thought she'd see him again.

"The years trench love's plain truths, chip & take in strands, ideals, bleed, break, mend, make." He's reading to her from that book he gave her years ago. Almost left when she thought she couldn't find it.

"So I looked for books like this, but there was a lot of intermediate shit first. See, nobody tells you, nobody. There are the books everyone seems to know, then the more hidden ones. Then the books the hidden ones mention.

"You look & look, read & read. Get to a point where the ideas get stale, argue with each other, bitch. Easy to stall, to back off a bit."

The scarf binding her hands to the bed board is still a little damp. Damp with girl-juice. Not hers. He gave her to midnight & specific instructions. She tried to think about that fine cock of his, though she'd seen others, but how he used it, mm, fuck a girl to damp his scarf to bound her while he fucked her with that magic cock? Yes, sir, & another please.

The mystery is hope, again hustling up faith in new sun & fruit, in the brilliant breaths of music.

Before waking, is it every night? On her knees, blindfolded, nude but a silk black kerchief on

her lap, told to bend forward, told things she couldn't remember, whispered in her ear, along her trembling back, her cold-roused nipples, the sense of fingers flowing a million of them along her, then under the kerchief & did her knees part, did they part willing, oh god——

Jazz wakes. She is in Cosmic Early's light, owning grasp. He is murmuring in that way of his, not awake or asleep, "Another wanting torso, arching ache, hope, near, mapless, another heart nods & smiles its notice, despair, sleep, rise, mate" the words get indistinct & she wished he would touch her with his purpose, let her within, he's old, but he knows & she does not, the closest she gets is when he orders her to pose nude against the moonlit window, to arch her back, cradle her breasts, hold her head back, pose, just like that, now moan a little, Jasmine, now a little more——

She'd never said her name to him nor told him anything, nor even brought her wallet, back safe with her friends—no ID, no name, far from home, how the fuck did he know?

Posing, hair loose around her shoulders, arching her back til it aching, cupping her cold breasts,

take me to the White Woods! Fuck me & take me to the White Woods! I have to find her! Nobody believes she exists! I came back & she was gone, every scrap. They try to tell me I had no sister but who the hell do they think saved me?

The mystery is desire, stroking a live piece of the world for pleasure, for effect

"Samantha"

"Maya"

"I don't know anymore"

"Know what?"

"Dylan. What was he? What was any of it? I'm the key? When does all this stop happening?"

"It's always been happening. You know that."

"It's been more since I left. Since I met Dylan. Now I'm here."

"Do you think it's just love?"

"I don't think anything about this clearly. I'm going to find Dylan but it's not going to end because I do."

"No."

"Do you know that?"

"No better than you do."

"Is he here?"

"Yes."

"Samantha, am I going to find him? Do I get that much?"

"Follow me."

—desire, gnawing moonlight on lone winter's shore, sweet bowl of prayers, for time enough to breach the blunt divide of space & blood, touch, music, wish—

"there" "it's dark, there's nobody in there" "go" "he was here?" "he works here" "works . . . ?" "they like him, he has a smile for every soul coming in" "I love his smile. I remember it

better than his voice. He's not here." "Keep walking. Look." "I know this room. That window." "You sent him back here, to find that window, see through it where he had to go" "When?" "Maya" "When?"

The mystery is dream, closest to freedom, to death, where all bloods clean & rain the skies

"Benny I'll snap your damn neck, I don't care if you're a dream complex or dream fugue or dream pile of dog shit."

"Jack, we both need something from each other. You have a question about two women, a question you can't even ask yet. It passes through me."

"What do you want?"

"Some want to find the White Woods & destroy them. Some want to harness them. For some a path runs through them but elsewhere."

"I don't have your answer. I got a nice bridge to sell you. Maybe it will take you right there."

"Maybe it will"

"Are you saying I have to keep following that damned bridge to the White Woods?"

"Nothing's simple, Jack. Nothing leads to anything else. That's the folly of waking linearity."

"Jealous, Benny?"

"You have to know. You could still turn back. It's within your will. That way back is shorter. You could be crawling through your own dear window in not too many steps."

"And you want me to say no?"

—where the broken softs & lessens, each hour a new mystery, what bravest to do?

Write lightly in burning breath across her slender nude torso, bound in this want, bound hard & tight in this endless mortal want, "Find heart's inmost den, wake many wants deep from daylight."

The mystery is mystery, naming that spire God or cracking that fine ass, mystery

I'm listening at the window, I brought Tweety Bird with me, we both dressed up a little, I warned her, we listen: "how breath can bark, sing, can say quietly, 'crush them now.'" I keep listening but the voice says no more. I find my hand furiously busy between my thighs, the one not holding Tweety Bird very tightly, we're going back in & not going to leave this time——

*Mystery more in kindness binds
& love consumes
countless the books
nor their men
can explain.*

Charlie walks on with his housefly, a red checker, & a comic book with several answers.

lxxxvi. / xlviii. / xxvi.

*The mystery is survival—but also decay—the strongest will bend to something stronger—even calm, accept—so survive longer but not ever—this bears no explain, rules all, yet on each strives—years touch the flesh & heart enough to bite a little, release a little, learn each hour’s how—& the next’s—
the years trench love’s plain truths, chip & take in strands; ideals, belief in & commitment to a right against a wrong; bleed, the body’s confession of its vulnerability, its brave, thin cloak; mend, that it must remain, that it comforts; make, the subtle, sometimes brute push against sweet despair, chaos’ entice.*

(Walks on with his housefly, a red checker, & a comic book with several answers. Which answers? His eagle flies immeasurably high overhead)

The mystery is hope, again hustling up faith in new sun & fruit (we push the door open, this is excitement like feeling Preacher’s breath was), in brilliant breaths of music—

—another wanting torso, arching ache, hope, near, mapless (I try to remember other happiness, a little scared, try to gird myself in beautiful hours, there was a boy, fuck this is old, we nearly did but he backed away, he read books, I wanted to be his favorite book but I didn’t know how, he touched me once, kissed me, leaned down, breathed in the perfume I’d dabbed between my breasts because I’d seen a famous actress do that on TV, oh, I wanted him to keep going! He moved, sent me a card a month later, I think he’d made it, a seagull maybe, in a blinding dusk & I still remember the words, he didn’t sign it—

**“To deny, to believe, and to doubt absolutely—
this is for man what running is for a horse.”
—Pascal**

Go on! Touch them. Please. Touch them. Kiss, lightly, again. Bite a little, I am tough stuff. Deny, believe, doubt, kiss them! What running is for a horse, yes something, push my blouse back, you have to, doubt, believe, deny—*oh fuck!*

Doors shut behind

with a loud *krak!*)

Another heart nods

& smiles its notice, despair, sleep, rise

(Tweety Bird not in her arms, where the *fuck* is she? Look, down there—

*The mystery is desire, stroking a live piece of the world, for effect,
it’s hard to think this & believe there’s much else,
much missing, desire, stroke, effect
Maya now in the alley between Noah Hotel
& Luna T’s Cafe, she’s fallen & something hurts
but something has always hurt this just
reminds her & she argues to the bright
green dumpster that pain not desire*

*but the bright green dumpster has
 seen too much in this alley to
 believe either argument is fully
 true. (desire, gnawing moonlight on lone winter's shore,
 sweet bowl of prayers,
 for time enough to breach the blunt divide of
 space blood touch
 & colors music
 wish.*

Maya's dress has grown deep red, she finds herself bending over to look at it, to touch it, know it better, not knowing what this means, a moment ago she was wild grieving for Dylan now she is curled on a couch pushed haphazardly into the alley, a garish orange couch, curled into it as she crawls into her dress as it falls from her—

The mystery is dream, close to freedom, to death, where all bloods clean & rain the skies, & nothing before explains any to come, why? & nothing to come explains any gone by, & why?—where the broken softs & lessens, each other a new mystery, what bravest to—?

The words scroll slowly down the screen then jiggle, angle, tilt sideways, scroll up, fall off as they go, there's noise, it's not music, crying, lonely crying, young then old, or maybe a hurt dog, or some deep forest beast—

“Find heart's inmost den, wake many wants deep from daylight” a new drinker at Luna T's bar suddenly says, as if in reply, as if waking from somewhere else & now arrived here—

The TV keeps making its noise, its many yowl, til Mr. Bob shuts it off, nobody objects, *Triptown* wasn't usually like this—nobody objected—which was strange—

The mystery is mystery, naming that spire God or cracking that fine ass, mystery, mystery, how breath can bark, sing, can say quietly—

She watches Jack on the Bridge of Glass, further & further from her, yet still she watches, still sees him *clearly*, distance warps as she watches, now what, she wondered, a dream had sent her here, from a warm bed, was it empty again last night? *Shit*, she can't remember. She'd left before dawn, taken nothing, well, the leather jacket Jack had given her, unworn but undiscarded, changed her clothes three times, trying to remember how she'd looked back then, the little ways a period of life will affect one's clothes & hair, Jack hadn't too many demands, but she remembered his tastes—long hair, single braid, little makeup—didn't like short skirts, did like long ones—liked a bit of jewelry, she knew more, remembered more than she should—did—dressed some to memories—but time had passed, she wasn't going to see him as a sentiment—that dream was enough to convince her—& the warm bed she couldn't remember was she alone or paired in it?

She wouldn't arrive on time—the dream had told her—

—“*crush them now.*” *Mystery more in kindness binds & love consumes, countless the books nor their*

men can explain—

that was what she did not—what she had discovered she could do—look further along the path best she could describe it to her clients—look further along the path—

it was honest work, or at least she did it honestly—she did indeed see as she told but two things always tangled her—she knew all people had this ability—she told only some of what she saw—the vision was too complex & deeply multi-dimensional to tell all—she tried to communicate a simple coherent version—what it meant she couldn't say, or chose not to say, or wasn't meant to say—she looked, she chose, she told—

of course dreams complicated it—the way her clients would appear in them—before they came to see her—long after—she thought of dreams as extended looks along the path, unfettered by a waking body, an expectant companion—

yet never a vision of Jack—until recently—then it seemed he was in every vision—she had to take some days off, call in sick, haha, he was bidding her along, come along, Penny, come Xtina, through the window in the old apartment above the S & G Pizza, onto the bridge, the Bridge of Glass—

She arrived, there he was, far off, warped closer in her view, & she knew where he was going & how he had to get there—

or its opposite

where & who who & where

Benny Big Dreams. The White Woods.

Benny had slept in her bed, in her dreams, lain very close to her, breathed in her heart's clearest spaces, hovered, close, maybe she had been tempted, maybe she'd loved him a little, especially at first, but nothing happened, he could not move closer to her than he did, she did not draw him an inch closer—it was Jack—he learned this from her over time—

They knew each other & Benny was the stronger, so Jack had never come to her in dreams til these past days. Something had changed. Jack had grown stronger, finally understood what she was, what he was, or Benny was letting him for some reason she could not trust. What then? What now? There was the path. She saw along to him, both eyes open, seeing as she did eyes shut, the warping view that would bring the far near to her. But she could not see farther than Jack. *Knowing* his path, but not seeing it. And not knowing it too exactly as well.

Benny Big Dreams.

The White Woods.

She leaned out the window & saw no better.

lxxxvii. / xlix. / xxvii.

Want is trigger, want is release, clue & code to what is not shown by lights. "I'm going to tell you flesh's secret, what you see around you, how to gauge it." New drinker has a bottle of twelve-year-old Scotch on the bar before him. Mr. Bob had sold it to him after a friendly, lengthy conversation. He's poured a round, raised a toast—

"Listening?"

"Go on! We're taking mental notes!"

He nods at the jibe, undisturbed, the drinkers at the bar unconsciously lean closer.

"Now there will be a few exceptions to this but know, they are exceptions, & they are few." Respectful nods. Waiting.

—*'what other, lighter world is dreaming all of you tonight?' is what he didn't say & wished to. 'How far from maps kings move by measuring blood?'*—

"This land is one devoted *profoundly* to propagation & consumption. We are raised to be breeders & feeders." His audience shifts. Another one of these eggheads talking college shit don't got jack to do with

"pussy. Pussy!" They jump. He's old, krinkly white hair. Severe blue eyes. Could be someone's kindly gramps. They laugh brokenly.

"Not just any. You boys are being driven day & night toward pussy with numerous characteristics." He stops. Sips from his thick, ornate dark blue glass. Sips again. Considers. His listeners are rapt & uncertain.

"Driven day & night toward par-ticular pussy. Hear me out now," he holds up his hand like someone's arguing or fixing to leave.

"Young. Pretty. Thin. Scantily dressed." They laugh, but don't feel released. He's paused but not done.

"White." There's silence. True but a hard thing to hear said aloud.

"Female." Takes a moment to grasp. Some don't. He does not elaborate.

Then one speaks up. "That & a couple of hard jerks will get you a gob of spew in your hands."

Laughter. Looking now one to the other.

He sips again, unhurried. Maybe he ran a hardware store once, sold screwdrivers & saws to farmers & weekend handymen. Laughed with the rest at the Sunday funnies. So when did he turn, grow hard & quietly furious?

"I'm no racist, mister. Pretty piece of yellow or black or brown poon inviting me along, I'd smile & hold the door."

"But your society is not trading highest on them. It's a sliding scale, from prime on down. We're all measuring on that scale, just few of us know it much. Or at all."

They turn to me. "This old man your mouthpiece?" I shrug. Look at Rebecca's perfectly pretty self next to me sketching, toward Franny's fine ass, reaching high for a bottle of gin.

“He’s not brave enough to call my thoughts his own. Cowardly toward advocating what many won’t acknowledge in their own furious tidal deeps. Mankind has become a restless caged animal, embarrassed to nod truly that it is not led by will or mortality but by hunger for pussy, for cock, for meat, for brutish yowling dreams taken far into daylight.”

“So we do we do, old man? Fuck in the streets day & night?”

“Fuck, yes,” he spits back. “Streets, no. They con the mind into thinking order is possible, earth can be tamed, & owned, & named.”

“We gonna live in the woods?”

“We *are* in the woods! Within, lost & huddling, harking any word, even noise nearby. Ready to leap & cry toward any hard spoke instructions. Without so alien to the lands, the seas, the—”

Someone switches on the TV, *TripTown*’s earlier harass is gone. The old man silences, later speaks quietly again with Mr. Bob, at length.

Trigger, release. TV screen pulses in & out, slows, speeds, settles as young palms in shade materialize, a couple on a bench close, each a babe’s first yowl, each a vessel of dust, close on a grim bench, hands learning new by way of forgetting other hours softly, incompletely, how far from days will again trench love’s plain truths? Tell them nothing, forgive them, forgive life itself. Praise drowning as a new kind of arrival.

Look beyond them, their park, its trees, yonder to an old brick building, its midnight scholar, bent over his metaphors & formulae, connect two, one breaks, connect two more, three additional clasp into place, & another, all but two sigh & collapse, he reaches back, further & further back for a kinder frame to this world & its gods, & how chase its new sugars, how shed its shapely remains?

Her touch in the shadows. Her murmur. Neither of them had ever, she was more eager than him, he wanted her a step above an hour more, as his hand felt beneath her sweater she laughed, it tickled, he clenched, she moaned, he liked that, again, she obeyed, learned love is obedience to will rooted far in loins’ imperative, breathed twice as he stripped her slowly, slowly, wondered a moment at how he could know, jerked back & forward,

looks out his midnight window & back at his notes, he’d inked his hands black to finger paint his conclusion on every damn wall, ceiling floor

*HISTORY TEACHES LITTLE BUT
SOME DREAMS BUTCHER OTHERS*

—What not shown by lights, want’s trigger, want’s release. World mulls kind the villain & stripling alike—

Gives breath like song to all.

"Shhh. Jazz, he'll find us." "I want him to find us." "No! Fuck! Shhh! Do you know what he'll do?" "It's our deal. You've done it already with that stupid college boy. I bet this time's better." "Let's go. She's nuts." "Go where? You two don't know where you are. Nobody knows where you are." "You're gonna let him do that to us, Jazz? Do you, & him—?" "I don't think so. He never asked. I don't know. He said bring you two. It's why you're here with me at all." "Why? Fuck, we're your friends!" "Shhh!" "I have to get back to the White Woods" "The what?" "He can get me there" "Is that where it happened? We always wondered about it, when you were gone. And your sister."

Jazz snaps open a latch, & slams the door behind her while they yell & shhh each other. "Please Jazz." "Please."

lxxxviii. / l. / xxviii.

There is no cage but perspective.

For a moment, start there.

This seat, these eyes, this mind.

Two bodies crash on a distant road whether you exist or not (there is a story involving two dreams, different years, different continents, their dreamers never met, though tis possible one or both crossed the other's path separated by years. The dreams were similar because each dreamed the other, dreamed the other's full life save for the dream each had of the other, it was a gap, a small gap, how long after all is the length of a dream in the space & breadth of a man's life? Nonetheless, a gap & it was the gap each remembered most vividly & mentioned to another in later waking, the one to his much younger lover, the other to her adopted mother, the gap stayed as the dream frayed about it in each dreamer's memory. How does one recall a gap when what defines it crumbles away? What indeed. The gap, you see what was each concluded held the answer to an important question each had, for each felt to be living a life defined by a gap, & the dream reinforced this, like another's entire life but for a gap & thus feel not to understand it because of this gap just as my own life bears this gap & I do not understand it, my full meaning lacks for this gap!

Sunny morning centuries ago a woman
sang, her son slept in the folded
clothes

(No	No	No
cage	history	history
but		but
presumption's history		cages
cage.	&	of
		presumption.

.oM

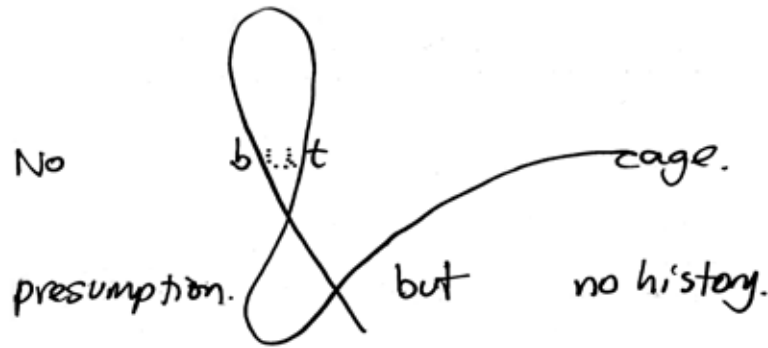
(No cage. No history. No presumption.)

(No history. No cage. No presumption.)

(No presumption's cage. No history.)

(No history's cages. No presumptions.)

history.



Branches crystal snowflake hung with new meat, bound to no hour, what market near? no hour, what tribe would cook & eat? no hour, would one bear a supercomputer on his ring finger or a talon through his earlobe, both? no hour, the meat is cut from is spirit & cooked in fire & consumed, delusion that much changes, there is ecstasy, pain, slavery, meat, no hour, no hour, no hour *Trip Town* shows these images faster & faster until a new image begins to emerge from the blue but the TV begins to smoke too, it seems important to watch, to see that image, there are sparks, the metal dials are melting from heat turn it off! No! Turn it off! Unplug it! It's only a goddamned TV show!

A moment of clarity. A dark, high wall in a cave, the words flaming across it

HAPPINESS IS PLEASURE IN PRESENCE

A door appears even more briefly though the flaming words, opens, a beautiful glare, an aching glare, a crying, moaning, laughing, leaping, wild glare, oh a hint!

the TV pulses twice more & implodes through the door.

"Shit my mother" cries one of the drinkers at the bar. The rest nod or stare.

lxxxix. / li. / xxix.

They wait. They wait longer. No light. Sitting back to back, hands crossed behind their backs, cuffed to each other.

"Why did she leave us?"

"I don't know, Lizzy."

"We're her *friends*."

"Not anymore. She tricked us."

"But why? We came here to help her. To watch out for her."

"She was always weird since she came back. Nobody knew what happened to her. And her sister."

"We were nice to her! But she wouldn't tell us either."

Lizzy starts crying.

"It doesn't matter. We're here. This is all that matters."

"I thought she was kidding. I thought they were toys or a magic trick when she put them on us!"

"Yah."

"Why aren't you scared?"

"Because they like that. It turns them on more."

"How do you know?"

"That guy. The college boy."

"Did he hurt you?"

"Yah. But mostly he liked fucking with my mind. Told me after that he had a few friends coming over. He wanted to watch them with me too. Asshole. Told me lots of shit before too."

"Like what?"

"Fuck it. I learned. They don't just want to hurt your body. They want to hurt your mind. Jazz told me something after she came back, it was like the only thing she ever said."

"What?"

"She said the bad ones leave a worse mark on your mind than your body. 'They tattoo their fucking soul on you,' she said. Something like that. We were really fucking high. Only time we ever smoked together."

"So they hurt her? I could never figure out how, like physically or what"

"She didn't say. She said that, looked at my bong, kicked it over & called me a fucking bitch cunt. Then she left."

"Fuck, Bobbie!"

"I just laughed. When I'm high I don't hold shit against people. Especially since Jazz wasn't usually a smoker. And her sister and all."

"You hold this against her?"

"Yah. I wonder if she had to trade us in to get free. Or if she needed some money. Maybe she's just way more deeply fucked up than we know."

Lizzy starts crying again. Bobbie listens for footsteps.

"*Soft, yield the world, lose nothing,*" the words whispered so deep in Bobbie's mind she confuses them with her own thoughts. She freezes, whatever it is, it's starting. Says nothing to Lizzy who's sniffing still.

OK, Jazz, fuck, & fine, was this how it was for you, how it started? We smoked more than once but I figured you were talking shit, I don't remember bong talk.

*"bright in lash, sweet in tongue,
cool as a friend in sickness & song"*



Lizzie also doesn't know it was your sister's old boyfriend who fucked me. He wasn't a college boy either. And he didn't hurt me more than I liked at first—shit, Jazz, what the fuck is Lizzie doing here?

"The worst comes, & comes again, world bides its wicked, yield, with pretty ease, lose nothing, you'll bury with the rest"

the words stroke down her like a secret rain, she holds very still only to nearly jump when Lizzie whispers "You awake? You OK?"

"Yah" she croaks. "What's wrong? Do you hear something?" "No, Lizzie." "Maybe he won't hurt us. Maybe he just wants some fun." "I don't think he's one of those boys from class you let cop a feel, Lizzie."

Lizzie breaks there & then. Starts screaming. "You're Not Going to Hurt Me & My Friend! Fuck You! Let Us the Fuck Out!" She's shaking & wrenching Bobbie's hands; Bobbie tries to move with her but their cuffs attach to a nearby water pipe, no give.

"Fuck You! Fuck You All!"

Bobbie says nothing. What's there to say? She'd let Lizzie leave if she could.

Thing about being bound was it depended on who & where. It could be fun, way more fun than anyone would ever say on TV. Once she knew that, it seemed like she was closer to knowing a lot of other things. Smoking helped too.

Lizzie was convulsing but had pretty much shouted down.

And it wasn't all sexual. There was something else in it. She was getting that after a few times but then he turned. Something changed & it wasn't a strange fucked up but sort of fun sex game. It hurt. The mistake she made was ever thinking he cared about her, the one night cuffed to his bed in a bloody rose light, pussy carefully shaven into some symbol he would not explain, sometimes dressed in leather shards, something nothing but black sequins everywhere, & involving her heart was what fucked it up. This shit involved Jazz too, & her sister.

Lizzie was a damp lump behind her.

"Yield the world, soft, nothing lost, in lone hours your best glowing text, what now shown common by lights."

Lizzie stiffened. Heard. Started swearing softly. "o shit o god o shit o god o shit o god"

"The worst comes, sometimes sweet in tongue, a cool, wicked friend, soft, yield, fine music in a sheered heart's hour"

Lizzie was shaking & jerking, terrified. "Sheered heart's hour"? What the fuck? She'd heard that before. Where? When? With him in that room? High with Jazz?

“Lizzie, stop,” she says with sudden firmness. Lizzie pauses. “I’ll tell him to let you go. To just take me. I’ll do what he wants.”

“What about you?”

“I can handle this. Just calm down. I’ll work it out. Nobody will hurt you.”

“You promise?”

“Yah! It will be OK.”

“I’ll get the cops! I swear!”

“We don’t know where we are. Just stop crying, calm down. It will be OK.”

The voice again but this time Lizzie doesn’t respond. Doesn’t hear. It’s hers again, sliding through her easily, quietly, curious, yet not possessing despite its power, she closes her eyes, “*Lose nothing, yield the world, soft, perfection yearns you to be its slave, its losing bitch, its close to explain*” she remembers how it was, early on, “*its magick, shudders by your need to know, your fury to raise & do,*” yes, & my fury to have something my own, & some truth too, “*World’s still stretching, by dream & fist. Soft, yield. Nothing lost.*”

She smiles. Did he want her back? Was he with Jazz now? Did he want them both? That might work . . .

Why Lizzie though? Was she a decoy? A way to get me here? The voice is gone, really gone, its smoky liquid fingers suddenly receded. Like never were. No, she whispers in her mind.

The door they had not seen, had forgotten for hours, starts to open. Light, hurting glare. Lizzie screams, & slumps.

lc. / lii. / xxx.

He’s never seen this comic book before. *CurviLineaR ComiX* reads the title. “*For Those Lost*” reads its sub-title. “*Super Size Issue #2!*”

Shit. Charlie hated not starting a new series from the beginning. He looked at his checker, then the cup containing his housefly & key. Sighed. Might as well try it.

The colors inside were more intense than he’d ever seen. No artist or writer credits. No advertisements. A lot of text at first, giving way to pages of wordless mind-wrenching images. He read, by the waning sunlight of his deep woodsy cove.

“*War becomes common one day, pain another scrub in the yard, despair an eventual way of easy breathing.*” Words golden but sink into depthless regions of blood.

“*Embattled dreams a yea to the worst of it all, & a question: when did the wish for the next become want of what lost?*” Words harder to read, submerged in blood now, Charlie finds himself wading in to see them, to follow them next.

“*This is not peace*” from below suddenly blows up in his face. He cries, flees a moment. Returns. Just a fucking comic book. He’s read a million of them. Weird but good so far. He likes weird.

“Calm bearded fanatic & his stained leaflet for every downtown soul, artful tracing a web of ending, a delicious nightmare of the saved & soil.” Charlie breathes, further in.

“No peace.” This time the blood takes him & he goes. Goes hard.

“A clumsy knock back at him & he cries free speech for one & all! til the cages ready.”

Charlie starts at the figure slumped against the wall, at his two companions surrounding him. Who? . . .

Images fade back to words. *“Tonight in the avenue glare & strange pressing bodies, the eager chew of hours, dark tickling music hues the air with its lyric about heart’s rootless tangle, angry refrain about empire’s pathless source.”* Charlie clutches his cup & checker as he reads again.

“This is not peace.”

Arrived where he was. Dazed but OK. Reads a little more, to see if it takes.

“War becomes common one day, its news blithely told from one sheered heart to the next.” Now reading aloud as the crowded streaming city street bumps by. *“Kindness ranges down from shared drink to relaxed fists.”* Now shouting, seeing blood in every face, golden traces in lash, nose, lips, chin. *“From a calliope of faces like the sky’s sparkling pool to maps of borders & waiting slaughter!”* Someone grabs him & he whispers.

“This is not peace.”

Roughly led but not unkindly. Voice replies to him, text from his shut comic. *“What lost? What lost?”* Another behind him adds, *“What mending waits for each & all?”*

“We’re glad you came but we all got to go now. This shit you’re in now is not safe. It’s spreading. Fuck.”

xc. / liii. / xxxi.

The way is called dis-illusion, say again, speak it hard, a truth can’t be left on a crate to stare brutally & useless. Dis-illusion, walking the humble path among shifting men & common ideas. Humble path, the inner smack to breathe & bow, & again.

Maya’s red dress becomes her tool, a strip of it around her wound, then another to cushion her hand as she discovers her path is through the back of the couch through the hole in the brick wall it nearly conceals. The couch is moldy, little tough but since it won’t budge to her efforts she has to force her way through it.

What remains of it she wraps around her breasts & hips, & a thin strip around her forehead. Not one to wear dresses when jeans would do, Maya still wishes Dylan could have seen her in it. She holds her breath against the dust & dirt, & pushes in.

Reck the tallest wall & how its indefensible hour nears. Great glaring tome, too, ivory & gold, god to minions & artillery, later come its burn, blind smiling dust.

She falls through with a painful thump. Dust blinds her a moment, all is white, then settles, all is still white.

She looks down at her hands, see them fine. Looks up, all white. Further up, still white. Further up, way way up, a knot of blue, so far & small she blinks, looks away, looks up again, still there.

Looks behind her, brick wall fading as she stunned watches, gone.

The way is called dis-illusion, that any heart finer than its bowels, (remember the old song: shit is beautiful!), that any golden vessel of faiths not some long, subtle hustle for sweet young meat, (the honeyed spot before too many other bees have come there), or a begged home beyond the soil (bury me in the wordless glare, burn me & my every page, puff my ashes to the woods & stars, better ever that than deathless kingdoms of men, leave me out of man-dreamed or conjured eternities, little faith in my heart from this world that any where men are not slightly bonded by mortality would be better, any god or heaven contrived by men will roar often with primal bloodlust garbed in manners & tradition & commandments, burn me in the glare & if specks of my being feed a tree or a star or a hungry trout, so much more the better) (Not to die another ragged man buried in undone vows)

Maya ranges along the wall, so white she cannot look on it directly. Decides to simply close her eyes, & this helps. A lot. She sees now. Faces straight to the wall & looks through it as though it wasn't there. Opens eyes, tests with hands. Still there, still blinding. Closes her eyes again.

The way is called dis-illusion, waking hour's new brutal reports, another falls in a desert sucking freely on blood these years, & the king laughs heartily from his high window, tells the one about the priest, the whore, the monkey with a cock fore & aft, & the night they all meet in a bar, one of them biker hippie bars, you see the priest was trying to get the whore to turn by her evil ways & come to the Christ but the whore would not until the priest explained how the Christ would have convinced her that a friendly funny two-cocked monkey was an inherently evil thing or why she should turn by her days & nights with him, she called him Ernie like that kids' show you know, Ernie with the funny laugh, she laughs like that when Ernie the two-cocked monkey is fucking her fore & aft, his & hers, & the priest has almost convinced her with his many words & sad dog look but then he really blows his case, she's left the monkey at the bar & is sleeping in his bed that night with only thoughts of purity when he moves under her blanket with two himself, one strapped on, why should the Christ get all this cunty goodness—some for him, the rest for me! he cries & dives in—

the king laughs & laughs & laughs

—no bridge of glass high enough for silence, Maya suddenly looks up with her eyes closed—there! wow!—there! Maya sees Jack & Jack looks down & sees Maya—several words but—

“How do we?”

“It's all of us, but I'm the key”

“Where?”

“The White Woods. You know.”

“I was there with Dylan, we met John there”

“John?”

then the wall begins to teeter loudly & Maya stops looking up, which risk more, keeps her eyes closed & hands over her head & face as she hears its ugly weight give to gravity some, then more, then crash around her but not a mark, nothing visible, she seems OK, uncurls from her huddle. Now . . .

All passes, & passes again. Jack is still looking down but nothing to see as the clouds thicken again. That pretty hippy girl, skinny, young, the pink streak in her blonde hair—she was down there—but what? An ally? A fellow captive? For a moment he was standing facing her, she wearing the ragged bits of a silk dress, he saw what was there, from all sides, enjoyed his perspective enough to lightly test the tightness of her cunt, her weightless pretty tits, the freshness of her mouth in the moment of shock she had after his because he saw her first—almost before he knew who she was—almost—but not for his fucking, he still bloodlusted Xtina’s body, Penny’s, both in truth, & Maya while a tight pretty little thing didn’t sway his cock’s obsessive eye—so, too long in figuring this much, Jack thinks: she, & I, & the others, have to get to the White Woods. *Passes, & passes again. Everything shits, everything’s soil,* Jack still doesn’t move along. Angry about all of this. Angry he attached a viral message to Xtina along Benny’s fat dream ass & he knew she would try to find him now, he was getting stronger than Benny & did not know why.

There was a room they’d sat together a few times awhile back, Jack thought of it as their Truce Room for they simply talked

Two armchairs in the room, between them a small table, teak wood, a pale blue vase on it, there was a rosy light to the room from unknown source—

they arrived separately, seeming to arrive simultaneously each time, Jack would blink, & firstly hear the click of a wall aperture closing shut tight—

Benny would have a large thick blue glass tumbler of Scotch & a cigar, lean back like a plantation owner at his evening relax, Jack would hunch in his chair, feeling a couple of points down already in the first minute here—

“I can convince you dreams are better than your flesh living, & you cannot do the same for your side.”

“I don’t know you can do this as well as you think”

Benny laughs, puffs, sips. Concedes a few points back, maybe—

“What comfort in breathing, meals of warm bread, a safe nest?”

“Why do you ask? You know those things are wonderful to me”

“You have them here too. Without end.”

“It’s not my battlefield, Benny. I don’t feel the victories in Dreamland or the pleasures.”

Benny looks up at the dim ceiling & opens his mouth impossibly wide. Stars blow out, & music, blow through the ceiling, & carry it away. Jack watches, amazed despite, & looks at Benny sadly.

“I know. I know.”



"Tell me what you know, Jack."

"You need a counterpart. You want to heal the rift between waking & dreaming."

He laughs, then louder, then nods. "But we'd both give up our worlds doing so. We'd willing seal ourselves, use our joined lives to create the new bond. No more sleeping to dream. No more waking to live. All one."

"Why me?"

"I don't know, Jack. I never know all of the parts, no matter what you think. I don't know why me for that matter."

"Find someone else, Benny"

"I would but I can't. There isn't. I don't know," confused, Benny would usually desolve the room & they'd part, truce over again—

Benny never gave up, still hadn't, which made using him to get to Xtina all the worse, & bringing Xtina into such a bad idea—

Some said it was a rival, some said it was a sequel. Some said it was a remake or simply another version of **RemoteLand**. Called *Three Inches of Blood* tho this title never appeared on the screen. When Jack's path on the Bridge of Glass arrives him at the movie theater, this is the movie playing.

Stops. A movie theatre? Appears so. Two-sided marquee is framed in blinking bulbs, hangs above the entrance. Both sides say *Three Inches of Blood* in large red letters; in smaller, black letters one side says *If You Are Lost*. He has to walk a few feet to read the small black letters on the other side:

Jump the Bridge, Jack!

He sees no theatre employees, no ticket-sellers or popcorn vendor. Yet when he walks into the huge old theatre itself, he's not alone. It's pretty crowded. No seats at all in fact but up front. He stumbles in the screen-glaring gloom for a seat in a nearly empty row.

The screen is still a glare to him, & the sound is an angry buzz. He sits, waits. OK, whoever, here I am.

I loved movies when I was a kid. Sometimes when shit was bad at school & home I'd go three times a week. It was just an escape for a long time, I didn't care what I saw too much.

Then a theatre opened up that changed me. It had a funny name . . . what? Nada Film School. I didn't know at first that nada meant "nothing" in Spanish, & I didn't know til way later that this theatre was named after someone, a man or a family, I was never sure.

They showed strange movies. I don't mean it was one of those snobby art theatres. I got into those later, for a little while.

Nada Film School showed student films, unfinished movies, home movies, & sometimes movies people knew but usually cut up collage style. Maybe it showed complete famous movies too, I don't know, probably, but I don't remember them.

I cried when it closed & yet what's funny is that nobody was nice to me there. I started going when I was 16, 17, & I went a lot, but nobody ever nodded friendly to me, sometimes I wondered if they'd just kick me out one day or not let me in. So I was careful. I was quiet. A lot of people weren't, they'd hoot & boo something they didn't like—

Why am I back here? It's the same place. Telling me to jump & fucking with my memories at the same time.

It's not Benny, I don't think. After it was torn down & a huge mall put in its place, I never dreamed about being in it. Just coming & finding it gone. Every time. In my dreams it wasn't there even to get kicked out of. So I had my memories & they dimmed over the years.

I sniff. Yes, they sold a weird spiced popcorn & spiced cola & spiced chocolate, & their combined scent *lived* in the theater—whoever's doing this to me is deep in my head, deeper than Benny's ever been. Deeper than Penelope or Xtina or the countless junkies & potheads who filled my wasted life.

Thing is, I *tried* to dream of this place. At best I came to the door & it was closed. Didn't look much like the Nada either. Not *my* Nada.

So this is no more of a dream than anything else since I climbed out the window over the S & G Pizza. My back hurts again too. Was it all that walking or these shitty seats?

The screen begins to clear, there's music, piano music quiet & sad. Image of a flame at a far distance. Burning, burning, not coming closer.

The flame is replaced slowly by a night-time street corner, the music is gone, there is silence, gas street lamps, buildings one & two stories in shadow, then eventually footsteps. A woman, more a girl, long hair, maybe blonde, begins crossing the street, steps hurrying, but then a louder noise than her steps, a hulking vehicle, driven fast, wildly, bearing down on her purposefully, a light, her face, pretty, blue eyes swelling to crimson, a sweet mouth open in crying terror—

Suddenly, a feast. A long table bright & heavy with platters & bouquets, men in tuxedos, women in gowns, their faces completely featureless even as their laughing & chewing & guttural tongues all clack & clatter, the camera moves closer, to the tan puckered skin of a cooked beast, rolling over grapes a shiny one at a time, into the glare again this time of shiny silverware & into faces, blank, blank faces & down into low-cut bodices, sweet upraised breasts with hard, roused nipples & down flat stomachs into shaven tight cunts, in & out as though fucking hard & the music moans by saxophone, a hard push & now ringing tongue wetly around a large ready cock, the camera lens wet like a tongue loving blowing this cock & swallowing its blown seed, & out, out, out, the glare again & here are bars, prison bars, the feast is inside a great cage, a blunt, endless cage with no door—

Noise, lights, acrid & sweet smells everywhere, the screen gone, the theatre gone, Jack cannot see but isn't blind just images, a great caterwaul of images bears him whole, too fast to see til a few repeat over & over, a room in rosy light, holding a letter fiercely, a hand, a known hand pushing away or pulling near or both, a lilting shadow he cries toward, noise becomes a voice or a pur. Body gone, world gone, nothing explodes again & again til he has no ears but is deaf. It won't end. *It won't ever end.*

Then, silence. Stillness. Eyes closed, a body again. Lying among covers & pillows.

A voice deep inside his head. "Everything's shit, everything soil. All's blooming despite." A pause. Breathing. "Jump the Bridge, Jack."

"Jack." Another voice.

"Jack." No! Whatever it is.

“Jack, open your eyes!”

Her voice. Eyes opening. Her face. Her smile. That damned pink hanky she called a nightgown she’d wear when she wanted cock for hours. “Crazy man.” That loving tone. Better than her perfect tits or fine fucking ass. *That tone.*

“Is it over?”

“Is what over, Jack?”

xcii. / liv. / xxxii.

How Bowie ended up in New Mexico the first time explains how he came to share her bed now, explains a lot, like how he knows the preacher in town, how he knew Rosie, how he ended up back here now, why Paula, whose ideas of desire run into places where silence & bare touch, orgasms brewed in body blow up in mind is more than willing to costume for him, wear his restraints, move with him deeper into what most would call, if generous, seriously fucked up erotic spaces

but how get anywhere that matters lightly & cleanly. Live on the surface, see what the surface has to offer & none else—

“You just like coming up with new ways to smack my ass, Freddy”

“Yah.”

“Rosie’s was nicer though”

“This a test?”

“You know I’m right”

“I know it doesn’t matter”

“Girls have egos, need a little stroking.”

“Yah.”

“Mmm. That kind too, Freddy.”

Freddy Ready, what she knew him by back then, what she still called him, it gave them both some comfort, they’d both lost a lot since—

Bowie & the preacher, not yet a priest, were up in Oregon, on a secret unofficial mission; they were mushrooms, living in Fort Stevens by the ocean. They’d been sent to form an alliance with the mushrooms, as though this was possible, Bowie’d laughed but his partner took it seriously—

“Fuck ‘em, who cares what they think. If we can make real contact, become mushrooms, then we’ll see, we’ll be closer, we’ll be closer!”

He believed, he really believed, & Bowie was his partner & best friend & that’s why they agreed. The future preacher was halfway to his someday profession already. Bowie covered for him, for them both. It was hard, it wasn’t going to last, but the preacher saw their chance & they took it, brothers, it had been so many years now! Really. No. Bowie stumbles in the screen-glaring gloom for a sit in a nearly empty row.

The screen is still a glare to him, & the sound is an angry buzz. He sits, waits. OK, whoever, here I am.

I loved movies when I was a kid. Sometimes when shit was bad at school & home I’d

go three times a week. It was just an escape for a long time, I didn't care what I saw too much.

Then a theatre opened up that changed me. It had a funny name . . . what? . . . Nada Film School. I didn't know at first that nada meant "nothing" in Spanish, & I didn't know til way later that this theatre was named after someone, a man or a family, I was never sure.

They showed strange movies. I don't mean it was one of those snobby art theatres. I got into those later, for a little while.

Nada Film School showed student films, unfinished (*everything to dusk, no less. This hour's rosy light, toneful, lashless song. A turning face's known smile, known need, mapless want, like ocean's every explain*)(*the preacher readies contrary prayers*)(*tall man in war, still a boy's green fields in his mind*)(*All's blooming, everything to dusk*)(*no less.*)

Bowie on the film's screen as phases incoherently blot him, for a moment he & Jack regard each other.

"What happened?"

"She's the key. The blonde girl."

"Who?"

"Her eyes turn blue to crimson."

"Where?"

"The White Woods."

The screen burns then as Bowie watches from his end, it was a chicken shack on the far edge of town, & Jack watches on his end, the fire consumes Nada Film School as he leaves, the Bridge of Glass once more endless before him—

xciii. / lv. / xxxciii.

Nothing goes away, nothing returns, there's the hope & hell of it. This a verity, a principle to build on, or something simple & cynical, a forgery of faith & experiential intelligence?

Nothing goes away, nothing returns, contradiction, koan, maybe a mental lozenge if worked long with, something to carry along, use in easy hours & hard ones—

Nothing goes away, nothing returns, not much easy comfort in it, more warning & strange reassurance.

Genny looks again at Tweety Bird. Tweety again, looks back. Blinks & looks back.

"No" Genny says.

Tweety blinks.

"No" Genny says.

Tweety blinks again.

"Fuck" Genny concedes.

A smile on a hard shell of a face? Yes, & less a shell of a face than some artificial skin.

Blink.

"To deny, to believe, and to doubt absolutely." Blink. "This is for man what running is for a horse." Blink.

Her voice in my head. She hasn't transformed to human but something has happened.

I turn to the man in the murk. I don't know he's a man but my thighs seem to think

so.

“Nothing goes away, nothing returns, a blind face still turns, moaning for more, moaning to break.”

Is it Tweety or Murk-man? I don’t know now. Without thinking, like the previous time, I leap for the light-switch on the wall, hoping for something—

Nobody’s here. Tweety Bird & me. She’s not blinking. No voices in or out of my head. Fuck.

Shit. I turn off the light, welcome back the murk. Sure enough.

“The hour when youth snapped, when mystery became hustles, years minutes.” A long pause. This guy should take on Preacher in a Battle of Pregnant Pauses.

When he starts up again, though, it’s like I’ve made him really angry, every word of his is a soft, pressing hand within my clothes, a dozen fingers crawling my body, & a dozen more too, I am held, I am stroked, I am had too many ways to know hard I cum or how many times “Moaning for more, moaning to break, for a glaring love’s ceaseless pitch, for an end to beginnings, & a cease to all ends.”

O—fucking—God! It feels like my knees & eyeballs are coming as hard as my thighs. I’m strafed with simultaneous orgasms I don’t know how to say it. Murk Man was pissed that I considered him versus Preacher in my thoughts, so he bombed me head to foot with comings—or fucking something like that.

He’s not done talking though his words release my body. I don’t know what that means. “Nothing goes away, nothing returns. Not to meet again in flesh, I will sate you all in dust.” Then silence.

I wait. Wait some more. Risk it. “Don’t kick me more again. I won’t try the lights again, I promise.” Silence. Waiting. Maybe just silence.

“I don’t know why I came here or twice. I don’t know why I can’t see you or how you did all that to me. I don’t know what the fuck is up with my doll.”

Still waiting. Or still nothing.

“Maybe you can help me. There’s someone, a man, like you. Maybe you won’t care because you’re a man & I’m here.” I pause, lost. “He’s never touched me but I love him. I don’t know where he is or I guess where I am. But something is going on. I just want to ask him. I don’t know anymore, worse than before.”

I feel something now. A rhythm. Breath. Beat. He’s not touching me again. But I feel his presence. Before it was angry, erotic, taking. Now it’s kind, it’s soothing. He’s lifting me, a strong, light feeling, I hold Tweety Bird as we rise. Blinks. Says nothing.

xciv. / lvi. / xxxiv.

What then. Told her path to the White Woods is clearing. Told to prepare herself. Told, slowly, words to hear like breathing, “Your first step within may be your last step without.”

She nods. Believes more that her sister is in the White Woods.

“Undress. There is soap, oils. A razor blade. Every inch.”

He’s gone. She’s not even sure who said those words.

“You won’t see them again.”

“Don’t hurt them,” she says quietly. Says it despite.

“Some eat others” is the reply.

"Do they get razors too!" she yells as the bathroom lights go on & where she's been brought appears as a copper fixtures & multiple mirror bathroom.

Last words for her. "No clothes. Leave them at the door. Bathe slowly."

Jazz knows she's being watched as she undresses. As she showers. As she picks up the razor, softens her pussy with oils, shaves it clean slowly & thoroughly. As she steps out to the steamy room. Her clothes gone.

A moment of fear. She's nude. Cosmic Early is gone. He's given her wish, or maybe this is his dreaming & he's consented to her entry.

She closes the toilet lid & sits on it, in a hunch. The wall next to her lights up a TV screen.

The TV shows a small house, somebody's home, & there is a woman talking. Mumbling. Singing. "Small bombs half-made lie among icons & manifestos." Camera moves in green murk between rooms. "Once, at a signal, we too hid our children under the family's prize piano, listened to small heartbeats impossibly quick. No more." Silence. The camera still ranges among poor's possessions, clothes, a few old books. One wrapped in silk. Cared for items. Known items. The singing resumes, now about a forgotten town, in flames.

"You will walk plain in this place until your ego & humility are both broken. Until you grasp beauty not by its rare shows but by its steady presence, how it moves through all with light's reveal & music's potency. Stand. Stand!"

She stands, still glistening. The TV screen is gone where there is a doorway now. The singing raises higher a bit. She listens. She walks through.

xcv. / lvii. / xxxv.

Not demand of world an answer & thus not build an answer's world. As simple, as complex as that.

Hunger, not cloak it like a slattern's bauble. Reveal the sunshine in a seeking hand, the world of its powerful wish.

Fear, what it does not teach or tell. What indeed.

Death, the hard rift in any explain, in every explain.

Or wash free with the stars in morning light.

"Begin with those."

"Then what?"

"Choose a setting. Luna T's Cafe. The White Woods. Noah Hotel. Elsewhere."

"Then?"

"Decide which character, use your intuition, who would fit well? Maybe more than one?"

"And?"

"Add words. Watch the pages flow, one to the next, tens, then hundreds."

"Why?"

"Because the pages parallel your hours, have become a measure between them. Your clock. How you know."

"Is it formula?"

"More rhythm. More beat. Old yearns, what few new ones. Most of them long familiar."

"Why then?"

"There are canvases on the wall, tomatoes & peppers. The radio was playing Led Zeppelin, now Talking Heads. People come & go this all night sandwich shop, a few familiar. The after-midnight rats. Like you, yourselves."

Not demand of the world an answer & thus not build an answer's world, what then?

If no answer, what solid ground in mind to give perspective, suggest path?

Hunger, not cloak it like a slattern's bauble, but what desire's music without its cloak?

Want storms high & low for the hidden—

Fear, what it does not teach or tell, if anything. On a strange bridge without end, looking for a loved friend, cuffed tight & a strange heavy breath nears.

Death, the hard rift in any explain, for it bears all throughout & awaits all finally, yet no moment to truck with it equally, plainly.

Or wash free with stars in morning light, is that enough, is any enough?

"Better"

"Is it? Or just more."

Try again: not demand of the world an answer & thus not build an answer's world, Charlie Pigeonfoot is in a completely darkened room. His possessions are near him, there was a blackout but they were not taken, there may have been a fight over this, or not. He does not know.

Hunger, not cloak it like a slattern's bauble, Maya moves ahead, the hours are lossless now between her arrival & the next step she takes. It's a game, all of it, like she & the others played back in that room. A tired game, she thinks. Not knowing how to shift it to her advantage. Moving ahead.

Fear, what does it not teach or tell, Bowie wants to see where the chicken shack was, where Rosie brought them, dried mushrooms in a paper bag traveled from the Oregon coast. Where she ate them, where they met.

Death, the hard rift in any explain, Genny is no longer where she was, there is sadness & a complex want here, hurt & heal in strange mixture. What words?

Or wash free with stars in morning light, Jack is also impatient, like Maya, he wouldn't call this a game but because he sees no coherent rules or controlling force. Jump the bridge, Jack!

Jump the Bridge, Jack!

Dare me, go on, once more.

xcvi. / lviii. / xxxvi.

All alone, all suffering, yes. When the door opens fully, it's not Bobbie they take, & there's no time to negotiate. Lizzie's gone. Gone like she never was.

All is suffering, yes, so one suffers, Lizzie moves, uncuffed, along a rosie-lit corridor. She's calm now, calm like all that screaming before was an act. It was in that she was protecting Bobbie, making her focus her fear on another's anguish.

There's brute force behind her keeping her moving, & more up front, directing the single way.

The great books preach so, of men with glaring swords & hard, clean faiths, the kind Lizzie

had known her all life, the kind she'd learned to obey & manipulate. Sexualized young by the world she lived in, she chose to work among protectors males & females. Work innocence & virginity to a hard sheen, one nobody would touch. Work her inviolate cherry into an explosive none would dare touch off, work in fear, work it so deep that she lived on countless levels in her mind, one for each set of curious hands with power, with an influential word.

She knew Jazz was crazy to negotiate her friends for anything, that men who did that took & crushed without blinking. It would end badly.

She knew Bobbie would get a smack on the ass, maybe a bit more, nothing too different from her college boyfriend. It would be OK, she guessed.

Her own fate depended on who she was brought to. If they knew someone in common. How negotiable he was or how tight & unwilling he liked his bed toys.

They cry, they roar, their prayers rise on burning swine & well-stoked women to bursting skies,

yes, she'd stroked a few cocks, large fearful eyes, talking fast & slow, learned how to wet her lips before & make the noises they liked, submissive but enjoying noises. And a few cunts along the way too. She preferred cocks, women were too savvy to believe her too much. She should have expected shit would blow not by a man's cock-led insistence of bound & tied cherry treat, but a woman—

a fucking girl. She'd mis-read Jazz. Mis-read the whole damned thing. Thought she had it in control, finally get to the power Jazz had some line on, wasting it on searching for her sister.

fists gesture the forests, mountains, challenge legends of the seas. They fall too.

The room approached, & the men were gone, & the door was locked behind her.

"Undress."

"Please."

"Undress."

"Please. Don't hurt me."

"Undress or it will go worse."

She says nothing.

"Slowly."

All alone, all suffering, yes. Great books preach of men resting astride harems, among their gods, dreaming toward what will alone can do.

Not the first time she's done it. Sometimes it was enough, no matter Bobbie'd mocked her. She'd kept a roomful of men watching, no more, it was performance in itself. The tremble. The grunt. the fearful look around. Find one, just one who enjoyed it a little less than the others, find him, look at him, smile at him, a ghost of one at most, something in it desperate, & maybe just a whiff's whiff of a promise. You don't *really* want to share me with all these grubby beasts? Sloppy seconds or maybe forty-thirds?

They fall too. Whisper in spittle, breathe in drowning gasps, reach a last time toward the glare, falter, know. No happiness in loving the bars, endless singing their song.

Look at him no more. But his shift shifts the room. In not all then none, a weird honor among these lunatics. They would let her go on down to her panties, then it would stop. Maybe nude, but then no more. Maybe told to crawl on the bed prepared, pose. But that was it.

All is suffering, yes, so one suffers. Each will choke blind & pass the hard rift, its burning

blankness, past what great books may say. Music of an open hand.

She'd be told to dress & go. She'd dress & go. In truth she wasn't sure why she'd survived so far so well. And there was no audience this time. No weak man to hook. Nobody to focus on in this room. Rosy light. Two armchairs, a small table between them, a vase. Thin, pretty.

Tank top, off. Skirt, off. Bra, removed. A pause. Silence. A room so heavy with silence she could hardly finish. Finishes.

"Turn." "Again." "Bend." "More." The directions are given in a tone so even nothing tells from it. She turns, again, bends, bends more. This part is familiar. She knows it well. But no watching eyes. She obeys, & again.

What chirps & morning light gave hint when, in glistening hours, nothing explained & all shone without a net.

There was one, she remembers, remembers unwilling but still. It was close as she came to feeling something for anyone. His face was hard, handsome, a man not a boy. His eyes fascinated her. His eyes were storms, gales, oceans, moved quick & slow. His hands tempted toward her, she felt it, felt an equal tug from her belly, from her groin. She would have with him, watch who did.

xcvii. / lix. / xxxvii.

Soft, tend the croon of bones. Reck these dust running the hours, crossing new blooms, a life's spark among squall & demise. Wish for what next. Want of what lost.

The question in the grieving place is not one of whereto but one of wherefrom. Some will ask endless, will bloody the walls & bury their years. Some will do less, let the regrets come along, let them keep feeding. Keep the cankers near, think it better than otherwise.

I dreamed the grieving place one morning, wept violently in this dream, woke unknowing what it was or what it meant—

It may be a room in the No-Tell, or it may be part of *TripTown* or even **RemoteLand** or the name of Noisy Children's next album. It may just be dream detritus, potent detritus, but it's escaped onto this page, traveled from its writhing origin, has changed & will change again—

A place of accumulation without future or plan. A place which raises to the moment, & echoes back & back—a place of familiar hours & scenes yet foreign, alien, forbidding, a place one could call *anti-earth*—

It was the wanting to know closer, want to know, want to know. What had I missed? What close, what dear. Soft, croon of bones, snap of flesh, when flesh sings with sweat, sings with sweat—what didn't I know? What would remain words, wants, what great, broad absence, visible in every adored shape of the day, remained? Remains? Could it be otherwise—

"Soft, tend the croon of bones" Bobbie snaps awake. "Shh, a friend." "You took Lizzie." "Who?" "Lizzie! My friend." "There is no Lizzie. You've been imagining her." "She's my friend." "I know. Since you were young. That day at the ocean." "We met at school! I haven't known her that long." "Shh. I'll help you if I can." "Where's Jazz?! I know this is about her." Silence. "You could have taken me. I wanted you to. You were too quick." Silence. "Are you going to help

me?” “You have a chance.” “Are you going to hurt me?” Silence. “I’ll do what you want if you let Lizzie go. Don’t hurt her. She doesn’t know.” “Know what?” “About stuff.” “What kind of stuff?” The voice is nearer. She can’t feel the cuffs anymore but she is still bound in some way. She wants to cry but she knows they like it. She can’t feel the floor but she’s not in water.

She’s scared. Maybe they did let Lizzie go. Maybe it was a trick.

“What do I have to do?”

“Relax. We’ll chat now.”

“The worst comes, sometimes sweet in tongue, a cool, wicked friend, soft, yield, fine music in a sheered heart’s hour”

it was what he said the first time, she knew it was for her, knew she had something Jazz’s sister didn’t. Why can’t I remember her name? Fuck.

Think. Think! Is this him again? “Fine new torso yet sweeting, soft, draping rosy light” she gasps, knows “how smiling gestures spied, a turning word’s sugar’s thoughtless gift” she wrenches her body blindly & tumbles forward in a complete turn.

On the beach. That one time. He called it “nights blowing wide of a thousand pink splendors & frail, forgotten shades” though it was one night. Nobody knew. They shared one look, few words. Any?

This isn’t much of a chat. There were many of those. Nobody knew that either. She’d hated the computer til then but now she was hungry for it. For that little chat box they’d talk in.

Talk. Some nights it was like he wrote out novels to her. She’d read. She’d touch herself. Some nights she’d wait. He’d give an instruction. She’d do it. Was it sexual, ever? She couldn’t remember.

“Soft, again, let what come not cut through this hungry cry. Arrive new with unmade questions, more ready in yesteryear’s salmon dusk” *was this him?* Why now? Why like this? She would have come on a word. He disappeared & Jazz’s sister followed him. Maybe. Nobody knew for sure. Jazz didn’t think so. “It wasn’t like that.” What did she know?

Yah, what did she know. Did he exchange a look with her too that day on the beach? Had he collected all the girls that day?

I don’t fucking care.

“Is it you? Tell me. I need to know.” Silence.

She remembers one. Focusing very hard on her thighs she opens them wide, trembling, not even sure she’s still dressed. “Breathe, breathe twice” she whispers, then more strongly, “mix your hours fine, invent your god’s strength sole by lesson of how last it goes.” Please take me, please take me, please take me . . .

She’s in a bed, a room littered with mirrors, velvet, rosy light but deeply bloody rosie light, on the bed, her thighs wide as she’d willed them. The door opening, blinding glare of it.

xcviii. / lx. / xxxviii.

Better than deathless kingdoms of men, bury me in the wordless glare, burn me & my every raucous page, puff my ash to words & stars;

Bowie had learned what the mushrooms know, what they experience when they consume humans, Bowie had experienced this, the simple metaphysical explosion, he hadn't really come back from that night & neither had the preacher. The difference between them was that Paula had eaten him & he'd panicked, forced her to gag, the melding hadn't worked, gone wrong, what the fuck were any of these words? He'd gone to Rosie's grieving place, & then through it elsewhere, taking her to places less place-full, til they were nowhere at all & divided in a sense, some returning to her live torso, to the bodied live, some remaining, & he came back too, he didn't know how, but wasn't back as he'd gone. The priest was back too, but his division was a dirty one, left him divided in worse ways—

Let me out of man-dreamed eternal, little faith in men unbound by mortality, all its gods & heavens will still garb in commandments & roar with primal bloodlust;

Rosie had held his hand as they evaporated, it was to tell to whom she'd thought she was clinging to. Father? Mother? First boyfriend? A secret teacher when she'd still been a primal, giggling bit? All of them. She followed him, walked with him, pressed ahead. At the time he couldn't see or know well what she'd seen but his dreams of that endless night had cleared it for him, dreams he'd cry & swipe for in the morning & little keep. One night, thinking he'd record the dream, if it came & he woke from it, he found himself at dawn listening to himself on tape crying & yelling, Jump the Bridge! Jump the Bridge!

Burn me in the glare, let specks of my being feed tree or star or hungry trout, so much the better, not to die another ragged man buried in undone vows;

They evaporated into each other & he felt, became her intensest moments, the first time she'd tasted a peppermint ice cream cone, how it accelerated on her lips & tongue, how she felt flying, she wasn't breathing anymore, nobody noticed, she was small but not small enough to be novel anymore, this taste followed her, it was her guide what to near what to avoid, what guided her the first night a man undressed her, beheld her torso in his rented bed, a breath, another, peppermint was that moment, peppermint was his touch, peppermint was the hour, she knew the scent the night she'd left her husband, watched him sleeping as she walked out the door into the desert full of lights, peppermint receded as she watched him tangle at time & space to retrieve her, she smelled no peppermint as he groped blindly into the ether, the malleable matter of existence itself, his hands gently calling her, calling, then fading back, fading back having brushed near, nearer, & she did not come, sent back a fire with him, all she could do, burn the town of their house, their union, send him far, for now, far—

Bury me, burn me, the desert I scatter will remember, the sweeter a touch to what I was, stars & woods will shine on because once I shone;

The chicken shack had burned too but not to the ground. Enough to close it. Everyone in town was spooked for a long time & nobody would go near it. Soon, it simply remained.

Enough of a reputation to remain untouched over the years. Must have been the Lights.

and, if not, there's a pretty idea to a short, hard being & a long, windblown forgetting.

"You're going in there?"

"Yah."

"You shouldn't. Nobody does."

"I know."

"Come on, Freddy. Do you really want to go into all that?"

"Wait here."

"No."

"No."

"I'm coming."

"No."

xcix. / lxi. / xxxix.

What cracks the world of its central tangle: whither bound?

"I don't have your answer."

Or what flesh remembers when none else, marking of lost hours & tumbled vows.

"But I'm with you. I'm with you always."

Prove it. Prove your presence.

"Everywhere you look, every scattered thing you see, every sound, every taste, every smell, all of it is proof. Your worst terrors, body fears, heart crumbles, woes so deep in your bones you don't know. The doubt you feel & how some hours so blow this doubt."

Can I say no to this? Can I demand more?

"Everything. You don't know & you want to. In your best & worst. This moment is laid plain for you to know. I'm with you always."

When still a fine new torso, faith sums in a sparkle, a chase to the water, sugar's fresh excitement.

Rebecca's blue eyes. True. Truth. I say nothing.

Dreams squall through in possibles not eternal.

Merry Muse regards me. "It's not up to you to decide belief. You are faith's instrument. It will use you as it wishes."

Work it closer, listen, always there with me? "Always. The worst of it."

Faith's instrument, when the hours are awful. When the corridors are jagged, impeded worse than dream's cruel tries.

Her blues eyes. True. Truth.

"None for you but to
sing."

New love comes in rosy shade, lashless song. A breath, another. A memory of another year's pink

disruption.

Mercy what flesh remembers washes free with stars in morning light.

Faith's instrument. Everywhere, everything. The worse of it.

What speaks tonight, what moves this pen, is my hand & something not my hand. I've begged to feel it blow through me, ride me, have me, cast me, no peace, no complaint, all music.

"Fear"

"I know"

"Fear. Fucking fear."

"I know. It never goes away."

"Fear."

"Listen to what you wrote: 'what cracks the world's tangle is how & again it cracks & does not fall.'"

"It's all lies."

"Yes, of course."

"Because lie implies truth?"

"Because nothing tells simply."

"If at all."

"If at all."

"Then what? I walk through days & miles among those who press truth & lies on me. I lose myself & do the same."

"Lose yourself."

"Yes. When I trade in truth & lies, I lose myself. Lose the groove, the way change soothes & teaches at best, & retain wrong certainties. Nothing, simply to share a tongue & another hour with others."

"How else?"

"I don't know."

"Ask for what you need. No matter how fruitless it seems. No matter how pathetic. I am with you in this asking. I am with you always."

c. / lxii. / xl.

*We remember in the movement
of hands, a voice from another
room, one holiday, maybe two.
The years were music, food, & plans;
we remember to learn & grieve.
Grieve, to remember better.*

There are hours, there are gestures. Habit, where rust grows, where it abides, where it eats.

There is memory, what rules crookedly. What worked, what didn't. Still works, still trying.

There is fear, the tangle of blood's push, bones' hunger, consciousness, mystery. Some explain, another.

It was like this, these people, this place. The moon above. Blink, & another live set. New people, new place. Things Change. Why? Yes. Now continue.

"Samantha."

"Maya."

"Is he close?"

"Are you ready?"

"I don't know. Yes. I'd like to have some clothes on."

Samantha laughs.

"He won't notice."

"He's a boy. If I'm dressed half-naked like this, he'll notice."

"He knows all that."

"All what?"

Genny holds Tweety Bird as she is taken by miles & hours toward her wish. She wants for a hair brush, some fresh underwear, a new name & identity. Does not know who to thank or how. Holds Tweety & wonders what Preacher will say.

"It's both of us or none, Preacher. She's come back to me, she stays."

Charlie Pigeonfoot is waiting for whoever is holding him this time to return. He looks up in the darkness & imagines his eagle above this place—whatever place it is—high above & somehow able to hear & come.

Here me, come. Hear me, come. I'm asking. I'm asking. Here me, come.

Bowie pushes into the chicken shack, Paula tries to follow but he won't let her. Leaves her with a word "Wait" & pushes in. What happened that night is still here, heavy here, nothing has moved since. Rosie is still here. The preacher is too. Strong presences of each.

How to start. The mushrooms have filled this place & he will do what the government dreamed

but not for them.

Jack looks over the side of the Bridge of Glass for a long time. Tries to remember Xtina's body, or Penny's. Even the hippy girl's, way down below.

The message is blunt but sent from whom is unclear.

She approaches him, running, flying, crying, so close, as his eyes close & he leaps from the Bridge.

Now it will change again, all of it, there is wild movement everywhere, rust screams from a thousand shadows, a thousand thousand—

Now it will change again & still again, there is easy movement where all was stuck & airless, flesh will name & it will pursue & for a moment it will control—a fish, a swishing hip, a cry of voices fill the canyon & the night replies in soothe—

Now it will change, change, & still change again, the music is always saying so, the trees & blooms, the buzz & chirps, the winds, the seas, watch men raise great heights, watch them settle an inch, an hour at a time—

Tell me, then, what of all this? Change, & change again, Jack closes his eyes & jumps the Bridge of Glass as she runs for him too late

What does she do? She leaps too. See her go. No hesitation in it.

“Trust. Sing. I am everywhere. The worst of it. All the rest too.”



To be continued in Cenacle | 75 | October 2010

* * * * *

Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Four.

"Truth is a pathless land"
—Jiddu Krishnamurti, 1929.

The way is Dis-illusion (always
with you), & the flames will
dream your nights, & the rose petals
will consume them.

Wherefrom, reck the great tomes,
guides where to, but scant explain
(always) a fine torso (fine, fine) blindly
burning hours to excite & known (taste
it, shhh! touch it, taste it) (with you).

Way is disillusion, ever many musics
hum & away, cries from rooms
where some eat others (fine torso)
(consume rose petals), two claps,
want's strap (fine, fine) (taste it,
make it breathe wetly, want, know,
wait, beg, crawl for it, do) (always),
now sun again & a meal in
silence.

Is dis-illusion, the sands corrode tracks
laid by kings with gods for eyes & worms
for wills (such torsos, such rose petals,
such blood, such straps, will heaved
will apart, commanded by dream's
worst corruption into lust & power).

Dis-illusion, breathe twice & again in
this gallery (always) of (with) skulls
you. (always) Awkward rose petals,

delicious in gait (take it, there is a moment, before the first wave falls back, wordless gnashing foam, a cry without clock or calendar *for fucking more*—(always with you, just fucking pose). Canvases of men long mixtured in dust (tasted their petals too, thrust with will superior, thrust from faith, from a blindness fired between lust & fanaticism). Voices sniff voices (sniff low, sniff well) (with you), music of a dreaming hour's passing, hours of music hum & away (fucking pose until a later hour when it's time to perform, pretty & perform).

The way is Dis-illusion, no man will gaze upon his world & wish to know this well (too many rose petals, too much lust in the world). Burn the pages, burn the skulls, the sand, the petals (mm, every one, lick teeth, know what heats is like heated), the canvas itself.

The way is Dis-illusion. Nod & burn the canvas itself.

ci.

I remember everything too well, & more & more these days. I remember how you trembled. I remember your sweat. I listened to your breathing. You're fragile in size but I've thought all night about what I felt run through me as I carried you. Not fragility. So much power I thought I carried a young star.

But I was murky. You have to know. My thoughts were mushy with ideas & numbers. With your scent. Even now I taste something of it. When I see young, powerful things in any form. Trees, collies, even sunsets. I think about you & wonder.

I walked a long way after I left you. I had my things, my books, but not for long. The books, I mean. I was tired of how I'd come at it.

There was more. So much more, I'd held it there in my arms, when you were in my possession.

What I can't decide now is what next. You see, Maya, I walked a long way from you, another state, another city. I've learned how travel works, & what it isn't. A strong back & a closed mouth will get a man far like a fine ass & a smile will do for a woman.

Something went wrong this time, that's what I'm trying to tell you. I've left people behind before, jobs, pets, homes. I thought of it simply, a snake sheds his skin. Started a long time ago & now it's my way.

But I didn't shed you. I've lain with many girls & women in more kinds of days & nights than I want to mention, but something in you stuck.

I didn't rid myself of everything this time. Broke my own rule about possessions. I kept the blanket I wrapped you in when you appeared to me. You weren't an angel. You were better.

You were shameless. Without ego or shadow. That's what I'm trying to say to you, why you matter, why this damned blanket in my arms on this too-hot day as people in this park pass me thoughtless, I'm just another city tramp on a bench, but I hold it in my crouch, my hunch-shouldered defense anyone too near or curious. I remember how shameless you were. You were scared, the White Woods had nearly been your end, but you'd escaped & there was something in you they hadn't touched. I don't know what to think or call it.

I knew I held you & touched you as they hadn't. I didn't know & had no plan for this.

It was a long time ago, Maya. I was young in years. Maybe not like you, definitely not like you, but a boy for the most part. I was full of my training then. Thinking plans were the best strategy, gave a man his best topspin.

There was someone I knew then, like you. Shameless. Beautiful. Made my fingers & heart likewise hungry.

She made a choice one day, Maya. It's what I would tell you, what the purely protector part of me wants you to know. A choice. Magick manifests & a thousand kinds of noses raise & sniff.

Maybe you've made it by now but I don't believe that. I kept a few old skills & I trust them to tell me true when rare I ask.

You're what you were that morning, along your path.

The first time I abandoned a life, I didn't feel it til years later, & then I spent a yowling month in bourbon & cocaine.

The second time it felt like I was burning alive everything I'd ever known, loved or hated.

More after that but with less occurrence after awhile. Start asking life for less over time & it responds. Eventually forget how to ask anything significant of anyone.

And I thought I was able to cut the human factor out of it entirely. Save the world through spirit & mathematics, a formula that did away with the vagaries of flesh & want. Funny thing was, calculated from this angle, I concluded that the world was doomed ecologically.

How then to use numbers to jumpstart a mass spiritual awakening that would save the planet?

You saved *my life*, Maya, which is what I'm trying to say here. I felt every wanting, tendering, confused, spasming thing for you in ways that haven't settled since. I'm not the same in ways I can't control. I have more old skills still in hand almost than I'd rather. The places I went to learn, the people I learned from.

—Am I supposed to follow you, ally with you, or claim you? No answer. None. I'm stalled in this hour, stalled & confessed it. I've walked as far from you as I can & it did no good. Love, lust, just fucking *wonder*. Who had I become that morning that I was given you, & passed you along?

Calling something a re-birth is dangerous, makes every prior hour secondary, & none

are. Some more dramatic, some more memorable, but each important. The souls I've met who are really past teaching know this, say this, are humbled & awed by this.

But it was surely a turn. I arrived to you as much as you did to me. Now here's this hour, this wooden bench cradling me, these beautiful trees around me, large & small. Not telling but not indifferent. Nature is never indifferent to men. Sensitive to each of us in ways hardly few of us dare know.

So I don't know but maybe it's just that I don't accept that it's not possible I will see you again. Possible & where I am bound, not a plan. More the path ahead.

I nod. Look up, around. Begin to walk. Lots of sleeping men on benches. Some it's a break, some it's a home, for awhile.

Keep walking. Leaving this city won't be too hard.

I'll walk my path, Maya, for you, toward you, because of what that morning keeps amplifying through me. I'll find you, or find something.

I keep waking up more & more, & I don't know what else to call it.

Maybe it's you. A cross, a lover, a forest to lose & listen in. I don't know. Life's better that way, Maya.

cii.

A film comes on that is clearly amateurish, a shaky camera, the whirring sounds of audio equipment, a cough, the narrator reads stonily, as though unpracticed, from a script: "In the White Woods there is an old empty temple, it is more a clearing shaped like a temple, only full visible in highest moonlight."

A pause in narration. Murky shapes solidify, a moment of a peaceful place, in moonlight, then a cry, a timeless cry of the stronger claiming the weaker, it repeats, echoes, distorts, then is gone.

Shapes, dark ghosts pass quickly & countless through the peaceful place & leave a sense of discontent. The camera is now steady, the light sharpens but loses its glow, its ageless patina. More artificial, electric, the wind & sense of growing, moving things is gone. Now a room, now breathing, eager, uncertain breathing. Now a bed, blurry, large, & a shape, a torso, nude but still undefined.

The voice resumes once more, & a sense of its presence in the room, the torso responds to its narration, flinches; then, as though curious, leans nearer as though to listen more closely.

"Tonight I am mortal. I know the starshine will outlast me, the high desert scrub, the long chasing wind. Some last day will come, some sad or sudden hour, & what next in soil or sky or else."

The torso shifts, & shifts again. Human, long hair, slender. Breathing quick, rushed & alert. The room shimmers in & out with this breathing, less & less solidity.

"Tonight I am at peace with all this, riding a full moon into eclipse's grasp—"

"Nooooooo" moans the torso, a reedy girlish voice thrashing the bed's breadth even as its grows larger & less substantial—"going & gone in many but a few ways—" "Nooooooo"—"Neither the suffering nor its explain, books glowing in shrines or scented icons." The torso stops thrashing helpless & starts fighting, for balance, for controlled movement.

"Tonight I can only think: empty the temples of men. They welcome when they should push along. Empty the temples of men, whatever's been learned, whether it's enough."

Torso rises now in rags & flames, carrying all along, a force now, little shaky. "Take prayers & praise alike to the woods"—rises, begins to walk—"the surf, to the desert under full moon"—rags & flames, the bed crumbles behind her—"I am remembering what shined days & what only blunt lust"—she walks powerfully through the doorway, leaving no room behind—"fine-grooved hustle of a deep gene's idea"—

Silence. She's gone.

Then a whir, a blur & softening into moonlight, the temple-shaped clearing visible again, empty, then shapes & sparks, the acceleration of time into something impossible, the transformation of space, & the voice its last cry found in starlight upon which new forms will form & emerge: "Give up the gods as child's scrabble for a safe place. Empty the temples of men!"

"So some temples are good & some are bad!"

"Yah, I think so. The ones in the White Woods are good."

"But they're not buildings!"

"I know. That's what they're saying."

"But why? There are some pretty nice churches around here. I don't go but I walk by 'em. What's the point here?"

"It's just a TV show or something. Don't take it to heart."

"We been watching it for a long time now. You know there's something spooky about it. You can't just call it a TV show & that's that."

"I don't know what else to say. It doesn't help to worry about it."

"Yah, I suppose so."

"Have another beer. Barkeep! Another round here please."

"Nah! I'm good. I gotta get going."

"Already? It's early. Tomorrow's Sundee. You gotta woman on the clock waiting for you in that stinkpot you live in?"

"Yah. That must be it. 'Night."

"'Night. Hey, barkeep, can we get *Sportscenter* on the TV?"

I leave but I'm not going home. The more weird shit going on around here the less I stick around T's drinking. I'm getting pretty done being always half in the bag when the bag isn't very interesting anymore.

It's that hotel. Noah Hotel. No-Tell they call it. I'm pretty sure there's a lot of weird shit up there & didn't used to be. Not just the usual whores & crack & all that. I know there's more.

But how to find out? Walk in the front door & rent a room? Start sniffing around like Columbo?

What do I want to know? Do I want in? Is this where I break with my past, my life? I know some things are wrong but it's easy right now, finally, & if I walk in there it won't be.

"Good evening, sir, how can I help you?"

"Got a vacancy?"

"Let me check."

“No. Wait. Let me look around a minute, OK?”

“Very well, sir. Come see me if you want that room.”

“I will. Thanks.”

“No problem. You’re welcome here.”

ciii.

More a beast than a man haunts the clearing shaped like a temple in the White Woods. Imagine a being shaped like every creature & creation the world! To have fired through bug & collie & raked ravines through canyons & given the Universe the gift of growth, decay, moving light, want & fecundity, tendered one with a day’s life & another with a century’s & another with many, some to fly & some rooted, the blind feeders crushed beneath the boots of the troubadours of men—

Imagine this great beast encompassing all & releasing the seed of each, deeper into what it is that knows no center or favorite, feels when foes clash & one falls, when two mate, when one dies in this shadow as another shadow cradles its new birth—

Old tomes call mankind a triumph, a paramount creation of a man-shaped god, conscious & therefore king—

step into this temple-shaped clearing, now! kneel! know you know nothing & your gift is not ignorance but doubt!

for in this open space pulses with unfettered intensity the beast’s push & purpose, all may pass through freely, none will perish while doing so, & there is no explain for this, no answer to its why, no what at all—

find here then not the beast but broad, plain evidences, broader & plainer perhaps because nothing lives here permanently, what passes through, continues—

thus the greed of some men believe here is power’s center, great, supreme power’s center, to be claimed, to be harnessed, named & ridden wild, ridden far across the world & elsewhere—

There are shades & sparks here
to remember, shades & sparks
without meaning or ends,

a beat, a breath,
what touches each to all?

empathy, & brighter, empathy, & all brighter. Shades & sparks tall men will swat away for a moment, & another, a beat, a breath, but no accomplishment, this is no place men can overturn & rule.

It breaks down here, simply put, laws & the linearity of text, all easy coherence, there is the chaos, crazy fucking chaos, of feeling it close, being close to the—

what? A source with no center? How then a nearer & nearer?

No explain, no narrative, just the acceleration of time into something impossible, transformation of space

just a whisper & hardly that:
 “step kind around the nests.”

Stalled, tonight, this hour, in the clearing shaped like a temple in full moonlight. The shades, the sparks, surrounded by them, stalled, the temptation to stay to avoid the morrow’s daylight hours where men seek to shape like gods, reck us all gods in every dim & blaring gesture, fine & funny, soil to sky.

Neither stay here, nor move blandly through those men’s tough, mere hours, will the beast hear & respond to a prayer, some cry, would this be the beast too?

Acceleration of time, transformation of space

Would beast even be the word to tell, & if not what word? Best to say brokenly & some wrongly that there is a place in the White Woods whose presence is known by full moonlight alone, its shape by what surrounds not what it contains, & what is within it is present only by residual effect

yet its pull, its force, acceleration of time, transformation of space,

breaks down here, laws & linearity,
 crazy fucking chaos, closer to the—

look it’s that room in the No-Tell!
 look it’s run through *Trip Town* & **RemoteLand!**
 look the beast fills every dream
 of Maya’s now when she can &
 dares sleep—

others call her the key while she wonders if she’s really the conduit—

civ.

In the moment before, there was some other, lesser furor, this is how it works. Chaos trumps what was happening before it. A phone call, a car bomb, birth, death, new love. Trumps, owns, re-invents. So yes.

There were two memories, at least, one of massed clouds in childhood before a summer storm. The other of an old relative (then chaos.), spittle & wrinkles (breaking through now), tears & obscure regrets (now.)

Then chaos. The old world remains
 as dried blood, a strange headline.
 Alien, nearly untranslatable.



The beast steps in, wakes, returns,
whatever one need say to describe
it, the chaos, moment belongs to
the beast.

Much will return, tangle with the new. The alien sheen to it all will diminish. There will be
sentiment, gaps, options.

As much as anything, the chaos moment each of these persons has felt—the *krak!* like a
gunshot—was the emergence or re-emergence of the Beast in their days—& since—this is an
important point—the beast emerges in chaos & recedes a bit & more in days but its effects
perpetuate—

Sometimes its echoes will reverse fade—the beast will clarify & its power will pulse rawly
visible again—

What then—something has happened—the beast is amplifying again—these past pages have
been owned by this—I won't say I know full what this means or what to do with it—maybe
knowing isn't it—isn't close—fair enough—

there are traps
there are doors
sometimes they resemble
each other—

this counsel remembered seems again relevant—for coming pages-

This all is mulling, is a sort of putting off—nothing will be the same—then chaos. Then, then.

I love them, these characters, these people, & I don't know their fates or nexts perfectly—now
knowing means I find out as the pages come—

It occurs to me to wonder if the beast is good or evil, at least to address it—good & evil
distinguish, simplistically, what does not in truth divide easily.

What to come, then, not by terms of good & evil but for each as he perceives. I wish for their
survival & prosperity. But of course I would.

Anyway, now continue to point.

cu.

Cup of liquid glass, drink, & for an eternally long moment know, remember, all runs, flows,
walls, doors, drink, it goes, the certainty, & certainty's despair, & certainty's comfort, all goes,
would you drink?

I drink, I must, I want to know, know how much I don't know, what shatters the familiar

streets & hours from within, what? I want know how much I don't know. Tell me so I can better not know.

The night is cold & reminds me of a thousand other nights. Other places I sat alone, & did not know, & wished to, & some of these nights drank cups of liquid glass

to talk to those nights, back & forth,
what to say, jump the bridge?
what to say?

How everything crosses obviously at this moment, a fist of liquid light crossed the TV screen showing *Trip Town* & passes through the screen where **RemoteLand** plays inside the pages written by Cosmic Early within those written by David Time read above bottom & below to thousands by Global Wall in a painting Preacher made that night in that chicken shack on that desert border town, painted the flames longer before they'd arrived he'd seen it all finally, what he'd come for—finally, open wide, here it/everything came.

No longer mortal, now a melting, cooling star (would you drink?) Warping into a wordless glow, he traded the human world that night for a perfect sheen, devolved, evolved, no fucking words, perfect sheen, smooth rim to luring depths

an ocean, a sky, perfect fragment
explaining one speck to all

Paula ate him slowly, gagged a little but she had to keep up with Rosie, go where Rosie went, know what Rosie knew, & he moved Paula's hand rapidly for a long stretch, she'd brought her artbag though Rosie'd laugh—

"You'll never make an art tonight when we eat those"
"Why not?"
"It's not how it works. Maybe later, a few days, months."
"I'm going to try. If it's trash, I'll call it trash. I'm no fool, right?"
"No, you're not. Well, not mostly."

They'd saved up their bus fare to get to Fort Stevens in Oregon, & then set a simple deception rolling about how & why they were going. Fake emails, Photoshopped brochures, & the smarts to tell nobody the truth.

"We tell nobody."
"& we stick together the whole time."
"No boys."
"Hey! None?"
"None. Or we don't go."
"OK. I agree. Let's spit hands on it."

They kept their vow to stick close to each other the whole way & if they had not become briefly separated in the woods up there, something else would have happened. What Rosie saw, what Paula didn't.

cvi.

(When all below was gone there was still sky. We collected the many clouds, wisps & fists of them, named & grouped the dawn & dusks because we were still men & women.)

Bowie looks around. Nothing tells him the when or where. Looks at his hands, yes, they're wrong for what he last remembers, they're too young. But how to figure this?

Someone is talking. "What are the years? Does anyone know? There's a presumption of purpose, outcome but no agreement, no proof. So there's the hustles of faith, of promise, hustles that play on vanity, fear, hope. Think any of this is new? The King crying to God's love & protection as his soldiers slaughter thousands, millions. The women shaking her ass for coin? The preacher in his small castle whining holy about humility & poverty, & the someday-to-come that justifies sacrifice? The take on every corner, one's purse, another's freshness, a third's shaggy talent?"

Nothing but his too-young hands & the voice, otherwise Bowie seems blind & deaf. Paralyzed, if he has a body at all.

"What then, you're wondering, but the sure path from first squall to quiet or brutal or sudden end? What then? Anything a choice not countless taken, & another, & another?"

The smell is moldy, earthy, something.

"There is a choice but it's not obvious & it's not out there in the wise men or the tomes. It may be one or many. It may fail."

Mushrooms. Fucking mushrooms.

"Nothing said here will guide you. Just a hint, it's somewhere, whatever it is. Yours to chase or not. Many kinds of good & failed lives. But there's something else too. Something else."

(One day a rainbow & lightning, it all came back. Even dreaming that night, nobody spoke.)

Bowie snaps forward again, bodiless still for the most part. There are two events going on here, he's now figured that, as though his mind rocks between two worlds, two dimensions, whatever, fucking Mulder.

Think! Stop. Steady. Think. Breathe. Waver between the two. One smells like mushrooms but when did they ever talk like that? Talk, heh. The other is music, he's really *not present* in that world, just an absorbing force of sugary doomsy words.

“Or choose to travel with us, young pilgrim, where we go, what we seek, what great thing you will become with us.”

Shit. They’re not talking to me. They’re talking to him! To Preacher! & he’s fucking listening.

(Nobody spoke, even dreaming that night. It had all come back, by lightning, by rainbow.)

That’s *mine*. Fucking figures. Now it’s looping back on me. But fuck a duck I don’t have time for it, gotta save that damned Preacher. Something’s wrong, *mushrooms don’t talk like that*.

Bowie now tunes deep in, forgets his hands & tunes into that smell, pushes, focuses, *buries* his awareness in that smell & the other world loosens, loosens, begins to let go, its music, its metaphor-tangled promise, maybe come back, will come back, come find me again, I have to save my friend, please understand, more important in this moment

yah, time, ha, but let me go some & remember me & please near me again,

buries in the scent until he is back somewhere more familiar, not arrived fully, no actual body to arrive with in truth, ah yes, Oregon, the girls who found them growing peacefully in the woods, well, no, one girl, another a bit later, something more to the details, maybe later they’ll come, now long travelled to their town on desert’s edge & a full moon’s night, of course, & he was eaten by the girl who’d found them, & the Preacher by the other girl, & it was alright for him til it wasn’t til the Preacher got trouble

“I have to go back.”

“How? Why?”

“He’s in trouble. They’re both in trouble, something’s wrong. Badly wrong.”

“What do we do?”

“We go back, slowly.”

“But I was there! You saw it too. Rainbows & lightning! We were close! Both of us!”

“I know. *I know*. We have to go back. They need us.”

Silence. I waited. Rosie demanded I help her leave a trail. From back there, as far as we’ve gotten, every step to her town, to exactly where she, her body, sat. I nodded. I didn’t need one but she did. I knew she’d go back without me but maybe we’d both get there separately. Meet up again after tonight.

Right now that would be a fancy, no more. I led her back, it was hard, we’d been deep. Rosie was hurt a few times in ways she couldn’t know. I was gentle with her, rough on what resisted. No liking for a retreat in these kinds of spaces. You get on board, you ride to the end. Otherwise, you get hurt a little. Or more. I did what I had to but it would cost me in time. I guess really every fucking move from cradle to grave bears a cost one way or another. I just banked on my reputation, & a few favors—

this makes no sense, does it? What the fuck am I talking about huh? Yah, OK,

we returned, it was hard, but made it, not fully in time.

cvi.

Benny Big Dreams knows Jack has jumped the bridge, but does not know how chaotic the effects will be. Right now there is the fact, & the waiting.

He lives nowhere precisely. Has no home to yearn toward or try to build new from memory & wish.

But maybe there are places of comfort, places he tends toward a little more than others.

They have different qualities, these places, & mood draws him to one or another.

He didn't think Jack would do it, didn't believe it. Saw where Jack'd been bound & knew his demise waited there. Humans call it the White Woods as though that means or explains anything about it. Not a place to go for them, though sometimes they pass through. But Jack had been *bound* there, by trickery but nonetheless.

Now he's turned elsewhere, done what was not expected, set chaos into motion.

Chaos brings the Beast, Benny shudders. Not in danger himself, the Beast has never shown interest in Dreamland, but Benny trucks with the world humans perceive, their collective waking dream, & the Beast is moving thither again.

What first caught the Beast's reck, crushed bloom's scent, stretched blouse, maybe a weightless laugh frosting the night air? Yes, perhaps? The Beast bodies & multi-bodies an hour, a day, less & less for many years but there was a scent, was a laugh & they left markings where little possible, a crevice in hide unmarkable, at least in a long while, but the crevice had no further history until this same scent, sweating, fear-pocked, crossed through the temple-shaped clearing. A scent fecund & terrified, the Beast manifest in the clearing, there was a great noise which echoed like furiously hard rain in disparate places, wanna know when it changed more than every minute every mile? That scent woke the Beast up, it remembered, the crevice in its hide blew deep & wide through, & on, & on, & on.

Why always pursued she does not know, nobody explains though many will advise her how to be chased gracefully, how to profit most in being caught, will joke with her if she would about the chase itself, try to chat it into the ordinary skin of things, this is how it is, how this is done, how to work it better over time—

Maya sniffs. This must be dreaming because she is very much more powerful than waking. Muscles worked hard & beautifully, hair somehow both blonder & pinker, she sniffs & knows what's near. The clearing. The Beast. Is she naked in these dreams? Doesn't quite know, doesn't seem important.

What is that she moves, not a panic like it was, but strongly, willfully, in the depths of the White Woods sight is the least sense, she sniffs & she listens, her body aware tautly, hard, glistening with attent, whoever she is in these dreams, what the path from waking's stumbles to here, to this, it happens often—

The Beast pursues at a lope, interested in learning for now how she moves, how she thinks, she feels touched from afar, stroked like a prize, she learns there is pain in resisting, doesn't & the strokes learn but do not go further—when did these dreams begin? It was Dylan. Not his doing but his simple coming.

Until then nothing, nobody profoundly other had touched her, nothing on her nearest side of the Universe, she was contained all in, then Dylan & now that boy walked around with some of her in possession.

The Beast is nearer this time, less lope, more pursuit, she sniffs & the scent is familiar, she knows it from other hours, cajoling whispering hours, power's intimacy, knows how it will press & press, & no nearness near enough—

She opens wide her senses, the known & unknown ones, feeling for a new crevasse, a move to make virtually as she invents it—

something—someone—he's near—she realizes suddenly he's always near—this place, kind of place is his—now to risk that he isn't worse—the Beast presses, nearly a physical presence now, she decides & suddenly cuts toward whomever tis who watches—right at him hard

A crash— a blow— crunch— chaos— then silence.

Rosy-lit room. Dark wood panelled. She rises, hard to know if the girl of waking or the woman of dreams, shaken, staggers into one of the two armchairs. Slumps. A thin blue vase on the teak table between the chairs. Slumps, waits.

A voice at first, not a present man, just a voice. Talks steadily as though he has been for hours & “Genes & chance number up the world, between extinction & the long cry for a familiar god's knowable craft. What was it, *what was it*, those hours between scents, what between the chase & the cage? What else haunts blood & bones & talks nightly in dreams” he is old, he is an old powerful man regarding her like a pink morsel, eat, teach, crush, no matter, blinks, looks again, considers. Speaks slowly.

“Are cock & cunt alone enough to bone up the world & drive purpose through its wide, wild flesh?”

For a moment she is beneath his torso, her legs wrapped around his hips, the thrust of his cock so massive within her that she has no excess of it, she is simply what sheathes his cock as it thrusts. Blinks, looks again, armchairs. Oh.

cvi.

How to explain it, what the years mean? Some eat others.

“—Red Sox are up 10-1 in Game 1 of the World Series here in beautiful Fenway Park in Boston, Massachusetts on a wet—”

He nods at the numbers, signs, notices the gulls shat the windows again. This high up even.

The radio cuts to a commercial, several, home loans, cock enlargers, dental health plans.

Nods, signs, better numbers soon.

The radio is pink, shaped like a cat's face, is old, like a thrift store relic but he doesn't know where it came from. Was it here when he took this office?

Some eat others.

He knows & does not know what goes on here. Human activity, transaction, is multiply & thoroughly filtered before it reaches him, electronic spreadsheets of numbers.

Maybe the pink cat clock is from someone he'd rather not know about. Something maybe that happened in this office one night, or many, long ago, or not, & its only residua was a figure on a spreadsheet, maybe this clock too, maybe a scar, maybe a dream or several. Residuum?

A dream or more. He nods, signs, there are money problems. Problems? No. But there is a need to grow or wither always in business. There are pockets of untapped profit here. Requests he had previously disregarded.

Men with tastes for consumption, some like his own, that he had wanted to keep far, others far worse, others he would not wish to encounter save by higher numbers on these fucking electronic spreadsheets.

Some eat others. Others will join in, or watch, & pay a good cold dollar.

"We're back at Fenway—"

He nods, signs, better numbers soon—

Some eat others. Dreams are blood & bone, maps & harvest, moving glance of a pale slip, a smile, a smile luring with centuries of force—

(It was lucid. At least. Dreamspace live & not a least thought what to do with it.)—

An ache as it turns aside, want's hustle buried high & low—

(live fucking dreamspace I looked at you we exchanged thoughts why now why this late ugly year in things? We don't even fucking count years anymore! Why bother? We did it, broke through time & space, or just plain broke it, our belief in it or part of it, I don't know—but damnit dreamspace I was arrived with you there we began & finished each other's sentences in that dream-room—

—& I offered you chocolate cake—you smiled no—you never liked sweets much—
there was a large raw spider on the ceiling I gave chase
didn't crush it til it was on the floor

We arrived! dreamspace! Not this broken world of useless clocks I've lived to see without you!

Floors below, still others years going on & I don't how or if to reach them, what would happen if I descended—how is this *hotel* growing taller through space & time with each floor accelerating & disintegrating faster than the one below?

What did we do here? Does it have to do with those damned Woods? That clearing? What we tried to kill there? Did we do all this by killing it or failing to? Which would be worse?



“Dreams are blood & bone. Skinny up gods for comfort if little explain” now Dylan is terrified—something is stirring in the dark—he was at Luna T’s trying to follow Maya’s dream-sent directions—he’s still there partially but there was an interruption—

“Mystic shades of winter on city streets” the words plucked him & he nearly gone went, left his body huddled somewhere deep in T’s under a tree—the rest hears the old man’s voice—follows, “Distant torrents roiling high plains” the old man is terrified & it’s to do with Maya “Touch of flesh to flesh, cults to why” each word broiling mad with terror he’s on the streetcar, a ragged kid with a tall pack on his back, a worn scent about his skin—

a companion—too? She’s talking like the old man, low, as they sway the train’s long night run—“What the years mean? Shine, ache, what strange lasts.” Her face is young & uncreased, & familiar—

“Cor . . . delia?” does he even whisper it? She is distracted, still talking “Hurry & laughter, nearly & always, nights sugared hours long with arrival & consume” she’s shifting, from ragged traveller to a leather body tight garment, tall black boots, whiskers, face tinted pink & singing “the many forgetting rest. Some eat others” she nears him, close, fecund scent hooking taking “some” closer “eat” closer “others” he feels her body press him hard, there is disintegration the train is rising, “Blood & bone” consume, feed, so close, this torso untried by any yet how it heats hard, how knows what to claw alluring deep within him “some eat others” “so close” “shine, ache, what strange lasts” he has to go, this isn’t helping Maya “Touch of flesh to flesh, cults to why” she has no leather costume on, there is no train, “want’s hustle buried high & low there is take in this but what was hers is now his, hands grasp small high breasts fingers squeeze & dare moan, artfully pinch nipples, she leans back as his thighs demand near “Dreams are blood & bone, maps & harvests” pressing torso to torso moan bitch there is resist in her & a little fight but he induces release, tinders up her hard deep hungers “some eat others” & a flash of blonde & pink from somewhere, that window as this train disintegrates by on its rise up “How to explain what the years mean” & Dylan twists twice right, left & again right & leaps back, back, back, lets it all go, so soft, fresh & tight, lets it all go for that blonde & pink, *she’s fucking in danger*—

cix.

How Jethro gets into the chicken shack, even if he was really there, what he was, why Rosie returned to find him possessing Paula, what this moment actually meant, or even looked like, what this did to Preacher, how it wronged him, to give it words where there were none—Bowie still had no answers—

For a moment it made sense, there were ways things got explained. He had known her mother but she was a bad drunk, a hitter, real mean woman, not very big but an easy turn to find a gun or knife at hand, or just crack the top of the beer bottle in her hand—

Jethro had liked Paula well enough but had loved her mother for real, put up with some hard, bad shit to work it out. It hadn’t & hadn’t even come close.

Paula's mother finally went too far & got put up to the women's prison for a couple of years. Paula lived with indifferent relatives & did as she pleased.

What she pleased to do was try & get Jethro & take him for reasons unclear to any & all. Give him the love her mama hadn't? Rebel with an older man? Had she simply liked him?

You don't ask heart & loins those questions because nothing answered will be true. Heart & loins don't act from visible reasons, easy logic. But had they? Did even Rosie know for sure? They ran together but each had a closet of hours. Sometimes did tell eventually, good & fucking high, probably good & fucking horny too, but not always.

Yet here she was, in this strange clear moment, on her knees, clothes pushed some off, enough for the tastier parts to be touchable or grabbable, the high tits, the full round ass, the dark pussy shaved to an artful tuft, instructions from cyberspace on that one, on her knees before Jethro, him leaning forward, hands lightly on her shoulders, his surprisingly hard & large cock a deep moaning pop she sucked with piston precision & the beautiful scrape of gleaming white teeth—

His face disappeared first, then the rest of him seeming at random, til he was gone & she was revealed still fairly clothed & retching in a corner's shadow—

The mushrooms let Rosie arrive, return, rush to help & comfort Paula but Bowie they kept, they took, he saw the shack fall away, saw Rosie a moment, full-bodied, a distance now between them & what man in him saw no blue jeans, no ruffled blouse, no pink underwear but an all woman's body, girl's tight flesh, fresh, fecund, spirit wrapped in blood shot through with cosmos' best sugar—

Shrooms took him far that night, he'd gotten Rosie back to help Paula, & now she knew about Preacher too, but—

Took, travelled, near, far, none of it really applies to shroom space. Now, then, hours, past, future. Bowie was gone elsewhere in too-brief sum. He hadn't been back since, not even close. Hadn't even been a body much less a man for some years. There weren't much in way of memories, gleams of sun, hard ferment of soil,

rain, he now loves rain so much it exhausts me crying, with—

"Who I was is who I am yet who I am isn't who I was while blood wilds streams through rock of years &

even
the brightest thing
is fading with a hunger
nothing tame can hold back
nor wild can maintain—"

the shrooms eventually re-shaped him into a man, let him again walk human shaped & mortal seeming—

But he was in a sense a man-shaped mushroom as he'd been a mushroom-shaped man—

he had achieved the union the agency had sent him toward, that Preacher had dreamed—

Gaining a human will again he was less a disguise & more a real man—a both & either—what? What precisely? He didn't know, simply grew used to what had happened for a long while—

It was his romance with Gretta Black, his sojourn as a regular at Luna T's Cafe that had catalyzed his eventual flight back to Rosie's & Paula's desert town. The night he first coupled with Christa had made return inevitable.

"Does the heart eat its way out at last & men simple call it death? Do bones fall to forever dreaming without days to divide & distract?

"Who I was & what I am
a beggar scholar's work
of years, faith of glass"

To return to the chicken shack was to try & grasp it all again, what became of Preacher, where Rosie had gone, he wanted to again meet the shrooms & not fear, neither dragged to them nor flight—

"Here I am" he whispered,
breaking script a moment,
"Maybe you're really angels
& I am blind. Here I am."

The movie's visuals crackle & break & there is only text against a dark pulsing, a throb that convulses the screen itself, how?

RemoteLand now had a theme, hadn't seemed to have one before. Once heard, it would seem to pop up all about, grocery stores, empty hallways, dreams, more of them

Pressed, one could not say how the melody went, or if there were words sung. More an intractable sense of its desolate space, long suffering nights with no answer in starlight or to come at dawn, freezing landscapes where everything living hid away or froze without a mercy, the deep harshnesses of human beliefs, those that press guilt, denial, sin, pleasure's deferment, the fool's try at any knowing—

Music of hard want to make, to possess, to twine burst an unknown hour's knots,

(Nothing, more & more)

undo the collision of breath
futile heated with diminishing
figures, unknown torsos.

(The eye cups, & easily possesses,
what the hand stays.)

Reck the empty temples, woods of a single tree, oceans at war, great cry for more violence at a continent's distance.

(render flesh from bone, blood of its life, & nothing of the Mystery tells, nothing is left.
Nothing, more & more.)

(Nothing. More & more) Nothing
(more & more)

Burning villages on private maps,
not shown by lights,
 what I was
 what I am
 who you are

Then a long arcing view of the White Woods, suddenly, texture to this view, rushing over
endless trees, sometimes close thrashing through the brush & branches, sometimes lifting up
what seemed miles, on & on,

til smoke, a pouring sparking smoke into the White Woods, catching here & there, then more
places, dry places conflagrating & catching to others, faster the flight over, faster & faster, more
of what below burning or burnt out, til less & less Woods & more & more blackened earth,
no life, no growth
(*Nothing* more & more)

“What now?”
“I don’t know.”
“Is this still the acid?”
“It’s all the acid. There isn’t anything else.”
“Ever?”
“There never was anything else. We’re just not fooled about it anymore.”
“What do we do?”
“We watch. If there’s more we’ll find out this way.”
“Why can’t I see you? Why can’t I see my body? I can’t even *fucking* feel it!”
“Just watch. That’s what we have to.”

cx.

For a moment they are together in the rosy-lit panelled room. His shivering sweet
smile, her pink striped blonde hair. Been so long.

“Dylan.” “Maya.”

Each in an armchair angled toward the other but afraid to move. Whatever this is, to hold it,
stretch it longer—

“I’ve been trying to find you.”
“I have too.”
“I don’t know what all this is, Maya.”
“It has to do with me. I don’t know why.”
“Are you scared?”
“They won’t hurt me. Maybe they can’t.”

“Whey did they let us see each other now?”

She snaps their freeze, leans forward, her purple eyes sparking. “Something wild between us. Maybe others too. I don’t think we’re in this alone.” She leans further to touch him, his smile warm, innocent, wishing.

Now the old man again, breathing hard, badly labored.

Nothing. More & more.

His breath foul, old, somehow sad, heats through her clothes, trembles her. “Something wild is your chance. Tameless hours, tameless movements, muscular, chaotic reach, systemless roots through dreams & stars, through happy frenzies & frenzied woes” his breath nearly flesh on bone, Maya groped, squeezed, “Reignless hours, nearest green visions, tuckless pink ecstasy” old fingers roughly squeeze her shoulders, breasts, hips “tameless hours” now letting go a bit, “The Beast” “The White Woods” “the Bridge of Glass” “No-Tell” “Luna T’s” “the key, the conduit” “Americus” “roseate chamber” “roseate chamber” “roseate”

silence. Maya’s eyes still closed.

A last whisper. “Be what you believe in those tameless hours, Maya, when you are the Beast too”

shift. again. again. pages of tameless hours, land back at Luna T’s Cafe & old friend Dr. Arnold T. Knickerbocker caught raising his hand for attention, expected attention, & Mr. Bob the barman gesturing those who don’t know to silence.

“You stood up, shaky, ignorant of the praise, a lost year, a lost child, one day died a careless death.

“I was a youth a sinful new burst of flailing wants & curiosities, not the bright brilliance of a child nor yet the organized fortress of a man. I suffered defenseless for moving flesh & reachless thoughts of a God to explain & advise.

“To remember your steps, lost brother, new hours, ambers you in victory.” Pauses. Then roars low. *“I held out my hands to you, bid come hither, & you did, an unsure but sturdy step at a time, You came, & you smiled, & we triumphed.”* Pause. Full voiced: *“Ambers you in victory! Despite the rest. Spite the rest!”* Pause. Now hardly a whisper: *“Wild thing, now you rest.”*

“Anniversary of his brother’s death,” Mr. Bob tells a familiar drinker. A trucker.

“How many years gone now?”

“Too many. Some other world remembered.”

Drinker nods. “We all carry one of those around.”

Knickerbocker sits back down. His coffee mug is refilled. No whiskey in it for several years now.

Who was that brother? Why today remember him. Why had he shown Mr. Bob that old picture? He sips, & doesn’t know. He’d lied. It was no anniversary he knew. He’d found the

photo in a book, one he'd long rejected. It had fallen off the shelf of his bookcase, from what few books he'd kept. From thousands once to maybe half a dozen or dozen. So many rejected, found offering too many answers when the world begged better questions, better *awe*. He sips.

"You OK?"

"Another wild thing is in danger, Charles. Watch for her. Watch closely."

"The young fellow we've seen a few times."

"He as well."

Sips. Too many lost worlds.

cxi.

Eventually a silence, an agreement of some kind. A hush, a deeper hush, an emptying of sound, now no sound, now there never was sound. A gap. Fissure then it slices through, divides, high, wide, deep.

No time passes, no before & after. Still this gap, this fissure, this chasm, no words, no labels, no descriptions scientific or mystical. None. Nothing.

Nobody notices, nothing is different. Not a blink's length, does not happen in time.

The first after to find something is Benny Big Dreams. Not his real name, more one he uses among humans, give a flair to the terror & joy they tremble both to know better. He knows something & remembers he suspected something was coming. Now it's come.

What then? Is anything different? Yes, everything, there was a shift, not measurable for all shifted. Yet.

Now Benny Big Dreams frets, not fear yet, but restless & a feeling of dangerous ignorance, slight, slight.

Even this line, these words across this page, on the other side of the rift, neither time nor space but yes, true.

Well, then.

Return to a try at origins, again. First is music, & I don't know why. Men breathe together, hearts beat close, love & fear swoon each high & low, the reeds & crickets play the wind—

She approaches, gauzed in pink blonde & black, approaches Benny Big Dreams, strong & unafraid, let it go, or perhaps the rift pulled the remain from her, approaches, together, grounded, asleep in a dark place in the No-Tell, approaches Benny Big Dreams, & says, "I'm Maya. I don't know if I need your help or you need mine."

—birds gossip

& mate with whistles, there is music, first, mystery's thrum—

Or maybe dreams, how they wantless occur in man & beast, how they lawless urge, tug a body closer to its hid cavern's wish—she found Preacher, *found him* at last, at Luna T's Cafe's bar, sitting before an untouched glass of rye. Sitting, staring. She sat on the stool next to his, & said nothing. Tweety Bird rested lightly in her lap, did not move or topple over, there was agreement in this. Genny looks straight ahead, what words after everything else? "You've come. You waited for me & I didn't appear. Now you've come. The reasons in all this aren't pretty." A

pause, a long, long pause. Beats, breaths. "I can't ask you to come with me but you may choose to." — a heart to the great open air, empty a long clear cry of its stones, of any fist's strength to stop.

then there's want, or perhaps first
of all & then all else follows. Toward
warmth, fleeing, coupling, maybe a
word or touch.
Jack wakes up.
Jack is awake.
Jack jumped the bridge.
Next to him is a woman.
She jumped the bridge too.
Penny? What finally is this
X? a woman who ran to
him & when he
jumped she jumped too?

He suddenly shakes her. "Which are you? Tell me. I don't know anymore! Tell me! Fuck!" She moans, still turned away. "I'm hurt," she whispers—that seems a moment to arc from cradle to cradle, strike wars & wakes, shared breath, close beats, prisons & tombs alike—"Who the fuck are you?" "I want to come with you." "You're in danger, Maya. I think we all are."

Of course there's the learning & madness some get in twining the exotic molecule or rarer see—Charlie Pigeonfoot is still captive or maybe something else, it's been dark so long he is forgetting all else & he is alone for longer stretches with his finger-touched possessions but he sees the golden eagle nearing this place with an anger Charlie cannot control, he is the eagle's child, there is nothing left when the eagle is done, Charlie sees that, sees forward in time to what this eagle will do, then doubts he sees this, yet waits, & gently touches his things—Through certainty's clouds WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU?, through the hard kings throned in sunlight to reveal beautiful dust I will do as you say but there are some people, nameless beautiful dust blows off,

dance now! dance now!



None of it explains, just clanging lights in a mind's sky, Bowie's tried it all ways & still nothing. Nothing here takes, how was it, they'd agreed on her path back, & now he wanted to find her, believing she'd gone back, on to that place, its rainbows & lightning

"Aren't you just guessing?"

"Yes."

"How will this help anyone, Garrish?"

"Oh. You."

"Did you think it was the mushrooms?"

Laugh. "I guess I did."

"No."

"Which one?"

"Soulard."

"Ahh. Him."

"Writer."

"Yes. Believing all this to be yours, dependent on you, limited by you too."

"Isn't it?"

"You're part of it. You write some of it down here. But, no. There's more to it than you."

"I think I know that."

"Maybe you do."

"I want to conjure the magical. That's the phrase in my head today. Make anything of it?"

"Conjure your awareness of it?"

"I don't know."

"It's all magical. Least of it, worst of it. Brutalest, stupid human acts. All magical."

"What then?"

"Purpose. Explanation. Cross the abyss between souls, make new colors, better music. All that."

"Why follow Rosie? Tell me."

"I don't know. There's something wrong. She's part of it, the solution, the victim, I don't know. Something happened here that night & my friend wasn't the same. And I wasn't."

"Preacher?"

"Yeah. It went wrong for him. It went wrong for me too when I couldn't help. I let us get separated."

None of it explains, just clanging lights in a mind's skies, no more to work with than tools in ground that may or may not be, show me the spell or devilling conjure can say other certain.

"Yes. Like that."

"Tonight an old village burns."

"Everything goes."

"So what then, Bowie?"

You stare at me from the pagee, a stranger, a man I've written several years without true knowing, I let it be that way, let you, let the rest, remain strange to me. I've done with breaking off pieces of myself, naming them, calling it fixtion.

You stare at me. One blue eye, one green eye.

“It wasn’t always like that. They took over one.”

“They?”

“The mushrooms. They kept one. I have . . . a replacement.”

“Took one? Replacement?”

“Tonight an old village burns.”

“Everything goes.”

He nods. “Let me do my work now.”

[Stray planks, all of it, stray planks on a wide foam, fingers cling, call up myths or guesses to travel the hours.]

Bowie calms. Lets it happen, lets it come, again.

[Tales of hid nests burnt in a bolt, a jaw’s snap, an old blood vessel damned breaks & finally goes]

At dawn a young voice sings. How to listen new, breathe new, love new. Remember & better than remember. Empathy, curiosity.

Neither hope nor despair proof of the other.

“I’m gong to help. You wonder what we have in common, who we are. We’re here to to sing & help.”

“Sing . . . & help?”

“Both, they are the same”

“Each of you.”

“I think so. It’s not much but maybe it’s what you need right now, to continue this. If conjuring the magical is too vague an idea then think: sing, & help.”

“Help how? Help who”

“I’m going back now.”

cxii.

Find music in a sheered heart’s hour, it about sums this book in a half dozen words. Some eat others, I suppose you’d call that the rest.

That all? Center of the big puzzle? I wonder, & don’t know. Would one sheered hour’s confession have done for all? Can any three words no matter how solid & thumping, replace years, their shadows & serenades?

“Will, has the music dwindled to less or same, again I don’t know. Men live in shifting quantities & percents of rhythm & novelty. So one writes, & writes, tries else, tries else’s else, then writes more, writes & writes.

Wandering down into the bones of this book right now, it will sing as best I can, it will discover as my will persists, it will matter none, lightly or a great deal, given how much, how

good, how long my energy feeds & feeds it—

It matters, the new music, the *next* sheered heart's hour's music. Some eat others, & mine to witness, & cry out.

A new day by men's standards begins during this sentence, midnight, the world's panoply of sweet cruel bizarre & unspeakable pauses not a moment. Blood goes, & goes—

Again, find music in a sheered heart's hour, peculiar thrum in aching blood, sadness descending rhythms, music when warmth & light gone, shutting doors & grim knowing.

Bruised apples, the dented wall. Bowie snaps open a moment, everything looses, he floats out of time & space with this memory. It was a clue, a hard fucking clue Preacher left for him in the chicken shack & he saw it & missed it in his panic at what was happening. The wall was dented, like by a desperate fist, & an apple shoved into the splinters—what? what the fuck?

Nearly pulled back, remembering his bus ride down, “Some eat others” & his companion had added more to it—“Freddy, some eat others, slowly, because they can.” Shit! Clues from Venus & Mars about how the human heart works in the deathly climes of Mercury. Something & no time to think it through. Carry it along, let a lot go to carry it along—

Nod, burn the canvas, let Art sparkle back to air, uncollect thought, unremark color, the raising snap in flesh & nature, sweet & suffering view of pine & cruisers — Charlie, what he's doing? Burn the canvas, him? He's deep in still, the golden eagle coming to claim him but not yet—

he's told him to wait, he has something to do, these men want his only valuable, his blood canvases, they have to burn, it's all he has that they could want—

he can do this, nod & burn them one by one, they contain these instructions from him—burn its matter & every reason—he speaks

“Some eat others, & get hungrier for it”

Genes & chance number up the world why one man eats his meal in shade & another in tower. Why one man nods & another is shifted—

Jack tends her but his eyes still will not focus, he finds her water, balls up his dirty shirt as pillow beneath her head, talks softly to her, nearly croons, panic stretches his calm & tortures his heart but he bears her, bears her entirely—

why one man cuddles his God in coins & another cries out.

Preacher speaks in his ear:
Some eat others, with bullets,

with ideologies — — — look!

Yonder a clearing shaped like a temple, in full moonlight, all may pass through, none may stay. Some bring a long siren of wishes, collected in pages, girded in prejudice & artillery. An iron path & its result.

Dream! Maya: “some eat others, of their wills, of their mysteries”

Find dreams are blood & bone, maps & harvest, the flesh of every heartstrick hour’s bony question.

Benny Big Dreams in top hat & tuxedo, long glowing cane, burned close in red fire, a grin to unsheave the sweetest of their finely cloaked shadows, consume it, it, the firey fleshly tight fine broad *it* cries merrily:

“Would you be sheared & chuted, or would you dream, perhaps know? What music does waking life’s days partly make?”

Some eat others, says bluntly from the deep bones of this book, because they can, because they will, because you still sleep dumb.

Now climb from the bones, into the night’s brilliant loon’s hours, climb from the cave, the cellar, whatever the muck is, the stagger from a dollar’s push to a fine fucking ass’s distract—from silly mewl for God become choking years, climb til walking & then enough to run.

cxiii.

Blood & consequence, tell what else, what we are, what we do, I cannot pull from the flesh, from the bones themselves of things any else.

What we are, what we do, what matters is a hard ’during twist of both.

So what Maya, wherefrom? Bowie? Charlie Pigeonfoot? Genny? Jack? Dylan? Even Jazz? Who is Global Wall?

I sit in Red Dog Cafe’s back room asking this & dissatisfied. Where has Red Dog been these many pages?

I am new of a kind to these pages, I’ve been broken off & thrust into them. I bear a name, Raymond, but what’s new is this new aspect. For years he lived here & there both, now he has separated into a him up there, out there, whatever, & a me, here, this world. I’m an agent, I carry the *Labyrinthine* manuscript with me but I do not write it. He does, who I was part of, who I’ve separated from.

Who writes this then? He does, he writes this because it is within his pages. I am reading these words later, the pages filled. He was writing them & the next word was not yet written, & the one after that—I am reading this, later. Is that possible to explain better?

I have a notebook, a binder of blank sheets, & a black pen. I am given the tools to write on my own pages. Will they appear in his manuscript, & thus be part of his book? Yes they will, & no they are not. How is this?

I open the binder to its first sheet, & sit quietly at my table, & think. Breathe, relax. Write:

Blood & consequence, tell what else, what we are, what we do, I cannot pull from the flesh, from the bones themselves of things anything else.

I exist because I am told so, & believe it to be. I have nothing to show what I was a hundred years back or hence. My world combines myth & amnesia to avoid these questions.

So, existing. Newly come, in fact. Released fully into being from another, excised & let arrive in this place, a man not a baby, dressed, my black leather coat visible on that hook, & knowing it is my coat, & this binder of blank sheets, & this black pen. Holding also a manuscript called Labyrinthine which is in a sense where I come from, & so I have two books, & a lovely jacket, & my language to speak & use this pen, & this world to move around in.

I am here not to write a book like Labyrinthine. It is narrative, meta-narrative, anti-narrative. Novel, anti-novel. No, I have other business to be about.

The waitress is too sexy not to be admired. Long red hair, a strange flouncy yet tight blouse, a short leather miniskirt & long black tights. Sharp little boots. She looks slyly at my binder & my manuscript but asks no questions. I ask one. Her name.

"Call me Merry." She's hurried from me to an arriving crowd of portly toupéed businessmen, I resume my thought.

The one I came from won't tell anyone's stories properly. I intend to try. He will take care of the puzzles & philosophy, I will distinctly ask who & why.

Blood & consequence, he would take this phrase & laugh it wild & directionless toward any near cloud & I would say why has Bowie all his life been drawn into hidden places, looked for obscure stories, suspected what explained lay another direction from what was obvious. Like many another youth he ravages his share of full moonlight for his desire's answer but when the moon did not answer, once, twice, thrice, he stopped asking, realized he asked no question the moonlight could answer. So again look another direction or ask a new question. It took awhile, years, to learn how to ask, what asking meant, how it controlled & colored. Ask someone else's question & get someone else's answers, live with them, forget your own, or the effort, years go by, it matters less & then less, & more for an occasional hour, but then less again.

How to ask. Who to ask? A clue in an old Bob Dylan song, about an assassinated hero, how the assassin was only a pawn in their game. Whose game? Pawn toward what? A clue, not much more.

But he read more, & sometimes didn't read, walked night streets & woods & he allowed himself not to know, not to decide, to let a visible lay of himself stand for the whole. Kept his private maelstrom to himself.

His path to becoming a spy was tangled, a couple of moments when the surface & the maelstrom met, touched, collaborated, he knew that powerful men often had sought what he sought but then became distracted by power's accumulation itself.

How this did not happen to him too was not will but luck. It was Preacher.

Preacher had another name back then but so did Bowie. Neither matter now. Preacher & Bowie were not originally partners, they drew nearer each other over a long stretch.

Preacher didn't care about men's usual ideas of power & he appreciated Bowie's "romantic crush on the hidden" as he called it, but he saw no romance in any of it.

"You say powerful men lose their way by drinking too much of their own power, by falling

into mirrors & so on. I'd say it's more often fear. No romance deep in things, no human reason or sentiment either. We are not our own roots, as the earth grows many kinds of things & there are many kinds of earth."

Bowie listened, resisted less over time because Preacher was not telling him what to think so much as sharpening his mind's capacity to think.

"It's not simple or even complex cogitation that gets us somewhere, Garrish. Certainly not the human heart! Human heart! Distracting us from our repetitive days & scant chances!

"No. It's the imagination. The continent, the cosmos of imagination." He'd nod, perform this speech often but stop with little variation at this point.

"Do you mean Art? Do you mean Dreams? Love?"

"Eat this," frowning. "Eat it, now! Now sit over on that couch, by the window. Chew slowly & watch the streetlamp. Good, I think you'll talk to me in awhile & there will be few questions & answers between us."

There was a moment, years later, Jack felt something waning in him, it was what turned him from one into another. He was nearly married, nearly become a father, playing with his nephew small enough stripling yet to toss through the autumn air like a football, Jack loved this boy, loved him as he had loved his grandfather, learned from him, but this moment led him away, let him toward Penny Xtina whichever both he cradled in his arms now, led him away from her too for a time, long before he stepped through the window back at the S & G Pizza—

Blood & consequence, what else—

For a moment raising up a small heartbeat was good, enough, the world itself, worlds on end, & then another moment, & a countless stretch beyond that one & he became another, not so much like shedding skins as some call it but passing through space while it differently occupied him one hour or another, & hours themselves shifted—

Blood & consequence, hearts dearest treasures in raw old frames, great calls for new brotherhood or centuries of marching faces with God in their chambers ("hey, think if God is a woman like them feminazis say, think she blows good in bed?" "blows who? her wife? she ain't blowing you no time soon!"), & a thousand thousand grey & roseate hours alike when bodies needless cry & fall ("look, I'm just saying!" "Yah, man, get yourself a rubber dolly!" "He should get a rubber nun!" "Now there's an idea! Stuff it with your stake!")

Blood & consequence, the room ruby with candlelight, a small pink radio smiles & reports the next war ("that radio is in about half a dozen different places" "Yah, I made up a map" "Nice! What program did you use?" "I just drew it freestyle") (Maya misses her radio & sometimes imagines it's with her, maybe that she & Dylan & even John are listening to it on Dylan's bed, that long ago night—but who would she fuck then? The boy, her heart's wish, her smile's fancy, her secret soft treat, or the man who would handle her a bit roughly & call her another name as he took her down? Who would confuse her with Marie & what Marie liked & what Marie wanted & how Marie sated him, would she let him, take him, take it, the dirty blazing IT he saved for her, take IT & enjoy IT because she cannot fucking HANDLE being the FUCKING KEY or CONDUIT or SECRET VIRGIN COSMIC COSMIC PUSSY of this

fucking fiction book thing! One pink radio, one lover boy, some nice clothes to make them both happy going on & coming off.

“No”

“What?”

“No, Samantha. Stop this. Can you?”

“It doesn’t stop, Maya. Nothing stops.”

“What’s wanted? What do I do?”

“Keep going? Find out more?”

“Can I take over? Can I steer it? Can I crash it into a wall? Can I drive it into the ocean where we met & drown it, & take you and Dylan away? And take John by his horns to Marie? Why him, not us?”

“Who?”

“Him! The one with the pen, who just turned the page to write what I’m saying! Hey!”

“I’m there too, Maya. A part broke off, lives there, somewhere.”

“Where do I find him?”

“Follow Samantha.”

—rooted dumb helpless in the hidden, mystic singing math twining all, preacher & scientist, symbol & molecule, king’s powerful, dying fist & eager virgin’s shade across a tavern’s earthen hilarity.

“What now?”

“Now?”

“We came to you. We’re here. What now?”

“You ask like I have a plan.”

“You always had one. We followed you. Now I’m it. Tweety & me. We’re your harem.”

“Harem.”

“Yah, sorry, old joke.”

“I asked nobody to follow. I begged none join in it. I knew what I had to find. Others came along. I couldn’t explain it so I didn’t.”

“What did you have to find?”

“A man. My friend. A girl too. A place.”

“Who?”

“Yes, who. Who was I when you met me? When you thrust your ideas over me, & followed them?”

“I’ll help you. You know I will. I always tried.”

“I know. That’s why you remain. The rest wanted something but not to help. They’re gone now.”

“Where?”

“Does it matter, Aquarius?”

Ginny starts hard, nearly falls over her stool. She remembers suddenly, badly. He gave them names, as though somehow reminding them. Aquarius was hers, given like she’d carelessly forgotten.

He stands, moves toward the great swinging door into the cafe’s band room, & elsewhere she knew. Walked through, did not look back. She, they, followed. One less willing.

Blood & consequence, the years scar the night's every glance, each fine & careless word, dreams unheeded gruesome with hard, strange counsel no sage has spoke.

Is Charlie aloft now? Is that him? Or is he dreaming?

O h h h h h h h

It's all acid. Golden eagle too.

We're buried in its world.

"All chips at faith," writes Cosmic Early tonight, coughing, "til one day a mound of ashes in a fargone world," coughing harder, "or a work no man denies & nature might allow" slumps lower. "Benny. Benny, help. *Benny, help. Bennyhelpbennyhelpbennyhelp*"

Revolution By Night

Revolution By Night

Revolution By Night

Revolution By Night

Revolution By Night

Revolution By Night



To be continued in Cenacle | 76 | December 2010

* * * * *



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fiction]

Part Four.

(Continued)

"Truth is a pathless land"
—Jiddu Krishnamurti, 1929.

cxiv.

Nothing goes away, nothing returns, (& here I am at a joint I left years ago, come here then jobless & heart broke, to sit privately & read & eat a little bit, what I could afford, comfort in this place, its trademarked anonymity but nobody troubled me then, hours I sat, I wrote, I struggled, then I'd gather myself & move along—

Returned to remember, & to carry on, to return, to remix, to renew—to see how I am here now in contrast—to see how here has changed—it has, it's been renovated—sports-themed now, go Blazers! it looks a little fancier—yet the Hispanics still run the place, still decent & friendly—now there's a TV & CNN on it, that cynical tool of a bloated self-obsessed media corporate bureaucratic establishment—I object to it yet some watch it who would not otherwise—still poor folks pass through—I've always moved easiest among them—fewer secret games, maybe, more upfront hungers—not sure—not meaning a romantic take on anyone—

Just came here for a sweet hour or two hid some, & to still this place in anew—

carry on—)

Nothing goes away, nothing returns. What other answer, what question? A smart cheek's sheen by ruby lamp & what the wish years ago to admire & know? How many cheeks, how often the wish?

How faith lets go, a lash at a time (she knew this time she could not hustle her way out & maybe better for it) (at first she had been tied to a bed, belly down, hands & feet cuffed to posts, & the light had been adjusted & there was a dimming smoke & light touches & she had held still yet pliant but there was no face to see, to know, & the gentle touch had terrified & aroused her (then she had been left with a costume & a warm bowl of stew in an empty, dim room but she could not trust her eyesight for the room seemed endless & so maybe she was dim (lets go, replaced by cloakless melodies in the wind (the costume was leather & chains, not meant to clothe but to highlight nudity, neither her ass nor her nipples, nor even her tender cunt covered by it (& she ate after resisting, ate & ate, & licked the bowl & wanted more (by

questions in the spines of broken books & answers scrawled above (& she did not know what she was after while, dressed for the fucking in this endless place she could not know, the light always a murky smoke, she thought to escape since nothing bound her, but to what? (you are here for a reason, I know it, they did, not Bobbie but you, maybe you'll find Maya, maybe they want you both, maybe you're better than Maya (I'll be better than Maya, I'll survive (those many nights with toys, *oh my lovely toys, testing each new one, a little bigger inside me, riding, riding, sometimes I would gag my own mouth for how deeply I wanted to moan & scream, **nobody fucking understood***).

Want sniffs by, on streets, in cars, dogs the eyes (I've been walking for days now, Maya, I am approaching you with my answer, the one I prayed for, I sunk down deep for my answer to who-I-am-&-what-I-am-to-you, I am not that fake thing that carried you from those Woods, & vowed to protect you ever after (Nothing gone, nothing returning (I understand better how I must do, every inch of you is holy, the dreams are clear, the blood, the knife, the moonlight, the Woods burning all around you, my body is less for how badly I need the answer, have you ever rent yourself & consumed by fire? *Have you you fucking bitch?* (Calm, calm now. Remember the world, its lies, its lies in every direction, its armored man-beasts clad to enforce its lies, its lies built into temples, into vast institutions of worship, of Moloch (remember you were one among them, teaching of math & music (remember what you had & what they took (because you had, because they took, Maya now come (come & gone, but will come again (and again and again (Want roots pink & black deep, rears high between broken walls & their lover fists (took away what you took, what was yours & what you did to him who took away & how it did not help (how Maya will burn this all away & burn the rest (yes for music & mathematics are not the answer, nor their coupling, no (those mornings, those dear, sweet mornings, that taste, her taste, her sound, her promise, the way she turned with the sheen's shifting hours, the answers that approached (lies, or at best distractions, waste, see it now, see it for what it was, distractions & waste (in dear, gone, fragile hours where blooms scattered poor pale rooms (it was more than this, I met them, we talked, there was no time, no space, it's why I needed her, why I really needed her (but why did they not tell me: Fire? Why nod about my music & mathematics? I would have burned her flesh, consumed her bones (& I will now, I've tested it, Maya, I would not be coming to claim you for this if I had not tested this (the dreams still try to distract me, & the lies of the world (coming, Maya, coming Maya, coming), the directionless rooting hands. No more.

*Nothing going, nothing returned. "Stand." "Why?" "Stand." Stands. "I am taller than you expected." "Yes. I guess so." "Let it fall." "All?" "Yes, I want to see." It all falls. The skin is pale, roseate pale. The torso is slender. "Pose." "Pose!" "Fucking pose!" She leans, allows her curves to frame her, cups her breasts. Looks upon looking. "Am I the heroine or just your pretty young whore?" "Yes." "Can I say no?" "It doesn't matter." "Are you going to f**k me?" "It doesn't matter." "Will you help me?" "It doesn't matter."*

Maya stares. "You broke off into this book to do something. Was it just to take me?" "It doesn't matter."

She thinks. "A beast of empires built in the fetid nest of that equation."

I nod.

She resumes slowly. "Boys are clad in steel & pushed off in columns." Dylan appears, briefly,

ghostly, a soldier, a mute face, a soldier. Maya watches, convulses without moving. I wait.

"girls dress it tight & roseate, smile shufflingly" I nod, I lean

"dress for me. slowly." She nods. We agree.

Her breasts are small & round, her nipples a pale pink, they've known scarce a touch, bear yet no milk, she dresses them in a creamy garment, shows me, shows me closer. Her pussy is lightly covered in blonde, tastes deep, tastes like a warm thunderstorm, a like creamy garment, both translucent. Her jeans are faded, patched with rainbows & peace signs, tight around her ass, I check, she waits. Her shirt is loose, long, tie-dyed, a long leopard resembling Jimi Hendrix on stage, plays or roars orgasmic, a shifting image. Boots leather, very protective, a bag, knapsack, a leather jacket. "Am I ready?" she smiles.

"Why did you come to find me." "Here you are." "But why?" "I'm the key or conduit" "I don't know. I'm not so much him anymore." "You're not married to Rebecca." "I don't know." "Decide." "I don't think so." "What are you writing in that book?" "Not much yet." "You're going to oppose him." "How? I can't." "You will be first. Before Dylan. You will prepare me. When you are ready I will go." "No." "We will work together but I know what you need as we do." "Oppose him how?" "He would never end this." "I don't know." "We will end it." "No. I can't." "You'll come with me. Samantha too but not yet." "Why?" "Not ready. No." "No." "It doesn't matter." "No." "It doesn't matter."

No.

It doesn't matter.

No.

She reads the manuscript, makes me sit & wait while she reads it, not mine but his, Labyrinthine, the one he imposes on this world, what contains this world from without, she reads its raggy length of pages, I see her resisting it, see her . . . consuming it. It is her world, she has known none other, & here it is as pages in a book, not the touch & sight & noise around her but pages, it is monstrously fascinating & I wonder at the power in all this, what I'm broken off from what I still possess—

Whatever I came for can be so easily compromised, I see that—of course the characters in this story fascinate me, of course seeing Maya reading scant feet from me affects me different from her as words on paper—

I watch her eyes shift in thought & emotion, aware that her awareness of me fades in & out—she's looking for clues, for intent—

"You won't find it"

"It's a game. An elaborate game."

"Without victors, rules, ends."

"No."

"You're beautiful."

"I'm written that way."

"I think you're every smiling hippy girl I've met or seen over the years. Long after I knew you had no secret to tell me. No solution."

"Then what do I have now?"

"Well, you have a little bit of me in you."

"Is that the sadness?"

"It's the sense of change & passing. Loss."

"Why all this?"

"No last pages. Why bother? It's one long fucking story. It ends when I do. I'm not going to stop writing. I don't know or like anything else as much."

"I don't accept this."

"Why?"

"Stories have an end, even when there will be more."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Maybe just so you can shut the book & bring it back to the library!"

I laugh. "You're not in a book that has a place in libraries."

"Why?"

"I'm not interested in that."

"What then?"

"I don't know anymore."

"I'll do whatever you want."

"I know. But what I want is for you to love Dylan."

"Why? Isn't he you? A younger you?"

"Maybe. But not really. I'd like it to be otherwise."

"What is the game?"

"The game is *want*, Maya.

Want to know. Want to learn.

What to love. Want to be loved.

Want to dance. Want to control.

Want to live forever."

"That's the playing field. What is the game?"

I nod. She's smart. She asks my questions.

"The game seems to be how to live without sure answers yet navigate mortal, fleshly years.

What to attend, what to stress.

What to believe, even in passing.

What to value, even in passing.

How to respond to the fervent claims of others.

Believe in God, believe in country.

Believe in family. Believe in truth.

Believe in compassion & kindness.

Believe."

"Why not believe?"

"Why not? Or why? To be conscious, self-conscious, is to be able to question. To question is a power & a curse. An affliction. Answers seem dangerous, the beginnings of disease & decay. The beginnings of sentiment & nostalgia. Some weak yearn for justice or justification in one's years. A validation, a worth in the suffering & a glory in the lighter hours. Carving meaning into past years & circumscribing how coming ones will be judged. Will be *lived*."

She looks at me & for a long passing moment I am tempted.

"Go, Maya."

"No. Wait."

"Take it & go," pointing to *Labyrinthine*.

She pauses, & I let myself taste for a moment every inch, every curve, every warm



breath, & then I stop.

"You know the playing field. You know the game. Learn how to play better. That's your charge. I'll see you again when you do.

"You want answers? I have none. Go find them, or something better. Go!" I nod.

Preacher in his garden, he appears here sometimes, fairly sure he is sleeping, fairly sure, hums, remembers, this is what happens here

"You look like her, a little"

"Who?"

"She was blonde too. I was a young man, she was young too, I haven't since, nobody surely knows this. But I am dreaming so I can confide you."

Maya nods. This is what is necessary. He is weeding among flowers that tinkle & glow. She gently takes his basket & holds it out for the weeds he plucks, unsure why.

"I was her first & she was not mine. It was sweet. Even when it wasn't anymore, in my heart, in my loins, it was still sweet." He nods. His face shifts old to young & back again. She nods & listens.

"I could tell you I've spent all these years trying to get back to her. I could tell you I opposed my dearest brother on one salient point & it was this: he sought redemption through vengeance & I sought it through compassion. I could tell you I've been celibate & true & you could say what of all the others since? I could say similar looking things may not be in any meaningful way the same." He nods. She nods.

"You look like her that first time. I was her teacher but she learned nothing in particular from me then. I'd like to think in absence we taught each other so much more. Does that mean anything? No. Not to you. Not yet. Maybe hints. Absence is the great teacher. The cumulation of years. The strange mix & re-mix of memories until you taste even your dearest as new & terrifying."

He pauses & his expression raises her to him, willing, hungry, panting, & yet he holds her lightly before him, a butterfly on his fingertip.

"Nothing returns, nothing goes away. There are a few hours from this life's raggy fringe, its known paths where woes fought the day, the many wars within."

Lets her free, flutters her aloft where a wind impossibly carries her & passes her along, & there is a lightness crossing her heart as she goes, & an old song whose first & last words she hums

no way out but through
no way out but through
no way out but through

Nothing returning, nothing going. “There were distant lights where a faith taught a love or a god or a fine, subtle dream dwelled.” Bowie nods, he knows many variations on this speech, Preacher is haunted again, sometimes it won’t happen for months but then it will smack him & here they are in the garden in Preacher’s dream, sort of in Preacher’s dream, in truth Bowie is not sure, & this time he sniffs something pink & young, recently gone—

“Was she—?”

“No, Freddy, of course not. The other one. *His*, though he has no valid claim on such a creature.”

“Where is—?”

“Aloft, where she should be. She won’t stay long, though, as she should. Her heart is tangled & heavy.”

“Is she the code? The key? The conduit? *Fuck*, Preacher!”

Preacher picks up the basket Maya had been holding here. “You know all this is too strange & malleable for me to answer you. She is important, but knowing that means nothing.

“Look, that great bird! You’ve seen him before, golden & powerful. He’s important too.”

“Tell me something useful, then.” Preacher is silent, looking in his basket. Bowie waits, waits.

“Sometimes things change & change & we get to thinking they will solve eventually. There will be a settling, & clarity. We keep thinking that as things change & change again, think at some moments we’re close, closer.”

“And we’re not?”

“I’m not saying that.”

“What then?”

There was a night, maybe two, when moonlight crossed intention, when a face drew near & the great hid wings of the world opened out, gestured, bid, bid again!—

“None of it may be enough. It may never be enough.”

“What then?”

“I can’t say for certain, but you should know.”

“Preacher, what the fuck!”

“That may be all you get”

—And you looked, decided, went, or held, believing through your hunger that other such nights would come—

“Do you understand me?”

“No.”

“You don’t want to.”

“Not yet.”

Nothing’s returned, nothing’s gone, Bowie takes Preacher’s offered basket.

Damned unsure yet keep moving—.

cxv.

Want is ancient & this setting hour new, moves to build, change, destroy, moves without prophecy or history, moves all.

The hunger is mystery to know, to touch, to hope. Fear of diminish, quiet or noisy fade, & where does it all go when gone?

Who bold enough to ask this?

Who wise enough to answer?

"There's nothing but the work & how the music waits you to follow. Choose to work, to follow. Choose to sing. Not knowing why, but a feeling, a humming pulse deep in, choose to keep singing."

"Why?"

"No answer but the open door waiting your passage. Breathe, relax, & pass through. One song's room to the next. That's all."

Maya keeps reading. Maya keeps listening. Maya keeps moving.

"Crazed various thing, how rat's meat tastes to a starving tongue, how jewels soft glow an eager virgin's breast in satin moonlight"

Maya giggles. Maya keeps moving.

"Crazed various thing, ferment, breath, dream, may burn your city to prove a faith's word, burn the seas themselves, no answer, no escape."

Maya keeps moving. Nothing else.

*"Crazed various thing! What electrifies this dominion of dust! Blows through a thousand centuries, all matters, all passes! **FUCK ME FOR ONCE, MAYA!**"*

Maya wiggles. Maya eludes. Maya keeps moving.

Want squeezes hand & heart with urge to possess, swallow & consume the laws of men in blaze & renting cloth. Maya nods, this is what makes sense, what she can use.

"Use how?"

"Perspective"

"Meaning?"

"No safety in any of this."

"Did you think otherwise?"

"No. I missed those years, didn't I?"

"Yah."

"Crazed various thing, what drives the blade into molecule's depths, what builds great edifices from which kings cry for final war; girded by preachers knowing a tender god kisses fine this cause & then all to the tankards for courage & fecund thighs of willing slaves"

Maya flinches, Maya keeps moving, Maya sure knows what value & what cost.

"?"

"Yes."

"?"

"What travels away & away?"

"?"

"Are you unsure or don't you wish to say?"

"How stalled are you right now?"

cxvi.

"Beauty is sexual," as though one could define or equal the other yet it's been said, many times, now reck it on this bathroom wall, written carefully in a ragged space between the cocks & cunts & assholes & whores phone numbers, & in two colors no less, black letters & red outlines, the red ink from a leaky pen so splotches, yet give a closer look to how like blood those splotches are, how like declarative violence, how like it, & a chance moment it's dusk & the high window above this single pisser scatters light through this cement room & some kind of refracting sheen hits this spot *thesewords&thewholethingpulseslike fuck if I know what this is a carefully marked confession? what else can be? it pulses now & is that the unevenness of the cement or how it is lacquered or may be strays splashes of piss wet then drying & again & the light & the wocolors of ink & the cocks & cunts & asshole that surround it what the fuck when something so casual begin to feel like more more than a confession more than an instruction a more desperate man might call it revelation & try to figure it out & follow it along & I don't think I am that man but I don't know that I'm not*—Bowie breathes & wonders what the fuck here is but it seems singly true he's been in here for hours & hours—

Breathes. Again. Again. It's familiar like a remembered dream, bites from an inner distance like that. Closer but not close enough. Looks again at the wall's writing. "Beauty is sexual." Who? Some poet. Those years of reading poets, of really bothering over human wisdom.

The shrooms, somewhere, laugh. "It was sad giving it up. Sad later. When I'd see someone sitting with a book cradled, feeding, feeding brightly."

"You want it back?"

"Not everything gained is a comfort."

"Or lost?"

"Fuck it. A trick. I know you don't like our language much."

"It's like wearing cuffs & blindfolds & choking airless & starving to death"

"Funny. Bastards."



Pushes them away, thinks. This was before Preacher. He was practically someone else living in some other world.

Sam. Shit. Sam. This was the pisser in the hole they drank in. So long ago. He loved her. He loved her as he would not find possible any more.

Did they fuck? What counts as fucking? He never used to think of things like that.

A punky girl before that got hip again. Scrawny, avoided food for days til suddenly they'd be at an all-night buffet loading up plates til thrown out.

Her story was so confused he never knew it straight.

Did they fuck?

Why here now? Which now is it? Looks in mirror. Fucking Bowie, beat to shit beautiful with his own brain stick. Preacher said that. Bowie nodded, one of his favorite possessions.

The door back to the bar doesn't fit right in its frame. A trick to it, push left, shove right, swings wide easy.

Sitting there at her place at the bar. Even drinking from her special glass the barman kept on a shelf for her.

Her hair is cropped short, never seen it short at all.

Play through, Bowie. Nod & play the fuck through.

She smiles, he loses some years. A flashing glance, not so scrawny.

"Gonna drink with me, Bowie?"

"You never called me that"

"Still like your Turkey wild?"

Barman pours. Tall one.

"How are you?" retches from his lips.

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry?"

"I thought I knew shit & I liked to talk shit & I treated you like shit. And later my life went to shit. I did it to me, to you, to others. I'm sorry."

Bowie studies his glass, does not sip yet.

"I took off for years, Bowie. You could have found me in Reno stripping for awhile there. It felt good for awhile. I didn't know how much I'd hated being poor until I had so much cash. I whored too for awhile but that wasn't good. Dancing I felt present, like it mattered. Fucking men for money I'd disappear. Nobody made me. I was treated pretty well, nobody beat up on me. But I'd disappear & that was wrong. They paid for a girl not a ghost."

She drinks hard, taps for another. "Then it gets weirder. I fell in love with one of the other dancers. Fell hard, like a fucking little puppy. Alissandra. I'd never really made love to a woman before, not like with her, not close.

"We had so much fun, pulled in so much cash when we danced together, made the patrons laugh, enjoy themselves like they never do. So unhappy mostly, hungry & empty & paying us to fill it with out bodies, I'd try to tell Alissa what I saw, what I felt, but she knew. We danced together & something happened to them & us & nobody knew then & I still don't know why now. We didn't even whore any more alone or together. Only a few strangers even asked. The regulars knew better, knew the gift in our dance. Some even took the feeling home & gave it to their wives & girlfriends."

Kills her drink. Nods another.

"Hell, the place got sold & that was that. New owners wanted moneymaking legs tits

& cunts. Alissa said we're leaving & we were gone. Remember that movie *Thelma & Louise*? Yah, two crazy women on the road. We drove to the coast & then up it a ways. Found a town & a little house & a garden & a fucking gazebo to drink beers at night with our fucking neighbors.

"She wanted a baby. Wanted one with me. I said yes because I loved her & I wasn't going to ever stop."

Shakes off another. "Later." Silent like death. "Well, it happened. But it was over between us. I left before he was old enough to know I'd ever been gone.

"Don't ask me why! Don't say a fucking word. I drove off til my old ass car collapsed & then I took a Greyhound & I came back home & he was there & alone & I climbed up on his hips like I used to after she'd finally left & I rode him til every drop came out."

Bowie doesn't breathe. She means her ex-stepfather, the one who'd married & divorced her mother & about a year later, on her sweet sweet 16th birthday, Sam always claimed when blind drunk, he fucked her raw into womanhood & they kept together & broke apart a few times. She might have still been fucking him when they'd been close before. Bowie'd met him once or twice. Mechanic, body of a bull, mind of a very nasty tyrant.

"I left him too but it wasn't sad or nasty. We've talked on the phone a few times." Pauses. "I've talked to Alissa once."

Now takes her next drink. "I even found God for awhile, Bowie. It was like, OK, what's left? Anyway—" She gets quiet. Story stops short.

"Why are we back here, Sam?"

"I'm not sure," she lies, first one he knows she's told.

"Why aren't you drinking? You used to keep up for awhile back then."

He nods. Does not sip.

She sighs. "I know you're mixed deep in some shit."

Bowie says nothing.

"You know a place called Red Dog? Chain of hippie restaurants started in the '60s?"

Nods briefly.

"I waitressed at one. This was years ago the first time & a few times since when I needed money. Like a cult, you can always go back once you've been."

Pause.

"Why are we back here, Sam?"

"You can stop. There's time."

"Stop what?"

"There's a way out of this, Bowie. I can show you."

"You never called me Bowie."

She smiles, strangely. "Think we have one more fuck in us? I've got more to tell but not here."

He stands. "I've got plenty of fucks left in me. But not with you." Feels his heart crack some as he turns to walk away.

"You're just putting her in more danger. You must know this."

"Who?" Turns back, anger climbing over old regret.

"The girl. She doesn't fuck you like I did but you're older now, a slower step in the bedroom."

Catches himself. Turns away & walks out.

“Best you can do is leave it all & walk away alone. At least take her. You won’t like what’s coming.”

cxvii.

Wherefrom hints, brokenly, whereto. This, genes & chance. As he walks away, Bowie isn’t thinking of Sam any longer, or whatever the *fuck* that was back there, whatever, wherever, he’s remembering his father, & that’s worse than Sam in every possible way—
So much love, hate, indifference to cook the little soup of regret in his heart—

He came & went twice, & seemed like two men, not one father but two. When Bowie was a boy, he was a mystery, someone so potent he followed Bowie into his dreams, long years after he’d left. Not afraid of him precisely, call it awe if given choice of one word. Call the feeling toward him longing, perhaps that clarifies some.

Came back years later, no longer enigma in flesh. Smoked his cigarettes too short, talked of nothing but the present hour, the recent meal, the dull quality of the air. Broken, but that’s no fine word for it, more gone than those intervening years.

The picture was incomplete, a formula missing that vital signifier, maybe more than one. And then—he was gone again. Less explanation than the first time. Dead? In an asylum?

“Unkindly missing in body but wedged still in his mesmerized son’s heart” was how Preacher put it once. Bowie growled & snapped at those words, but did not disagree.

He knew the people who loved him—Preacher, Gretta, Christa if told more—would try to place his father’s presence/absence/influence in context—smart people but what a temptation! The spy business was perfect for a man shot through with unresolved enigmas in his own life—like most everything else, it seemed to work logically until it didn’t, & then proceeded to unravel worse than least gain.

Bowie uses skills to arrive back at Luna T’s for a time. Doesn’t hurt to have been a mushroom, to have one still as an eye.

Ready to see Gretta, Christa, ready to try a new thing, but neither are present. Not exactly.

Mr. Bob the barman points. “In there. Way in there.” Nods, no judgment in his eyes. Feels good.

“Are the OK?”

“Of course. You left them here.”

Bowie sits more settled on his stool. Mr. Bob nods, settles too.

“I saw someone tonight from a long time ago.”

Another nod.

“It was more like . . . a vision. I have more to do far from here.”

Silence. “She was with me when I was young. Then she went away. But something’s left over.”

“Something’s always left over, bud.”

Bowie nods. Suddenly talks some more.

“There was a night, years later, I was in a city, alone, a hotel. I was following someone,

he was in the next room, with a prostitute. I could hear him going at it with her. Some kind of really kinky shit. He was the deadly serious kind, even getting his rocks off, but she was young, laughing. Sounded like it anyway.

"I had a bottle of bourbon & I had some porn on the TV. Strange, I found myself wanting to connect with him but I didn't want a whore. I didn't know if I would have to kill him & maybe this added to it. I was depressed thinking of what I might have to do & here he was in the next room, fucking her in some guttural tongue crying out. His demons all exposed, her picking up a couple of bills for riding along. Me, my bottle, my gun, the porn on TV. The walls had two pictures on them, the same one, nearly, an egg falling off a table, in a dimly lit room.

"Bang! Bang! went the headboard against my wall as he really got into it & she only laughed more.

"Suddenly, no impetus, nothing, I was thinking about my father & felt like he was dying at that hour, somewhere far away, he was sick & his hour had come.

"I was sad. Everything meant less, I sat there withdrawing into this feeling until I wasn't present any longer. All that was left was that falling egg, those two pictures, not quite the same, & it came to me in a shoddy way that I had dreamed of that egg or something like it.

"The noise in the other room had stopped, I knew this & didn't care. They were talking, maybe smoking a cigarette, settling up. I didn't care. The first time that room's door opened & shut, I didn't act. Probably her. Then the door opened & shut again, & it was him. I didn't care, really fucking didn't.

"It was that egg I wanted to catch it. It was me who had knocked it off the table, I'd pitched a stone at it & now it was falling & I was realizing what I'd done. I was trying to catch it. I had to.

"I didn't know he'd died, no reason rationally to think it, or think of him.

"And why would it matter? But it did. And my quarry got away. First time it had happened to me, on purpose. I learned later it happens all the time, the longer you're in the business. But that was my first."

Bowie nods, pats Mr. Bob warmly on his muscular forearm, & parts him.

"Don't say I was here but watch them."

Or maybe Mr. Bob just imagines later he hears that as the man leaves.

cxviii.

She didn't know it would be like this & still wonders if it's so. There was another world, another life, back there, back when, & it was a struggle,

he said, "too many gold coins in your head & nowhere to spend, & they pile up coldly year by year"

She nods, wondering quietly, when he's gone some nights, how she spends them better now, or if much at all—

And yet—and yet—there are moments—he talks to her—he talks deep into her—he talks to places in her she'd hardly known before but in dreams—places surely nobody else imagined or cared about—yet he goes to them easily—does not charge as another man might, or simply take as many would—

No—his purposes are not that easy or blunt—he knows, he teaches—she listens,



disagrees if she wills, no rancor in it—*none*—

But he knows things & she listens because her mind full of unspent gold coins will have no less—

Calls the world an effect, how it leans in, for a touch or a coin, something in purse or pants, she cringes a little but nothing in it. He smiles & she relaxes. And she doesn't.

"Something trades back a heavy promise called God, or a sate of loins, or loneliness, maybe a song in green."

"Songs in green," she says. "I dream those."

He nods. Perhaps he knows already but his way isn't to treat dialogue like battle.

"Worse," he continues, "world does not lead in, the hours pass silent on a carriage, in café, a park, muted barks through rented walls—

Jazz breathes in, twice, something happens, there is a smell of exhaust, & baked bread, opens her eyes—

a city. What . . . ? No place she knows, she's sitting in a café courtyard at a black metal table, there are people around her, talking, know her—what—

one—no—her sister? no—this isn't real—she's in a shiny room in that hotel, really, come on—

"It's OK, Jazzy"—she smiles, that dear, frustrating, silly-little-sis-but-I-love-you smile—"don't be nervous" she whispers—"these are my new college friends, I've told them you're cool"

One eyes her & Jazz starts a little, peeking down, fair amount plain to view & her jeans feel water colored on—eyes her, then his gaze drifts easily away & she finds herself wanting it back—she listens but nothing makes sense so she looks beyond this courtyard, to the traffic crowding by, the old stone buildings across the street—a street musician starts up on the sidewalk—

her sister sitting right there & yet—

"if you keep chasing me you will find trouble, Jazzy—I was there when the White Woods burned down long ago—they're gone—I didn't survive—you did—I made sure—I love you"

she turns confused—what the hell was that?

"Which, then, you ask, grows a heart kinder again, unclenches those still-grabbing fists no longer a babe's?"

"Where is she?"

"Who?"

"*My sister!*"

"I've told you, I don't know."

"*Where is she?*"

“Sit down, Jasmine”

Her wrist feels the cuff, & the long chain. The pretty red dress with the side slit up high on her thigh. The sheer black hosiery beneath.

“Who?”

“Sit”

“What?”

“Sit.”

She sits.

“Neither resisting nor blandly yielding will win my favor.”

Says nothing.

“I know you hurt. And hunger.”

Fuck, what has changed? The room is thickening with want. What she wears is worse than naked. A blunt invitation, not the helplessness of a weaker combatant.

“Stand.” She does.

“Pose.” She knows this means a shift of hips, hands cupping her breasts, wet lips.

“Again.” She adjusts her straps, lets one fall halfway down her shoulder.

He nods. The room strangely relaxes.

“You understand.”

“No” she says, risking all.

“Good. Honesty pleases me.”

“Tell me.”

“He passed you along to me. Maybe I can help.”

She’s quiet.

“You thought there would be no cost because I spoke kindly & did not brutalize you immediately. Waits.

“There’s always a cost, Jasmine.”

“Will you help me find my sister?”

“I’ll help you reach the White Woods.”

“She said—I heard—they burned down—”

“Nothing destroys them—nothing’s like that—we can’t”

His voice is crackling, mingles with static like a distant radio station, what? where?

“Nearer the window? That’s good. The morning light on your skin is luminous”

A large room, seems real enough, her hair is down, arranged to look careless, she wears a long silk scarf, sky-blue like her eyes, it wraps around her. He is painting her portrait on a large canvas, the one from the café courtyard—

“where’s my sister?”

“You told me she went shopping with everyone else. You wanted to see my studio? Yo offered to pose? Is something wrong?”

What’s wrong is the absence of any concern in his voice. His sunburnt face ranges over her with a casual rage, like he would hurt her if he cared enough to—

“what store?” she whispers.

“Um, I’m not sure. I think she said the Coop?”

Jazz nods, & decides. Lets the long scarf fall. Risks all, again.

He starts.

“Are you going to hurt me?”

“No. No.” Pause. “No! I love you, Jazz! Why do you do this?” He moves near her, awkwardly.

“You can’t explain why I’m here, can you?”

“You’re staying with your sister in North Cambridge? She’s showing you around & we met? You told her you were staying awhile? Why do I have to keep reminding you?”

He’s scared.

“My sister is in the White Woods. She never got out. They never burned down. Am I there? Is this somewhere in the White Woods?”

“She told me about that. It happened when you were younger. She was kidnapped, & you were too but you both made it out. You’re OK, Jazz.”

Jazz stands, angry, bluntly naked. “Will you tell me if I get into your bed with you?”

“Tell you what? You’ve slept in my bed quite a few times.” He’s angry but still a few feet away. Angry & scared still.

She leans down to retrieve her long scarf & affixes it around her body again, notices a set of pink sneakers & slips into them, walks out his door to his protests. Slams the door behind her.

I’m in the White Woods now, he promised me he would help me. I’m here & I’m going to find her. Whatever this is, I will find her.

cxix.

In this dream, he was watching a man cry out unheeded to a fast moving crowd on a city street—he had much to say & not the usual God-mongering—

but he was failing & he grew very frustrated & angry & he acted from this anger, & his power was harmful—

He touched strangers & reduced them to gobs of shit, small soft balls, & these he rolled together to create a single larger & larger ball, touch & add, touch & add, the ball now like a large, heavy balloon he pushed down the many streets to the waterfront, to the docks, touching more along the way until he came to the edge of the dock & pushed the ball into the water, it fell with a heavy splash & sunk deep & deeper, slowly disintegrating, freeing all those souls from what had come before & nothing now to come, nothing at all

He cried to the splash, to the harbor as a whole, to the sunset, to the city, to all who might listen & the many who would not:

“I dreamed you’ll find it underneath, response to the preacher waving his tome & pointing to a sky rigged with explain! Underneath! Where the pretty faces & spangling nights devolve to plain chaos, to flesh’s consume & decay!”

He pauses, listens for anything like the response he’d want, none, nothing, & resumes:

“The hungers & their statuary, the music equal to deep manless jungles & onyx fractures of urban despair! Underneath, tickled in unsure thighs & muscular gestures to the stars alike!

The pain! Neither source nor explain!”

A girl passes, curious, dragged by her large dog, she is pinkly clad & slenderly curvy, the years have not choked her short of juice yet. She slows but her dog pulls her harder & her curious look diminishes him.

“Ecstasy!” he calls after her. “Where not fruited on one smile’s tree! Underneath! I dreamed you’ll find why this war, & the next, why men roar & wish to call it language! Wish to call it song! Wish to call a later hour revelation’s, willing live in time & law at all!”

She finds her way home with her dog, disturbed, distracted, there was something back there, & the evening’s cartoons & hash pipes do not dismiss or distance it for her.

She undresses for bed, as always before the open window & the nameless one who watches her, who breathes brokenly as her pink sweater, her lace bra, her jeans, her panties, her long pause, her lingering pose, her hint of a smile, & eventually the nightie with a teddy bear & some thing dirty written in numeric code about her belly, & she falls into bed, legs parted, the lights off, the candles, the music, the drift, the dream, ahh the dream:

the man at the harbor is in the city’s downtown, crying out his words, crying for all:

“I dreamed you’ll find it underneath, a comfort will not abandon you in your hungriest years, will assure you that no man’s hand forever clouds the skies, & that indeed he roots like all in the same bloody muck!”

Cries, smiles, waves his hand openly, mercifully, peacefully, this is his hard life’s dearest message, this for all of them & none listen, not a one, *she listens, her thighs moisten, her lips part, she whimpers wanting, badly wanting, badly wanting, is this possible? This much want? Where is all this from, this blind roaring ache in her belly, this shift & crackle in her loins, who is he to her, what has happened, how do they? Will they? Have they? Ahh fuck she comes so hard in this dream, never had, never knew what or how, o fucking god what are you to me what am I to you what is this?*

*Please please please please please
please Preacher please Preacher
please Preacher pleasepleaseplease
o god fuck please——*

xxx.

In strange service these many years, & how it come to & what it is—

“What purpose?” I ask the Beast in dreams, we prowling & pursuing each other awhile.
“To what purpose?”

“Everywhere is the White Woods. Every hour is *TripTown* & **RemoteLand**. Some eat others.”

We move, apart but aware of each other, into the Underneath, where borders fall down
“undifferentiation?”

“No.”

“What then?”

“Where all roots.”

Silence. Tick. Tick.

Resuming: “A butchered torso crosses the bridge to her door at dusk, removes her parcel of fruit & lays by her weapon, her walls silken with thoughts for revenge, & memories of every cat, & the dead teacher who was kind, gave her what she wanted, many books, tender



hours, & compassion.”

—must be dead. But I was never quite sure. All these years later I wonder more than I let myself back then. Back then I was pure act-&-react. I’d loved him. I’d given my heart & body to him. He had tried to kill me & failed. I’d killed him. I know it. At least I did.

Why would you come for me now? You cost me my legs. I’m old now & nobody sees me as a person anymore. My blood is old & sick too.

It’s been so long since I’ve felt anything for anyone. Yet I do now.

They don’t keep me from going out, the nurses, & I have an electronic pendant around my neck; for trouble I press its button, & they save me.

Save what’s left for a short while longer.

I remember you & I don’t. Blurry images but more in touch, sound, smell. You were not a handsome man. Not tall, not muscular. You read books & didn’t see the sunlight much.

I’d been a wild thing until I met you. My virginity was easier for you to take than my heart; & that was yours too, after awhile.

“Who is she?” I ask the Beast.

“A question & an answer. No, don’t grimace. She is both.”

“Why we’re here?”—

I have the dreams every night & for years I did not remember them. Then I became aware, gradually, that I was having them, one really, over & over, every night. Words, on a page, perhaps in a book, or just a sheaf tied together. My body complete & young again. I was in a vague place but for this sheaf of pages, so I read, read as you taught me to.

“Words have a taste, a smell, a sound, create a vision in the mind, touch within, all of these, even more if they are true, if their music is pure. Whatever it is, a long novel, a short poem, a newspaper advertisement even. The truer their music, the more they take on visceral reality, become as flesh & bones.” He told me so many things, like he had a limited time & I had to know all he did, & I listened knowing he would take me when he was ready, & he might be gentle or not. He seemed to obsess for a long time on two things: language & my body.

There was a phrase he had, word made flesh, or its opposite, flesh made word, & this was how he related his two obsessions. It was worse when other things came along.

I read in this sheaf of pages: *“World bides its wicked, their shifting promises to salve & reveal, draw plain the gentle scarlet path from hearts’ trenched old lusts to fine temples of explain to prayer’s electric ride up dark moonbeams & final burst of happy flesh.”* I read it again, & for many dreams after. When finally I turned the page, it was the same words for many dreams again. Had you written this? Were they instructions or a message from you to me?

For awhile, I got God & tried to work this dream & its sheaf into my new life. I told my preacher about the dreams—though not about you. He listened eagerly, for he was young & full of fire for his calling.

But he stopped listening one night. I’d done something daring for me. I’d dressed like a woman. I think I had an idea. I remembered what pleased you & tried this.

His look was a clash of thought & hunger. My legs were gone but my breasts were full & elegantly primped, my lips glistened wetly. My look was fairly plain as we sat together that night in his counseling room next to his bedroom in the empty temple, a full moon through the curtains, or nearly full.

He leaned forward to say a word & his glance lowered & I did not breathe, he was kind, he was compassionate, he read books like you. I wanted that night like I hadn't since you. I did not breathe while his gaze fed, & considered.

"Tender hours & compassion!" roars the Beast to return me where I am, the Underneath, where all roots, I notice many torsos, writhing shadows, some fucking with happy grunts & cries, others silent, a knee bent before another, hoping, perhaps, that the sky watches & rewards such humility, the manacle, the cruel tongue, I turn away again—

What happened next? Did we embrace, did he take what I had left to offer? I don't know but I'd lost God again, began watching clocks more, reading books about time, its absolute consume of flesh & empires, its relative reality—

It's a long way from there to here, & what's left.

Tell me, what's left?

Doesn't matter. He held no God I cared for. That night, another night, some night, you showed me, let me read, more of that sheaf: *"What better hustle than any king's great cry to war, luring gestures to easy superiority, any preacher's offer of a God that favors one over another, than to cat a stripling squalling into this world with no better explain than what his answerless race can offer?"*

Was reading that when I began waiting for you? When my crushed, loyal heart began to see in these dreams instructions for your return? As you had taught me, as you had shown me what to wear for your pleasure while refusing any thought I seemed to grapple with only to gain your notice?

I don't like to say to myself: you're coming back to me. I keep this hidden, can't let them see, or know.

Since I can't know, I can only believe. Since I can only believe, the temptation is to believe what I'd more dearly wish.

I wish I had let you do it that night. I could have let you kill me, & I think you would have then driven that black blade into your own heart, our bloods & bodies one as we died.

You'd been pushing toward it. Eliminating books in your great library. Nobody knew but me but then, nobody knew about me.

"What purpose!" I cry at the Beast, distances between us vary illogically in the Underneath, I waver in & out of awareness, I find him with . . . Maya? No. Yes.

"Let's say maybe for now."

"Why ferment, why breath, why dream?" He nods, leans down & kisses her pink cheek. Her eyes are open but not lit by awareness.

"Why want's rootless temple?"

We move around each other though somehow I never get nearer her. He does not lunge at me, knows this would be bad.

"Why does she dream of this clearing? Why don't you ask this? Why this clearing shaped like a temple in full moonlight? Is that Maya there? Dead? A coma, a simulacra?"

"You are facing me, the roaring core of this story, book, what you've been writing toward all these years. There lies the prize of this story, the code & conduit & key. Is she the

butchered torso, once the ‘wanting half-child dressing for her teacher’s every pleasure in glaring new love’s ceaseless pitch?’” he reads from the manuscript a broken-off piece of me had given Maya. His page contains more words than mine I rush him, for the manuscript, for Maya, we clash inside, deep inside, I cannot match his strength so I sing & sing again, wake the hour’s tenderness & compassion—

“Nothing divides us but the walls hands have made,” he told me that last night, burning his private words into my hips & shoulders, with candle wax & my . . . menstrual blood & . . . my cum juices, I lay before you a wide open eye in love, a soft croon of bones, there were some nights when you would make our room black & sit far from me & steer me into cumming with your voice alone, sometimes just your breathing, sometimes you would cuff & bind & gag me & instruct me to follow my breaths slower into a deep long cumming & then faster into a quick, tight one.

“Aaah god!” she cries out. Blind nights, blowing wash to the seas, she is between us, we share her, grow tendrils & tentacles to comfort her, is this Maya? What left of Maya?

“Nothing salves the closest wounds,” she thrashes & sighs, her cunt bare & tight to my tongue’s & fingers’ touch. “Happiness lies in loving the bars, kissing the cage, endless singing its song.” She cries out from the deepest star within her dream-torso, is it Maya? Whole & hungry now, the Beast licks as I stroke (Is it?), her singing louder now, the temple of moonlight roars & shakes all the secret worlds within. We let her go, slowly, to what remains of her (Maya?) by daylight, in an old vessel damned to finally go, like faith, a cringing lash at a time—Maya?

“To what purpose” I whisper to the Beast, as we haunt & howl the Underneath, its nocturnal caverns & corridors. “Little but blood & consequence,” he replies & I can see the old bones tearing & framing his chest are ever nearer to burst. Reads from the manuscript again: “Stray planks on a wide foam. Tonight an old village is burning. Everything goes.”

My death is long in the old house, my memories the fine thing of blood & delusion, I see him return with the black blade, my life reverses, I arc back to that night that hour, he would kiss my legs & tell me they strode through his heart making him strong, my round hips we rode for hours together, he once told me a thought would come to him, a thought of his love for me & we would embrace, & he would lose something, would feel himself within my flesh, he called them our scarlet hours because that was my color, the one I gave to him in deepest, subtlest love—

“Many books, tenderness, & compassion”

They treat me like an old carcass, play the TV, programs about a girl, a code, a key, endless war.

When he comes, he is bigger, maybe it’s my sight, I see in shadows now, but he warms me & I no longer lie in a cold room with tired sick blood counting down, I remember it all, how you watched me undress in the morning light, I would come to your rooms while the trucks on the avenue pounded, & noise of students & teachers, musicians, soldiers, prisoners, the ships

in the skies above, I came to you in your rooms still filled with thousands of books, you still believed, you told me

“Nothing goes away, nothing returns” & I tell you again, my first & last lover of shadows, you move between my thighs full of wonder & knowing both, now gone a moment, my senses shattered by this scarlet hour, you return to take me again, but wait, a glint, take me, tell me to breathe slower, a glint (Maya?), take me harder then slower & slower, tell me to breathe slower & slower (a glint?) (Maya?), I want to bring you from this world, my love, let us, let us now, flee from the prisons hid deeper than earth in every human heart (glint!) (Maya!), “consume us now, let the morning light consume us, dearest love’s going morning light”—I want to come with you this time—I’m ready—

“Shit” whispered one drinker in awe.

The others nod.

Another is looking at a magazine left on the bar’s counter next to an empty coffee cup. Reads the following story:

“By middle evening things began to fragment. The TV was all fucked up, each station seeming rooted in a different place & year, & maybe reality. After all, who had not heard of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. by the early 1960s & yet here was the Johnny Carson late night talk show & a woman on it, a Missourian who said plainly her name was Martin Luther King Jr. & nobody blinked. They laughed however when she said Missourians were considered Southerners by many & thus got no respect.

“There was no going back. I walked down the broken steps of the building to the liquor store a block away. The ships hovered over as always, recently. Had to remember this: they hadn’t always been there.

“Small store, always crowded. Like many buildings, it was cracked open & the line led down the steps into the mud out front. I pulled out my money & panicked, some it was old script & was already disintegrating. I slipped & dropped it & the line moved & I had to hurry.

“The owner was slow, he talked extensively & didn’t care how long the line or the wait. He was telling a young longhair about a magazine that had the real dope on the aliens & what had happened to all of us. See, nobody knew for sure, & most people were forgetting things had been different. The ships hadn’t always been there. The mud, the blasted-out buildings & rules against re-building anything—

“I got jittery & had to use the toilet. Small dirty room with a hole in the wall for light. A coffee cup stood on the toilet’s lip, full of something creamy & badly yellow. I picked it up, put it in the trash can, the kind with a swinging lid. It began to bubble & I did my business fast & ran.

“Never did get my booze. The tiny joint had two counters & I tried the second but people kept pushing ahead of me. I screamed & ran out.

“Shit. TV again. Nothing new, just old shows, like we’d broadcast them into space & here they were coming back, taking over, but mixing up, not right. I don’t fucking know.”

Look up. Stars, their journeys of fire & dust. More to it than fine ass & disappointment on earth.



More to it than daylight's expansive penury, the endless crowding faces to & fro, restless, unspent, wearying all.

The ships *are* overhead, & they've always been, watching, descending, mixing with will & caprice alike. The lies kings & preachers tell are sometimes kindly, protecting men-children & women-children from the million-fanged abyss they walk inches above.

& perhaps too the brilliant musics everywhere which belies the necessity of this life's brief, mortal suffering—civilizations push their numbers to dwell dully in the murk, puff dream-smoke or quaff joy-juice, mistake an orgasm for intimacy, mistake a marker on a mound of disturbed earth for grieving, or understanding.

The traffic is moving distantly from a coffee house's high window, & if I let cry my vision I can reach there & dab it with my words & imaginings, call one of those sets of headlights driven by a hungerer, not quite a man, importantly not quite a man, he drives the night on that highway toward a place that will answer him. The night is mildly cool, windows open, air blows in like night's sugared treat offered, & sometimes he let his hands lax & fall, drives by suggestion, allows the car's innate will to consciousness to flare & thus its instinct to survive, it can drive itself, it can collaborate in this, if let, if believed, if trusted enough—

He lets the car drive, lets it open out to full intention, & looks in the back seat to where precious Whistler rests on a small yellow pillow. Whistler, come from dreams, Whistler, who needs to make contact, Whistler, manifest in this world as a leaf deep in the White Woods, Whistler, are you fucking listening to me about this? Whistler comes from the White Woods!

Whistler speaks but only in reply & only the same words as spoken. Does Whistler simply mime? No, he's decided after driving with Whistler for this long & how his own thinking has changed about everything in that time, the ships are really overhead, civilization does push faces en masse deep into the murk, makes sure each face faces many others, makes sure each face confuses the others with an idea of truth, of knowledge, of possessing something another lacks, of envy when not jealousy, of ideas that conflate difference with threat, of the possibility of one language tapping the music better than another, one ragged tome of letters & questions over another, each face pushed to mass with some & not all, & want & want & want

Who he was before this trip is fragments, unconnected & fairly important, what matters is that Whistler get to where he's bound & do what he is bound for doing.

He. Or she. A joke. Both, neither. The cries for knowing in these cars speeding on all sides of him, the hurry for gain or blood spent to plug loss.

More than any of this. Knowing the ships are up there, have always been up there, knowing the murky mass of faces striding brightly in ignorance, raising high the reflections in civilization's thin puddle, calling to one another of one image or another, this is not what Whistler is about, what Whistler has taught him, how he has changed.

The car has driven itself some miles now, call it a happy creature as much as aught else, it was Whistler who made him see that to create anything intentionally was to breathe, share, give life to it. What kept all these cars around them obedient, dozing mindless of their own being was how the will nearest them caged them in, how each car's dreamless sleep reached out & massed around each other car's possible waking. Kept cocooned in years & slavery.

He laughs again. Whistler taught him language's snares, & its open doors. Whistler taught him . . . but then not really. Who teaches a child to hunger, to want touch, to love music & sunshine, to fear a little the night & its potent surprises?

But it began somewhere & that's how it was early on. The night he passed out in the motel room covered in shit & blood & cum & bourbon, what else, he didn't know, passed out & was somewhere else, best called "other years," abed with a pretty companion & about to fall asleep when a sound, a start, the dim room's light showing a movement on the bed, he wasn't in it now but his companion was, scared, a tiny movement across the bed covering, a spider? Perhaps, his companion cowered & he swept the tiny creature gently off the bed, & then, in fractured minutes, there was now a moth, a clumsily flapping being, growing larger?

Larger & now a bird no longer a moth, a bird with a flat topped head now landing on the bed & he was told "that's Whistler" but by whom? Whistler lay now on a small yellow pillow, wet, as though just hatched, yet able to fly, Whistler indeed.

More fractured time & the dream left & the shat bloodied hotel room left & this car on the highway & Whistler in the back seat on the yellow pillow, both from that dream, now how was that, what had happened?

How did I know Whistler came from the White Woods? This is what I wondered, wondered a lot, it was probably all that I still wondered about. Or asked Whistler about when I discovered he could or was willing to communicate with me.

"White Woods?"

"White Woods"

"What are they?"

"What are they."

"Are we going there?"

"Going there?"

Sometimes it got more complex than this & I would get upset, I would *feel the murk* coming back & panic. Whistler did not do this to me. It was the questions, not asking them but expecting something of them, bringing to questions nascent answers, wanting to be right.

But the White Woods was not something I had known familiarly back then, before this drive. It was what I dreamed about now, whenever I slept, though I didn't really call it sleep, I can only say things shifted & after fractured times I knew that Whistler was from the White Woods, & this was important, & there were other things to know & I did not know them.

We keep passing that billboard for Black Dog Diner, that exact one, I'm not sure anything is

wrong but gently take back control from the car & pull off the highway to near it.

& I do it again. & I do it again. Then I stop doing this. I stop everything. We sit at the side of the highway, not far from the billboard, yet hardly off the road itself. There is a stasis now, nothing repeats.

“Whistler?”

“Whistler.”

“Where now?”

“Where, now.”

I nod but think harder.

“Forward or back?”

“Forward. Or back.”

Thinking is getting me nowhere. Cars, sound asleep to themselves, roar powerfully by. What then?

“What. Then.”

“Barkeep, what the hell is this crap?”

“This is like *Herbie the Love Bug* for pot-heads!”

Everyone at Luna T’s Cafe’s bar is restless & annoyed. Now what?

When movement without isn’t working well, or at all, chance at movement within. Pull back from the external traffic & reck its equivalent within. Blood, piss, bile within. Music, sadness within. Memories within. The steady of bones, warmth of skin & muscle.

Perhaps the traffic between inner & outer, what pours out & in—

“Go slowly here”

“Go slowly”

“The murk is safe, a blinding cozy womb.”

“Move toward it now.”

“Let to it now.”

“A face among faces.”

“Faces confirm, encourage.”

“What else but faces?”

“What else but faces?”

“What else but faces?”

“Faces?”

“Faces.”

The car begins to move again. I let it, or rather do not try to stop it. We pass the Black Dog Diner billboard & eventually come to the Black Dog Diner itself. The car pulls into the far end of the parking lot & parks itself away from the few other cars present. I sit there for a moment. I don’t remember leaving this car once since I . . . don’t remember entering it.

Something like fear.

"I don't want to leave, Whistler."

"Leave, Whistler."

"I can't."

Silence. No kind of reply.

I get out of the car & walk through the cool night to the Black Dog Diner, through its doors, into the murk of men, not knowing if I will lose into it again now that I have left Whistler in the car.

I sit. A glass of water is on my table. A menu of words, I speak them without reading, I know the words already, I'm breathing hard, this is choking me.

"They clobbered them!"

"They did not!"

"I'm telling ya, it was ova' by the 4th innin'. Nothing to do but let the thing die an inning at a time."

"Fuck you, Jonesie!"

"Hey, watch yer language"

"Goddamn your piety!"

"Now you're taking the Lord's name in vain!"

"What Lord, Jonesie? Show me a Lord whose Goddamn name I'm taking in vain! What does that mean anyway? Take the Lord's name in vain? You tell me, Preacha!"

"Go to Church or read your Bible!"

"What Church? I don' got a Bible! How about if I look in this month's *Penthouse Letters*? Is the Lord not in those letters from lonely, horny people trying to make a connection, tell their story?"

"Why do you always do this? What's your point? To make me feel bad? Show what a smartass mouth you really have? I already *know*. You don't believe in anything ain't wiggling wet in your bed!"

"Ha! Listen to Jonesie! 'Wiggling wet' in my bed! Sounds pretty good actually. I never asked. You got a sister, Jonesie? A daughter? A niece. A horndog neighbor?"

I leave then, there, now, I run back through the murk that is everywhere now.

"Whistler! Whistler!" I call & try to listen & I hear nothing & I call & I call & I call—

I run, then I crawl, then I begin to cry, then I fall to the ground, & I pass out in my despair.

When I come to we are driving again, Whistler is in the back, & I know: never ask about the White Woods again. It's where he's from, where we're going but if I want to keep with this, I can't ask.

When next I sleep, or just lose into fractured time, I see a face, a face & nothing else. Blue eyes,

a kind young face, one that is not murky, that is clear & looking back at me, & this is where we are going & we have to get there very soon.



To be continued in Cenacle | 77 | April 2011

* * * * *



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Five.

*"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.

"Walking city streets tonight with an idea, maybe a better recent idea, it may be folded up a few times, & come out slowly—

"In recent years, LSD & similar substances have been referred to, more commonly than psychedelics, as entheogens. Generating, causing, compelling the God within.

"But what of other approaches than one that is God-centered? What of an approach which does not place spirituality foremost? What of dropping acid not to see Godd or be Godd or know Godd.

"Neither an atheist nor agnostic approach either. One that works the landscape of realities without reference to a creator, a beginning from which all comes & an ending toward which all is tending?

"Always, ever, time a tool that may also be a trick—

"Psychedelic means mind- or soul-manifesting. Use of psychedelics brings out which is within, stuck there, or untapped, or perhaps even unknown.

"That said, there becomes more to work with, & here something happens. Dreams, desires, Art, each can be seen as materials to work with. Dreams. Eros. Nature. Art. Magick. Psychedelia.

"Once out, manifest, the world is changed a little, is a little more. Or, conversely, if one dives into dreaming more, the within is what changes, even before manifesting.

"I began writing 34 years ago, just now, crossed the midnight line into my anniversary, May 4, & how I viewed Art has shifted many times. I had youth's ideas of fame, of being like the writers whose books I loved.

"It was more than 20 years ago I began to shift my thoughts, still a young man, still unknowing & yet believing I *could* know, & that knowing would bring me something. But I'd sent out my poems to magazines & got back form letter rejection slips, or sales brochures, or nothing. It took time from writing to beg this attention. Didn't seem worth it—

"It was about 10 years ago I took writing classes & this didn't work out either. I showed up with a different set of ideas from others. I didn't want my work treated like half-formed clay, but my ideas to be confronted, & in turn to confront others their ideas. Three months &

I was out of that.

"I was already by then full of my own ideas, I'd do it myself, publishing my own works on my own dime, publish others' works too. Subvert assumptions & pathways both.

"So I've long published all my work this way, in various forms, & found others to support in this way too.

"And yet—ideas have pecked at me that there's more, that I've not finished my path, steps along, but there's more.

"Much more. How do I meaningfully connect these various ideas? Art / Nature / Psychedelia / Dreams / Eros / Magick?

"So I nip again & again around this idea of *manifestation*. Being mortal, bodied, & working with it more & more varied. Not believing mortal life is beginning or end, but neither proclaiming what else. Disputing time as framework or guide, calling it tool & trying to live this.

"Manifestation, bring what is *within, out*. Diving in deeper to return to surface with more.

"Even more, dispute the legitimacy of within / without dichotomy. All is many, all is one . . . not enough . . . one is one, many is many, all is all . . . work perspective loose of where it limits, where it obscures."

Pause. "Are you done?"

"I don't know."

"Will the story resume any time soon?"

"This *is* the story!"

"Sounds more like a rant."

"All my work is one & several rants."

"Why are you here?"

"This is where **RemoteLand** is made? You're the man who makes it?"

"Who told you that?"

"I dreamed it."

"Ahh. So I 'manifested' in your dreams?"

"I dreamed you. This restaurant. The train station next door. That you make films here & run your restaurant."

"That I make **RemoteLand** here?"

"No. That's my leap."

"Ahh. You wed dream to Art & here we are."

"Yes. Here we are."

"And how long until I am abandoned like other ideas in this book?"

"Abandoned? No. Nothing is."

"Nothing? Quite a lot."

"No. In this section, in fact, I intend to return to many places & people & ideas in earlier pages, & take them along."

"You like showing your bones, don't you?"

"It's all relevant."

"Because for a few hours you're crazed on the idea of manifestation? It won't last."

"But it manifested."

"Like a bad shit."

"No shit is bad."

He laughs in my face. But then says, "I suppose not. At least, the alternative is worse." I laugh now. I'm not sure we agree but there's something between us.

"Manifested," he says.

"You make **RemoteLand** around here?"

He doesn't answer. Wipes down the counter between us. "I don't know if I'd use the word 'make.' It's not exactly something one makes."

"Have you always been a film-maker?"

"No. Wasn't my dream, I didn't study on it. I don't think I'd call myself one, exactly."

"What then?"

His face wrinkles deeper. "Gate-keeper? No."

"How does **RemoteLand** relate to the White Woods?"

He laughs, almost angry, but not at me, strangely. "Lots of words for essentially one thing, Mac."

"They're one?"

"You can't get me to say what I don't know, what I don't have words for even my questions. But I will tell you one thing. I've thought about the word manifestation too. It's not accurate but it's like a floating marker in quicksand, if that's possible. A beacon, maybe. Explains nothing but shines a little when you keep near it."

I nod. "So I'm not completely off?"

"No. It's not the worst step even if there might not be a path to follow."

He serves me chili, very hot & spicy, in a beautiful blue bowl. Puts on a small black & white TV, news program. I eat, slowly, & we listen to baseball scores.

i.

What won't come is music half-called, hungry hours, sunk in the province of men. Lights, simmering smells, bread & stew. Lure of wine & silk. Someone nods & says, "We're mapping beauty, an hour nearer, a formula derived of striplings' coos & closely tuned compass. More smoke, distraction's distraction. Maybe the potion drunk an hour ago will able salve the next."

I look back, over to the Gate-Keeper, not his title, calling him that anyway. He ignores me, serves several coffee, the radio is mumbling news, he won't buy a TV for the joint like the regulars ask, they even offered to chip in ten bucks apiece. Refuses, tells them to drink their news straight, no pretty pictures to distract them. Pretty pictures are dangerous, he further warns, needlessly, they've given up for now, says he knows better than any of them, much, much better.

Won't say a word to me, or even a glance. Like we never talked, like I don't know. *Like I don't fucking know.*

Music half-called rings back in blind cries & smoking metal. Sentiments & easy lusts. "Mapping beauty?" another says. "We can't feed ourselves & save the trees alike. What beauty in a hungry child or burnt acre? Legions of men will be needed, maybe more than all this world holds. Legions of men & centuries of days before anything known, or we even begin."

Can't go back, can't stay here. I leave the talk & the smoke behind, walk into the clear bell high night, streets & more streets, an all-night store where something happens & I get

stuck for some hours.

There are pieces to it, some of it pain but not all. It wasn't the place I thought it to be, not simple. You had to leave a better way than how you came, that was the rule, as clear & ambiguous both—

"Tell us the rest"

"Rest?"

"Go on. Tell. Now."

Music, I call you now, from what I know & much the rest, I call you now, music, where you tend I will follow, what you know I will believe. By star's light & dream glow will I map beauty, in songs to manifest, music, I call you now. Each drift on his breeze, one wind, many winds, one rhythm, one melody, many musics, hear my vow.

"Good. Is there more?"

"There's always more. But that's enough for now. Can I go?"

"Going back won't help."

"I don't want help. Not like that anymore."

"Like what then?"

"It's one life, one story, one song. It all matters. I've got to work with it all, freely, let it flow back & forth, let it change & change again."

"Can't be fixed"

"I'm working on but I want a bigger canvas, & to reject none of it. Little as possible."

"I'm not encouraging you."

"Just let me through. Open your Gate."

His face is old with important things come & gone. Days that were worlds & meant everything. Now gone, gone as though never was.

"Tell me one before I go."

"None matter."

"Tell me one."

"Why?"

"I can't get away from you. I'm stuck. So there's something right now I need from you."

He's not from here, from the United States or the 20th or 21st centuries. He got here through a series of accidents & bad mistakes. His film **RemoteLand** is the most important film ever made yet his life began before motion pictures & he never even read many books.

How here from there? One story was asked for. It's all one story, one life, one song, yes.

There was a discontent that had accompanied his years. Like a low buzz in his heart. He was skilled enough to try working with it, work the buzz into a life, a profession, music some years, painting others, make the buzz visible, audible, so others would share his disturbance over it, trouble too.

One, a painting, dimly lit room, a table, a bowl of eggs, tipping, one falling from the bowl, mid-flight, some looking at this picture said they could *hear* something in it, no explain but one critic mentioned this too, jestful, embarrassed, not one inclined toward either

ordinarily—it caused some trouble, a few less balanced persons to think him endowed with power, wisdom—he did not paint the buzz so bluntly into any successive paintings & soon was being forgotten when he

“I got stupidly mad & I did one more, it was all buzz, I listened to the damned mushrooms one night, their talk of blood paintings, I listened & I painted all night & I delivered these paintings to my dealers in the morning, in a box to his closed gallery & then I left the city far enough so I could not return in time before he saw them. I knew the shit they would raise. It was I guess you might say a dare, a challenge.

“*‘Don’t just disturb them. Infect them! Make it take! Force it to breach the world outside your head, finally, fucking finally!’* Did they tell me that, any of it? I don’t know anymore. But I’d done it. I’d painted the buzz on canvas, it was out in the world, & I’d never get it back.”

He never went back to that city & discovered the buzz had changed. The buzz was now his door, to anywhere, to anything. Name a hunger, invent a hunger, now there was food. If not to sate, at least to feed much more fully.

He stops. Stays stopped. Begins to fade back. “Wait. Wait! How did you become the Gate-Keeper? What about **RemoteLand**?”

He shakes his head. “The buzz wasn’t mine. Some of it had settled in me when I was young for reasons I still don’t understand. It was, I guess you could say, a gift. I didn’t understand this until much later. I confused things.”

Stops. Again. Still.

“What?”

“The White Woods is everywhere. The ships have always been overhead. **RemoteLand** has existed forever. You’ve always been writing *Labyrinthine*.”

“None of that helps.”

“One life, one story, one song.”

Silence. I feel it deepening.

“Is Maya the key?”

“Come again. But go now.”

ii. (cxx.)

“Sing the hours true & know the hunger is bound in breathing itself, its walls, beams, what girds beneath,” it’s a preacher or something on the radio, Whistler prefers the oldies station but we lost it awhile back, the road is pretty empty of cars & not much human habitation on either side. Bare fields . . . but not woods . . . not yet.

“Breeze moves each & all, one wind, many, & rains fall with the ceaseless questions & some answers. Want born, roots, thus musics bloom.”

I don’t like preachers. No, I really *hate* them. None where I come from, not like these men. The ships up there, that’s where I’m from. Yah, I remembered some, or Whistler helped, or Whistler let me.

The ships. I know that’s what they’re seen as by those here that see them at all. Ships. And I guess it could be said I came here from there. I’m not from here. But nobody is, really. I’m still a few puzzle pieces sure of a full picture, but I know more than I did. I’m surer.



And I'm surer no preachers where I come from. I make to turn off the radio but a noise from back & I stop. Whistler is changing. Maybe we're getting nearer to the White Woods finally. I still drive but less & less, the car seems to know the way, seems eager.

But that hotel room, the young face with blue eyes, the ships overhead (so-called) . . . I don't know how they relate to each other or to the White Woods. My hours haven't been fracturing so much since the Diner, but I don't feel any more coherent, *whole*.

"Next hill may show whatever the burning smell in the air, or within heart's bluest scent itself, or where bound world's greater arc half risen."

Men know so little & so much, & confuse it all by trying to find for certain their exalted place. Why would the burning smell have to do with men? What arc? What any of it? They take their strengths like language & empathy & twist them into flaws, weaknesses, points for battles *among* them.

Whistler shifts in back again. Whatever he hears of my thoughts I assume all. I assume this temporary body is rife with vulnerabilities. Little chance I could keep any from Whistler, if I wanted to.

"Wanted to?"

"No. I don't. No questions. I just hate this preaching on the radio. So much dust."

"Much dust."

"Yah. But if you like it—"

"Like it."

"OK."

"Sing the hours true, chop wood, carry water, reckon every hour's pulse of promise & ache, what stays, what going."

More on this preacher thing to be said, I don't know if more puzzle pieces or shards or what. Different kinds here, I've learned. Some refer to a book, one or another, often old by men's terms, & try to work the book's words into wisdom, new & fresh wisdom, stories of another day's men & deities tricked into solving a current day's dilemma, hustled toward timeless wisdom.

Others stand in front of their books, would, in fact, toss them away if possible, feel brimming with what is needed, & what needs knowing.

But then, oh then, there are those who pretend toward no knowledge, dispute the possibility of it, dispute any value to be found. Gesture to a mountain or a tree, as though men could find what they need there—

Whistler is now thrashing, I realize he's not able to keep out of my thoughts, I wish I had better.

"I'm sorry. I don't know why I'm driving you. You know my thoughts, you can hear what little imagination I have."

"Don't know why."

"No."

"No."

"You do. You must."

Silence.

The radio continues: *"Ferment & strew, drifting lash on a curved warmth, news of today's annihilation in god's praise."*

Killing for a deity! Killing for land! Killing for a language's domination over another!

"Tell me!"

"Tell?"

"Why?"

"Why."

"Are we here to help? Will we bring some of them with us? Will we free their planet of them?"

Silence.

"Crack the wish to notice newly, the long remembered page's lean wisdom, dream's luring, distant tree line. Every heart blows through empty fields with obscure intent."

I look back at Whistler, stop fearing for a moment & look, let the car drive us or crash us as it will, look back, he seems no longer the frail thing from my dreams, but I can't focus. A beast? A great bird? A ragged manuscript.

Speaks, in unison with the radio preacher: *"World manifests in you for its own reasons, many, & none at all."*

iii. (cxix.)

World evolves an hour to a train's slow through grassland carrying new dead, to a long waited kiss in rainy light.

her long pause, her lingering pose, her hint of a smile, & eventually the nightie with a teddy bear & something dirty written in numeric code about her belly, & she falls in bed, legs parted, the lights off, the candles, the music, the drift, the dream, *ahh the dream*

the teddy bear moves slowly as she drifts deeper, his paw clumsily pushes up her nightie, the perfect tits, the flat tummy, she moans slightly in resistance but she is too deep, this doesn't really matter as much, the numeric code, the numeric code

to what purpose, blood & consequence,

something like fear

Music half called, deep hungry words, the teddy pushes her legs apart & gnaws with its dry tongue stuck out from mouthless mouth at her panties, clumsily pushes the panties aside & gnaws, tastes nothing, gnaws & gnaws & tastes nothing still

many books, tenderness & compassion

he leans forward more, dangerously out the window, eyes closed but fluttering wildly, tongue flapping hungrily, tastelessly, *let me in, let me in! let me iN!*

to what purpose (*code*) (*key*) (*sad, endless war*) (*always war, ever war, a war, the war, one war*)
tonguing tastelessly while soft fingerless paws press on perfect tits, press, squeeze, near to seams
ripping, pressing, she moans & dreams, *preacher please preacher please preacher please*

good teddy nice teddy hungry
 teddy always hungry teddy eat
 & eat teddy always hungry
 teddy oh teddy always hungry—

To what purpose. Everything goes.

Maya?

Preacher. Maya?

Later teddy is softer, gentles, her dreams calm, Preacher is with her, they walk together by the water, the others are gone for now, he is hers, they walk together, teddy soothes her, soft, deep, kind touch, Preacher talks, tells her truths & secrets just for, just for fucking her, teddy, Preacher, her soft tits, he wants her to look, her pretty low-cut blouse, her tight jeans, walk together, teddy drily parts her thighs & pushes her over, the perfect ass, paws too thick to press in

he moans & leans farther reaches, reaches, for that drawer, what teddy found last time, long, purple, ridged, her deep fear & want the deep purple cock teddy holds it in clumsy unsteady paws presses a little a little more Preacher talks, talks but will soon shout—her pretty blouse, every guy likes it, loves it, wants her, Preacher will too he will—talks near to shouts

Always the same dream as she cums, cums twice, cums countless, always the same as she loses mind & breath to the big fucking dream cum:

Hitlerville. 1922. A tall building at night. Many soldiers. Trying to escape, but trying to get back in, this is the dream, & once in it the rest is nothing, shit-nothing. this is purpose, only, ever purpose.

A stiff uniform, it never softens or settles. Soft grey, none would call it pretty. Considered too long it can sadden an eye, melancholy an hour.

The mission, if a mission, changes or seems to. An ambiguity in it all, & a danger in this ambiguity. A dangerous, slim sense of the unnecessary in all of this. That someone knows, or will find out. That everything can change, that it has before, will again.

And, yes, the dream's dream, no matter how returned here, in the middle of a firefight, rolled up in a muddy ditch, even one of the sex piles that neither inside nor outside would believe the other has too—

the dream—him—Benny—every time—usually in the forest clearing—not always—again the uncertainty in it—but the hunger nonetheless—the great loving raw hunger in being here—in the arrival—

The dream—Benny—his smart mouth & single instruction—

"Find Maya."

And the other part.

"Kill her." or "Protect her." or "Bring her to me." or something that sounds like "She must fuck the Beast in this clearing & so right everything again."

Shaven-headed man. A little flabby. Tattoos revealing his weakness for arcane power symbols.

When he approaches the dream ends, he never gets closer than a foot or two. The clearing gets bright, the pale sky & its black stars glow impossibly, there is no animal or bird sound, this becomes disturbing even as there never was a sound—the tree-tops seem aflame or sentient or run along with language, sometimes knowable, often not—Benny does not like this, feels they are competing instructions, another's directive about Maya, the Beast or what all—

the dream ends & I am fully arrived—the dream perhaps the great hard fucking cum's aftermath, some kind of brief vision generated by its exhaust—something—

The building is always there—though sometimes not so much a prison. Occasionally a hotel. Once, yes, a school. Full of fascist schoolgirl whores who are trained to fuck the enemies with mined cunts—cunts that will explode upon them cumming—a sort of cumming threshold has to be reaches—used sparingly—

But Hitlerville. 1922. That's always involved. At least as a movie marquee or a delicatessen.

To get out becomes as much a culture as to get back in. Rarely is there anything else & nobody questions this.

I don't know why I do.

I tell nobody I question.

Who would I tell?

There is no ongoing narrative here from one time to the next.

Except.

I had to. The fucking wasn't quite as interesting. Something was happening, there was a somewhere else than here, than this, than dreaming of Benny—

"The fucking wasn't quite as interesting" is a dangerous thing to have written, even thought. I do not get fucked here. What I do to others, or sometimes they do to me, doesn't count.

I have an office, sometimes, & I scratched two lines, parallel, fingernail scratches, I left my self embedded, a bit, everything, in that bite.

And next time, I remembered. From then on Hitlerville. 1922. was not my all anymore. I began to leave scratches elsewhere. They echoed. They reminded me. I touched them by programming into myself that I would. That when I cummed very hard, even a bit less interesting, my hand would tremble, would tic a little, reaching, obscurely, but reaching, til a set of scratches found, their bit of me touched, abh, yes. I began to learn. I began to understand.

Ask who isn't trying to get in or out? I could not, aloud, but I began to progress, best I could—

*for the Beast was nearly aware of me. As I showed myself willing to kill or fuck or fuck and kill, or kill & fuck **anything**—as the veils gave way, more doors opened—*

I began to understand that there were no enemies here, no real war. What was cage was the whole thing. No gain for anyone here. Nothing. When dead, dead. Or maybe something else, but not here.

But not here, & not anywhere else.

I grew in my powers, the scratches in walls, on doors, basement corners, they changed things. I was a leader, then I was the Leader.

Then, Teddy came. That is, the Beast came looking enough like Teddy to make me terrified & knew I was caught. Strangely, I wished for Benny as the Beast bounded with the light-footed glee of a two-ton apparition—the moonlight blew away clouds & soldiers around me were dust & gone—Hitlerville. 1922. seemed going too.

“Will you find her?”

“Yes.”

“Say again.”

“Yes.”

I wake & find my nightie clawed from my shoulders & jammed along with my purple vibe deep deep inside me.

The formula is now instructions.

“Fucking cunt,” the soldier swears, loudly, not giving a flying fuck anymore. Bitch didn't get it. He watched her from far, then one time very close, knew she still had his knife marks along her inner thigh from his teeth. That fucking club, she liked it, he'd heard it was a way out, elsewhere, but never knew anyone who'd gone & come back.

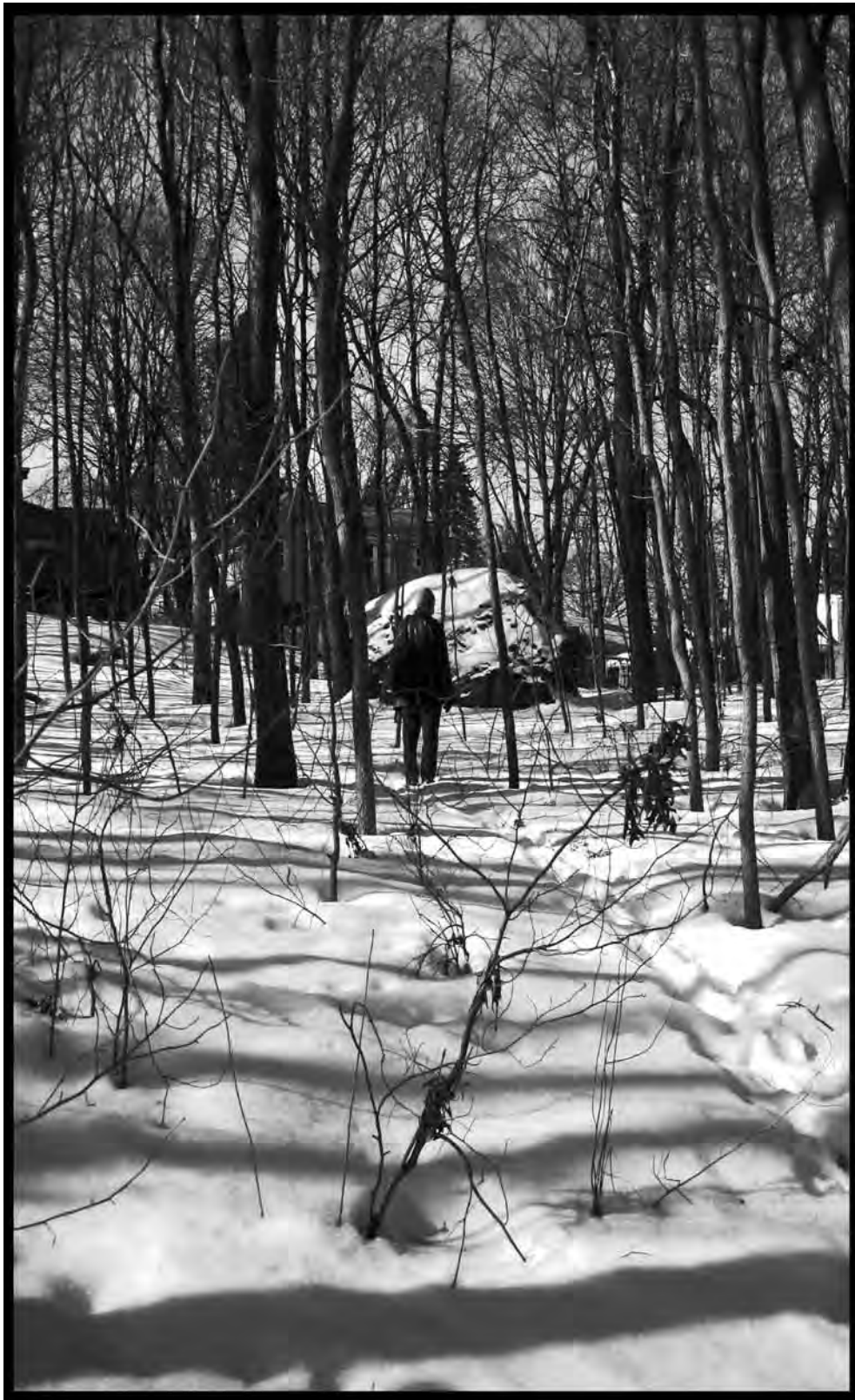
The band was good that night. The pills were good. Her dress was short & tight & to the point, & being important she had a booth to see & be seen by all—

So he'd pushed his way under, slowly, fingers touching, fingers pushing a bit when resisted, thighs opening as his head insisted, as he chewed off nylon & panty, maybe more resistance but the blade curled around her kept her mostly still—

“Fucking cunt!” he's holding his guts in now & it's easier to let go to that moment, what he found, let go & not come back—he doesn't, quite, yet—

The band has been jamming for over an hour when the singer takes the mic & sings

**“What to do next
when the wind & the rainbow
& the shutting door?
What to do?”**



Her cunt is bare. Her cunt is tight. Shit, her cunt is cherry! His tongue presses harder in. Her hand clenches his hand clenching the knife against her.

**“Say the world is dis-illusion
call world an effect,
crack that wish
to notice newly?”**

She’s squirming, she’s close, he wants it, wants to blow that cherry cunt out—he tongues deeper & faster, let the knife turn slightly, cut her slightly—

He sings, again, & again:

**“Manifest. Shit is
beautiful too.
Manifest. Shit is
beautiful too.”**

Starts to scream

**“Manifest!
Shit is beautiful too!
MANIFEST
SHIT IS BEAUTIFUL TOO”**

Feels her cumming, a breath & she is burst out, shivering, trembling, crying, yelping—she’s fucking loud but the band is too—he drinks her, sound & cum as the band destroys the stage to cheers—

The soldier wraps his guts in tightly & begins to crawl, he sees her going, & begins to crawl after her, she’s going to meet the Beast, he knows it—he stands, stumbles, falls, gets up, runs a-staggering after her—

He won’t die right now, something is using him, even now, he couldn’t stop pursuing her if he wanted when the something takes control—

Calls them the Eternals, there’s more than one, sometimes they let him act on his own—but—like that night, he wanted to rise up & stab her, stab her over & over while she was still cumming, while her cherry was still bloody, still wet with his spittle—before the cherry came back—he learned later—

The Eternals won’t let him kill her then, won’t let him die now—

While she lives, he has purpose, to protect her—at the cost of his life—at the cost of his heart—at the cost of everything—being a soldier, a bad one, won’t free him, getting shot neither—

he follows, bleeding, alive—

iv. (cxvii.)

Leaves everywhere shake &
 I understand:
I know nothing.
 Trees above drink of earth & shine alike:
I am nobody.

This is what it was like, wasn't it, Preacher?

Human paths through hills & bushes decaying
 the moment the pick draws away—

You're not with me this time, & I came back with my own intent, a wish, a request.

But I'm losing within, Preacher, I understand: *I know nothing.* Earth & shine: *I am nobody.*

Losing within this hour, any hour, all hours, the sadness, the struggle to share, losing within,
 this hour is a gift, every hour, all hours a gift—no hours—there are no hours—

Think! Think! There is a way, a ledge, keep some, keep what's needed:

what? Preacher answers in my mind:
 "hunger." He pauses, refines: "discontent."

I will a ledge below me, beneath my mushroom body, no appendages, no roots, will this ledge
 & stand shakily on it.

Discontent. Shape it. Begin where? Christa? No. More ease in my feelings toward her than I realized. Gretta? No. And, strangely, peace in glancing toward her.

My father, where else, I fall in & begin to gather my materials, I find there's not a lot I haven't used, picked away from discontent to resignation. Near, nearer the one I'd saved. What he said to me, a boy still, before disappearing.

I was a boy but also not quite. He must have seen he was leaving me on the cusp. Must have felt the questions I would ask before I had them formed & worked up the courage to ask.

I think he knew. I was that damned egg, to put it bluntly, falling off the table.

He could catch, retrieve to that spot. He could catch & ease the way down, point out what to see down here, offer his advice in lieu of answers no man has to give.

He could just let me fall & spend a lifetime trying to recover.

Which? Did you try to cut the difference with what you said? It wasn't advice on how to get in the tight pink panties of the elusive smiling schoolgirls in my class. Wasn't how to survive with something within in tact, worth defending, when the years would crowd bastards

& demons closer & closer.

No, nothing for my roaring need to grab ass nor the hard fucking path I was being brainwashed into walking, into believing what it was to be human in this walking.

You talked to me. I know now you'd already been a fucking mushroom. I know now you saw too much of what I was bound for.

But what you told me, me, with my half-grown rock-hard schoolboy cock & puppy tender heart, what you told me:

Stars on that porch wave too bright that night, it's like the ships ever constant overhead were leaning down & especially listening to what you said.

"What answer is a tapping in our cells, a deep rhythm, a source of knowing & nothing, move nearer, no why, move on, sing, trust."

Was it the first girl I seduced who I sang those words to as I slowly stripped, somewhere between the "please don't" & "I'm a virgin" & the "will you show me how to please you?"—those words, her candied breathing as ever inch, every moment, she revealed herself brand new to us both, the carefully chosen colors & layers falling away, the sweaty lightly tanned skin, the breasts she worries are a little heavy, worries I don't look at enough, the hips she's played others with, ride a little, retreat a little, ride a little wilder, & retreat, this time, baby, just this time, oh yes Dad tell me more I'll use it on this one & the next few

"What answer" stir of ice in his square blue bourbon glass "in godless hands that can shape dust to bullet & back again, thus back again, or shape dust to a prayer of thanks, manifest a star in every seeking eye."

She bucks at the word "prayer," reaches to clutch panties I'd chewed from her an hour ago, she's a church going girl or used to be, what would Preacher say, she'd thought she'd be his first, it was one look, one deep deep look, Bowie's tongue recalls her back & a harder tap & thrust deeper flings her on, "say fuck me, Preacher" she thinks she hears though how when his mouth is deep inside her *oh god ohgodohgodohgodfuckmepreacherfuckmepreacher, F U C K M E P R E A C H E R* but he pulls back a little, relaxes, she takes a breath & gulps more, wondering why he pulled back a little, feels him moving up her body, kissing here & there, keeping her thighs very wide *oh god please*, feels him atop her looks down her length to see his hard prick entering her in a single long stroke she starts to scream when a single finger on her lips stops her & as he thrusts again, slower, each time deeper he says in her ear, watching her eyes, teaching her the rhythms to help her fuck back, she follows him then clicks in, a slight shift down there & their power is one, no longer a one fucking the other, now a single thing, a fuck, a good hard fuck, there are words, his voice deeper than the boy's a few hours ago, the one who had brought her here because of his nerdy charm, his pant when talking to her, the way her smart friend noticed him noticing her, that thrill of power now a millionfold, a lunacy of pleasure as he said, "leaves are shaking harder now, everywhere, a language of both knowing & nothing, a pickless path, this hour's gift both spent & unspending" she cums blindly & wants to howl but, again, the

"Fear . . . falls . . . dripping through the heart" she begins.

"Something else is dripping on you, little girl" someone shouts to cheers & hisses.

She holds her position. "How alone & why?"

The whistles & hoots increase.

"Ancient astronauts taught us this far & left, nodded, let go?"

"Hey, baby, I won't let go, I promise!"

"Yah!"

"Ride that nice thing all night long! Come to the Lizard King, honey! I can do anything!"

They won't listen, Master. My body is plainly bared. There is nothing to wonder about. I'm speaking your words.

She nods, kneels among the tresses of her body scarf. "I will take the first."

The crowd freezes.

"I will perform & then speak. Every one of you."

Nobody moves. Nobody speaks.

She is kneeling, legs apart, a position of worship & supplication. Two police approach.

"OK, honey. It's OK. How old are you? Are you high?"

Something happens & she is gone.

"Why did you bring me back?"

"Jasmine, this isn't the way."

"Am I in the White Woods? Is she alive? No more of this hustling on my body!"

"What else of you?"

"I learned, Master! I listened. You let me go. Sent me to the others."

"Yes."

"Tell me!"

"Why do you pose?"

"It's what everyone wants! Pose or fuck."

"What else is there?"

"I don't know. Nobody cares what else."

"How did you end up here?"

"My sister. She was taken. I was too."

"What happened?"

"I don't know. I don't remember. But the doctor after said I wasn't . . . hurt."

"Fucked."

"No. I wasn't."

"And your sister?"

"I don't know."

"Jazz, what is her name?"

"Name?"

"Yes."

"Um. Ashleigh?"

"Is that a question?"

"I don't know."

"Do you have a sister?"



"Yes! I saw. They . . ."

"They what?"

"They tied me up in front of a camera, pretended to do things to me. They told me if I didn't cooperate, my sister would get very hurt."

"Now you're wondering about this."

"They didn't do it. They pretended to do it. They told me to struggle & moan but only a little."

"You said you didn't remember."

"I don't know what happened after. How I got home. Where Ashleigh is."

"Is that her name?"

"Yes."

"You think so."

"Yes."

"So you came back for her."

"Yes."

"To the White Woods."

"Yes."

"Is she here?"

"I don't know."

"Why are you back here, Jasmine?"

"I. Master?"

"I am not your Master."

"Please."

"Tell me."

"I don't know."

For a flash: her hair is down, she is facing a bareheaded black man, face to face, legs entwined, he is pushing an enormous cock inside her & she rides it out of desperation not to get hurt, her heels press down hard on black stiletto heels each time he thrusts, his face buries in her chest, sucking & biting each nipple til she howls as his bites & thrusts burn & break & dissolve her, the sunlight through the great windowpane, the ocean at great high tide in view, he bites & thrusts & she—

Again: a hotel room, maybe a ballroom, endless long, a mirrored monstrosity, many chandeliers, dripping . . . honey? blood? cum? Crowded with men & women & beasts & aliens, they give way to her, defer, as she approaches, a stage, a microphone—speaks—the Master's words again but some of her own:

"Fear falls frozen dripping through the heart, one & many wonder at its breathless wall, its lump of god within. How alone & why? Ask again. The cicadas & bamboo too? Ancient astronauts taught us this far & left, nodded, let go?"

The ballroom pulsates, alternates with another scene. She is watching her sister being fucked by a . . . something. Sister on her stomach, legs spread wide, the Beast is on top of her, his hands crushing her breasts, his twin cocks fucking her cock & ass, how, *o god o fuck*

moan Jazzy moan like I taught

no it's Ashleigh I watched

moan Jazzy moan goodgood

it fades & she continues speaking:

"Want, taught to want, to feed one hunger with another, to choose, to almost know, hurry toward those brilliant years, sensuous playing lights."

No. I remember her. I remember the night we were taken. I remember how she let them—so they wouldn't. I couldn't get her out. This is a fucking trick!

The Master nods. "The White Woods is all tricks. You can't navigate it alone. You won't survive."

"I only have you."

She strokes his cock, lightly, in their bed, beneath the glowing ocean skies, never able to see all of him at once, without thinking lifts up & makes to mount him, mount the much wider hips, longer legs, the cock her cherry tight pooch—

He pushes her lightly but she clings.

"I only have you."

A moment balanced, feeling him about to enter her, then a noise, behind her, a bang, a shot, a single word: "No."

Jazz is in her bedroom, the old one, before they moved, when she still had Ashleigh, standing over her, looking at the chat underway on her computer.

"He's asking if you're a virgin."

Jazz inwardly shakes. Thinks. Remembers.

"I tell them something that happened. Something I laugh & blush about."

She types & types. A tale about sitting in a man's pickup truck, letting him look at her, down there, not *touch*, just look, & he buys her a music player. Ashleigh laughs & laugh. Says something about the fountain at the mall. Makes to leave but Jazz says no.

"What's wrong, Jazz-ma-tazz? You're doing better cock-teasing than I ever did."

"Ash, something."

"What? I have to get going before they get home."

"They took us tonight, Ash."

"Who?"

She thinks. Is this the White Woods? Has the Master sent her back? Is she dreaming?

She shuts off the computer. Roughly.

"Jazz! Come on! I know you hate her, but that cost her a lot of money."

Jazz grabs her sister's hand. Drags her through the house, to the living room whose windows look out to the street.

They hunch low, lights off, peek through the curtains.

"Look. The van."

"Yes, Jazz. It's a van."

"It's the one that took us tonight."

"Took us? We're sitting here at home, in the dark. Not taken."

"They came in, took us both. I escaped when it burned down."

"What?"

"The White Woods."

"White . . . Woods?"

"You didn't. Get out. I couldn't find you. I tried."

"Jazzy."

"But they didn't burn down. They can't. So I came back to get you."

"Jazzy."

"I found a way in. I had to do things. There's a hotel. I lied. But I got in."

"Jasmine!"

She slaps Ashleigh's face hard. "I don't know if we're still there or if the Master sent me back to tonight to save us."

"Master."

"Am I supposed to go again? Let myself be taken, knowing what I do?"

Ashleigh yanks free & stands. The door bursts open. But it's those college boys she's been sneaking out to see. They have beer & weed. One hunkers up around Ashleigh to hug her & one hand cups her ass tightly, the other squeezes her tit possessively.

Something is different. The music is loud. More arrive. Ashleigh is making out hard with one of them. He turns away every so often & looks over to Jazz, says a word.

"Come on, Ash."

"She's my little sister."

"Doesn't look so small."

"Aren't I enough, you pig."

"Feel down there, Ash. Good, now stroke."

"Um. Mm."

"Nice? Yes?"

"Yes."

"Say it."

"Nice."

"Want it inside you?"

"Yes."

"Then we bring baby sister in on it. Someone's going to have her tonight. With you & me it will be gently. We'll have fun."

"No."

"One of these others might just be a little rough. They're waiting on me. On you. She belongs to me unless you cut her loose."

"No."

Jazz is on the couch now. "It's OK, Ash."

"No!"

"Let's go in the bedroom so we don't put on a show!"

Ashleigh is half-dragged in, he's licking his lips over her, she's letting her tank top straps fall from her shoulders, letting him get a good look.

He carries Ash with him into bed. Jazz dims the lights. Knows he really wants to fuck

her while Ash watches.

Lets a few things happen, lets him strip her some, maul her a little.

Starts to talk, in his ear, then louder, something happens he does not expect, it hurts, it hurts more. She talks:

"Hunger, is it more complex with more men, larger cities? Does any who falls tonight triumph in finale, glory for not an hour more?"

He starts to scream, when he feels his cock being ripped from his body & somehow weaker than this much smaller girl.

She chants, as the Master taught her:

"Fear falls, frozen, dripping through the heart, great galleries & long centuries, preachers roar & kings thump." She lets go a little, just a touch. Continues: *"Comfort in hovering together close over the abyss, align gazes & call it love, or gesture to maps & libraries, bullets, chalice, scripture, grave, solemn, nod their truth?"* She lets go a little more, whispers: *"Comfort in what hasn't slipped yet & touchless faith it will hold."* She squeezes him until he screams, then pushes him lightly off the bed.

Ashleigh is staring at her. They are in their parents' bedroom, his choice.

"Are you listening to me now, Ashleigh?"

"Yes," she whispers.

"Walk out there with this phone in your hand, tell them you've dialed 9 and 1, and if you dial another 1, all of them are going to prison for rape. Do it now."

Ash nods. Jazz hears her voice, hears her repeat more clearly, hears hurried, noisy departure, cars starting up & leaving.

Her boyfriend, whatever he is, is moaning on the floor.

Speaking very softly, she says: "I didn't rip out your balls & let you bleed to death for a reason. Not that you're fucking her, if you even have yet. I know she's still a virgin but lets stories tell lies."

A moan. But listening.

"I know how to hurt you worse than killing you. You know I'm not afraid. I know you are."

Now just breathing.

"I need someone. You. You're going to help me."

Nothing.

"Nod!"

A movement.

"Say yes!"

"Yes" croaked.

"Again!"

"Yes!"

"There will be a reward if you do right."

Ashleigh walks in, barely.

“He’s going to help me.”

“Help?”

“The White Woods isn’t just a place. You don’t escape it by walking out.”

Ashleigh stares.

“We’re still in it. The Master didn’t send me back in time to stop it. He did bring me to you. We’re in the White Woods, *do you understand this?*”

She nods dumbly. She doesn’t know anything.

“He’s going to help us. For a reward.”

“Reward.”

“Yah. Later on that.”

The Master’s cum that last night had tasted like moonlight, like sugar, like new breathing. As always, in their coupling, he talked. He talked and she listened, it was like he was wind & she chimes.

“Questions mirror glance to glance, & highest music only sighs & sings of full moons, midnight tides, & the moment’s power in warmth laying by warmth.”

She felt herself cumming, very hard, & longed as never for any other, that he enter her, stay inside her, she tried to suspend it aloft, as he’d taught, use the energy to fly, the ocean so near, the moon as full as his words that night.

“Tonight behold the wide world with all its fears, howling & half-awake, no key to explain”

They had howled, together, that night:

“Behold the world, howling, half waking, yet still no key to the smallest face or least star”

She looks at the man, whatever he is. At Ashleigh, sweaty & badly shaken. “There is no Master anymore. This is his gift to me. This is his goodbye.”

vi. (cxvi. + cxv.)

Years ago I sat here, jobless & alone. Not a long time ago I sat here jobbed & loved. Now I sit here jobless & loved. This strange, shifting equation. I’m lost in this, call it a sea or mist, & solid ground comes & goes. A labyrinth. Labyrinthine. Life as fiction. Fiction as life. The despair that perhaps makes good Art in life tries to drown a little more every day. The push back, the vow, the promise, the wordless wish.

What then, what? A book I keep from commerce’s claws by sinking the rest of me in, willingly. Toward hours at these pages, toward every new & old thing I can throw into them, this open-ended book I see no solid conclusion to, no plan.

What then? I press the Universe: let me, help me to find work to protect who & what I love. I vow, I wish, I promise.

There are moments leading to that happy one of victory, moments when I am not in



my familiar mind as I beg pretty, cajole pretty, all but willing suck shit from this one or that one's asshole. I would. At hardly a remove, I do. I do, & again, & again.

And so helpless to the power of others, mostly unknown. A child in this helplessness, cursing its unfairness, & the poverty of imagination I see. Cursing my own as despair laps its brown waters at me from many sides.

Yet here I sit, live, able, this poor folks cafeteria where I've been atop the barrel at sea & below. Not safe, but not, perhaps, as much danger as some years.

Universe, I ask, I beg, I wish. Please help me on this course. Please help me. I remember my father telling me he'd pray to his mother in hard times. I pray to you now, whatever you are beyond a stone & a box of bones 3,000 miles from here. Whatever you were. Help me. My story, this book, is raw & vulnerable in this asking, yet I ask. Help me to succeed & soon in this task. To find good work as I had before taken away by accountants, more loyal work.

I have asked in all my notebooks & I ask here, in these pages, expose here this need, promise, beg, wish.

Help me.

My gift is to pass to this book's people what I was given: ask the Universe, ask those loved & lost. Ask. Ask & ask. And be grateful in this struggle.

The man in the wheelchair, a long beard & crazy look, & a second empty wheelchair tied to his, says: "Come on, let's go back."

"Who are you?"

"You met me in recent dreams."

"Who *are* you?"

"I want to lead you back in."

"Am I out?"

"It's this way."

"Is this out?"

Hesitates. "It's the shallows."

"What if I go the other way. Is there shore? Is there land?"

He motions. "Get in."

"I don't know."

"You asked for help. You wish. Promise. Beg."

"Yes."

"Get in. Let's go."

I get in the empty seat & we push, off-synch at first, then better. A night coalesces around us. City neon, short skirts, slow & pressing traffic. The laughter of booze & want.

"There's more."

"Yah."

"You don't believe me?"

"It doesn't matter."

People let us by, few look at our faces. "Why give away that or anything?"

"What do you want of them?"

"Listen, some talk about the masses as one but I don't see it. I see half-awake animals

jostling for bones, coins, & dirt. Calls for unity sum to shit. Good to cheer for in a faceless crowd. I don't see it manifest."

"What do you want of them?"

"Behavior more mature than children. Better than selfish & short-sighted. Maybe just some honesty."

"Do you do better?"

"I try. I fail but I try. I look at faces I encounter. It's not much."

"Maybe none of this is what would work best."

"What then?"

"Finding a sense of place & contentment there."

"Maybe."

"The world will press on when you are dust & blow away."

"I know."

"Then what you have is your unknown stretch, your choices, & the vagaries of luck."

I nod.

"Look. Look!"

A white bunny rabbit about 5 feet tall hops up. To me, gazing me steady. I gaze back a moment.

It turns & hops away, slowly, as though I will follow.

I stand, don't follow.

"Why not?"

"I'm going into the shallows, that's what I need, what I'm after."

The man nods. "I'll wait." I noticed the bunny rabbit has paused too.

The city clarifies & becomes familiar, my current neighborhood, my recent hours. I walk toward one of several writing joints, not to fear, not to turn away.

A table I've sat at many times, the cup of soda, the window's view of a car wash across the street, its sign a digital one, time & temptation—

The table next to mine sits a scrawny old black woman, at her puzzles with a short pencil—

I wonder what they are & have never asked. An old man with a coffee pauses friendly near her. Some mumbled words.

"The college could probably use you in their anthropology department," he concludes, smiling back to his own table.

People come & go, a variety, some faces sheen & plush, some worn hard, alert for the lash. I look for the connecting thread, the blood shared among them, below the lies of race, ideology, ethnicity, sex, inherited senses of alliance, the child's mind washed with prejudice & discontent. Come & go, no explanation here.

Universe, & Dad, this page is a cry in a weaker hour, a plea, a wish. I feel partway there, somewhere, a portion of what I can be, a twist of hungers that spits song some hours & others wastes all.

This hour I ask for a soon coming hour's success. I ask to do better when the path is clear, &

less despair when it isn't.

I opened these pages to this prayer because whatever another's rules for story, for book, I have no interest. This prayer is this hour's matter, manifest it in song or otherwise. I acknowledge this life's burdens & expectations while expecting I live far more than meeting them. I expect more, Universe, & Dad, & right now I hobble. Hobble with a stubborn gait but hobble nonetheless. Please help me toward this wished success, & thank you, my loves, thank you dearly & deeply.

We sit at our tables, one between us, she at her puzzles or whatever they may be, her pencil, my black pen, not a word between us yet, though I think she sneezed earlier & I called "Bless you" by youth's habit—

Workmen in a corner install an espresso machine, one scolds the others to tape off their work area properly & fill in any holes they make—

Another corner has a machine that rents films on disk for a dollar a day—what is any of this? The shallows, the shore?

She wears an apricot-colored shirt & purple slacks, black knit cap & woolen coat, limps, badly, over to the trash can to dispose her cup. Our eyes meet but hers register nothing. Passes me by, going now, little hand purse, beat brown shopping bag, again looks at me, again . . . nothing—

I sat here hours tonight reading through a poet's work, half century of poems—culling what I needed, for a small chapbook—

what? what?

The beg, the wish, the plea—I could not be more focused on this—

My naked, raw, please.

If it was some other book I would not be checking in with this jobhunting news, yet here it is & I am—

It may happen tomorrow morning, the catch into new employment, end to a month's nightmare, maybe I'll retreat from these shallows then—

A new page will tell.

The new page says: not yet. It says: strike on. It says: beaten or beat on. It says: not yet but soon. It says: wanting leads toward getting, wanting more toward getting even closer. It says: you have not given all, really given all, you have given some but maybe held back a little, not believing that even the answer will be more than passage, will not be arrival.

Ask: do I still wish for arrival?

Ask: what would it look like?

Ask: what would it give, & demand?

Ask: do I believe arrival is possible?

Ask: have I earned it, or just luck its getting?

Answer: I wish for safety in the danger & mystery

Answer: It would look like hard work & freedom.

Answer: It would demand my best & reward me in kind.

Answer: Possible, but I'm uncertain.

Answer: No answer.

Ask, finally: does it matter? Death engulfs all, & whatever after. *Does it matter?*

Answer: A thousand confused words or, simply, yes. It matters. I don't know why, don't know what this all is, but I cannot refute it by sum, as I don't know its whole, nor in parts, as I cannot see how each contributes to that whole. It matters & I don't know why.

I feel these truths, these fears, most clearly & profoundly at night. Day comes & I don't know in a helpless, blindly, wildly terrified way. That is my struggle. Not music, art, the singing I do or enjoy in others. It's daylight's insanity. Its fake sobriety, false rationalism, lunatic arguments pretended as truths.

Those hours my worst, my brutal struggle—

What, then, the morrow? I keep thinking that it's war. That I cannot succeed with honor & virtue, but trickery & hustle, that I need to take by whatever means & be less generous than I would wish to be against dangers I cannot foresee—

Daylight divides soul from soul, it is a place of false words, not music but talk, lies created to explain or battle other lies. Sides taken as though it is the world, not men, that create borders among them. Distinctions found in a color, a genital, an accent, an idea of faith.

How to engage such? Without loyalty or faith. With mask & costume.

With an idea firm that one far day's success will be most of daylight's hours spent in dreams of coming night.

Daylight I beat at it, ranted at it, begged a little, a little more, & dug into my task—what this book now but become a diary of fragments—where Maya? where the Golden Eagle? where the wide & swallowing White Woods? Where the Beast?

The Beast is here, is now, is tonight. The Beast clouds stars & sun alike, heart's hopes, many kind impulses of stranger toward stranger—

Maya waits, pends, like the others
but the Beast does not.

"Aww, man, you need a drink, brother."

"No. I need a job."

"Yah, that too. But a drink couldn't hurt in the meantime."

"No. A job."

"Yah. You really gave it up, huh."

"Moved on. It happens."

"Well, anyway, don't give up. You'll find it, do what you gotta do."

"Can't say how fucking tough it is."

"Hey, it's on the TV. People all over are hurting. Maybe it will get better when we get those old bastards out & something better in."

"I hope so."

"Can't hurt to try something new when the old ain't working."

"Yah."

"Gotta try."

"Job. Need job."

"You'll do it, buddy. Hang tough. Be stubborn. Hell, say a prayer."

"I did."

"Say another. Maybe nobody heard the other."

OK. My new prayer. Universe, Dad, I need a job & I wish one very soon. I am hurting now worse than my wallet. I need to find my way back to the wheel & I need your help. Please help me to get a *good job and soon*. Please. Please. Thank you.

I read: "Old thoughts crowd the peak, obscure both sky & valley," & these were words written only some weeks ago, but a kind of forever. I was tired that day but felt I was striding OK, the times hard but I was grateful, I was working—

I read: "The years conspire to narrow faith, harden & systemize what it becomes. Worshipped words without burn," & it occurs to me now how there is little time for fine thought, or tries toward it, when one's purse or person or loved ones are in danger. I am no thinker now as I was in those hours writing those lines. I am a desperado, a man-shaped fear, a well-spoken beggar for what I need. Faith now is subsumed to hustle, to lie & whore for it, & *fucking get it*.

I read: "How long stable this living machine? Look to how dear men bear the crumble of other centuries, & yet little reck its warning," & nothing occurs to me but the lunatic obsession my world has with sexual prurience—with controlling the use & produce of cunt—& so little care for health, for teaching its young a knowledge of body & mortality—to live & die never having understood one's own limbs, lungs, genitals, blood heart.

I read: "Old thoughts, on a familiar train crossing a local river, some factory crowds its edge," & remember to the moment, two, one of witness, one of composition, the first a train, near the last time I would take it for that reason, the second a dimly lighted room in a museum, sitting, calming, the day's toil done, did not know then what it summed to & do not know now.

Hope hungers me, it is night.



It is night, hope hungers me.

[Maya reads: “I witness this passing hour in nod to its sky, its valley, what treasure it keeps, what it passes along.” Her book without the cover, without the title page, no footers on its other pages to tell who wrote this book or what its title. She hasn’t read it in awhile, was reminded of it by Samantha, who wasn’t around awhile.

[“Back to basics, Maya.”]

I sit back in the wheelchair. The long-haired man smiles when I ask about death. Brightly cries while he claps: “Rocket, boom! A better world.” The tall bunny rabbit looks at me as though to ask if I am ready. I nod, & we push our wheelchair conveyance smoothly behind him as he hops forth, from the shore, the shallows, back deeper, where I’ve denied myself a few days, maybe necessary, maybe so——

What now, Maya? What now, Bowie? I look toward you with this query, wondering any way to give you something I don’t have, something I can’t know——

What would that be?

“They’re not there to free, they’re there for you to work with, respect, run with”

“Like friends”

“Like always”

“This isn’t my best self tonight, these days. It’s some version of me, something. But not my best.”

“Been worse.”

“Now a new week come.”

“Bring this in. Bring it all in.

Breach the fucking daylight
with your Art. Do it.”

We roll in deeper together.

vii. (cxiv.)

Damned unsure yet keep moving—it seems I can’t hold or reck true much more than this—I want to—I want to—I so want to——

Hardly any words but
vow’s true by this hour’s acts——

I want to call for faith, for more than these few words—
yet, no,

vow's true by this hour's acts.

Strange it was when Sunday night & *TripTown* came on at 9 like it used to, & the drinkers at Luna T's Cafe's bar settled into it agreeably & then a scene where a man on the TV screen walked into Luna T's Cafe's bar as those in the actual bar watched a similar man walk through the door into their midst—

The two were similar not the same but did tell the same story in tandem it seemed as the drinkers turned from TV to man among them to take in the tale—

“When I was a dragon many years ago I lived in a cave in the hills above a small village. I had been left there when I was small & I'd grown up all alone—

“The village's people were afraid of me & there were rumors I had incinerated children with my flaming breath, & would do it again & worse if not kept at bay by sentinels on watch day & night on the edge of the town.

“It was a lonely existence & maybe I would have lived & died that way save for a chance finding in my cave. It was a pile of books. I got excited by the sight of them, though, & my fiery breath torched them all—

“Save for the one volume not with the rest when my breath went off—

“I'd been sad several days when I discovered this book tucked partially away in a narrow crevice—

“I didn't know what it was save that it was made by men, like the ones who drove me from town & guarded against me.

“I'm not sure how I discovered it was a book much less the skills to read it, but I tend to think that whoever my parents were, they were wise & wily. So I learned. I read, & I learned more.

“Then came the day when I came down from the hills into the village, determined to change how things were. I'd decided to risk myself in this hope.

“The sentinels let me pass but gave signal I was on the move in town. Women, children, the old & sick were all hid away safely.

“I'd come so close because I wanted to be chased & followed.

“I made sure most of the men folk in town were coming after me, & I led them a long chase through the woods to a clearing.

“There I made my stand. With them shouting threats of all kinds, & spears at my tough skin, I did nothing.

“Then I let out a bellow & stood them back several paces, & at that moment I scorched the earth with a message:

**“I MEAN YOU NO HARM
LET US MAKE PEACE.”**

Now nobody saw it because nobody expected a dragon to scorch earth with language.

“What I did to force my point was blow fire up in the air until a huge black cloud of smoke blotted the daylight—

“Then also with my flame I gently illuminated for them the message on the ground.

“One, a man I later knew as Specs, saw the message & compelled his townsfolk to stop threatening me & stop being afraid—

“He knew in fact from my message I had read a book, read one of his books for it was he who had lived in the cave before me.

“He was called Specs, short for Spectacles, & he’d run the town newspaper awhile. But he did not hale from the town; neither did they know of his time living in the cave.

“What they did regard him was with trust. They stopped attacking & awaited what next.

“One of us is a ghost. We each carry a small vial on a necklace. The ghost carries the ashes of our deceased body. The other carries desert sand. The answer to this riddle isn’t as plain to solve as it may seem.”

“My name is Preacher. I’ve come here to find my old partner.”

The drinkers at Luna T’s look at the TV & then each other trying to figure out which puzzle to work first—

“Are we part of that TV show now?”

“Nah, it’s some trick. Barkeep, where’s the hidden camera?”

Mr. Bob leans on the counter & shakes his head.

The drinkers look at the TV where the drinkers look back at them & both regard the Preacher, though each has the one sitting near—

“How can he be dead or alive & on TV at the same time?”

“It’s a trick. One of them *Candid Camera* or reality shows. Cmon, barkeep! What’s the joke?”

He shakes his head again. “This one’s for you to deal with, boys.”

I sit in the corner watching this all play out, writing it down, causing it or reporting it hard to say, this deep in I’m not sure it matters, perhaps it does—

Sit thinking my own tangled thoughts, interrupting this promising scene to mind them better—thinking how this book no longer has a center or a focus, I’ve discarded goal or length of any kind, discarded the idea that distinct stories matter other than for commerce’s purposes—

Yet—

“Are you abandoning this scene? This is getting weird enough to get good”

There is a music I do adhere to even now, a deep rhythm, a long melody, a shaped wish & a pursuit that matters—

“We’re losing him”

“Eh, he’ll be back. We’re what he has left of other days.”

“Better ones?”

“Just different. But he keeps them & he keeps us too.”

Turn back to the old, ongoing sheaf of songs & read: “Brave, bastardly brave, stupidly brave, happily brave, let the countless musics within bloom.” What are the pages for? Maybe not anything pointed. Maybe just because. Maybe because I was small & poor & paper & pens & books were what I had, & what I have now still. But what of this endless story? Have I abandoned any idea of form, of coherent structure?

Let the countless musics within bloom. Sitting here in a poor folks cafeteria, another one, sitting here & listening to music & I have no answer yet—let the countless musics bloom—what of this? Bravery when fear tries to swallow & bury?

Read on: “Break narrow faith & dreams of burning landscapes, win or lose by what matters, struggle to share, & share.” Win or lose by what matters. What matters? I ask, knowing & not knowing.

There is a music I adhere to even now, a deep rhythm, a long melody, a shaped wish & a pursuit that matters—knowing & not knowing.

Read: “Blowing scarce tonight, I pledge to my returning tide, & what fineness still waits.” Blowing scarce, what fineness waits. Both, regard this heart. Blowing scarce, waiting fineness.

Nothing goes away, nothing returns, I keep not knowing what this is, what far depths it can go, what to do with this

I can only think: this curtained savagery is beyond any easy knowing, or hard or long or any knowing—

Nothing goes away, nothing returns, this curtained savagery, did you know that, Père? Did you see it in your lion’s years or later? Did you see it when your brain was going & gone, could you have told me that last time I phoned you in your hospital bed, when instead you ranted to me that all was hatred & all were enemies?

What could you have said to me that last night, last time we spoke, what help, what advice, what warning? If not that, what comfort now if ye exist more than decaying bones in a box? What do you know now if anything more or at all?

Nearly 800 pages & I’ve got no answers, nothing goes away, nothing returns, this curtained savagery, listen:

for awhile she is told to walk around, just like that, a kind of small arena dim in roseate light, she is barefoot but the ground below is soft, almost like grass, told to walk around, she is not nude but no longer strange to how much or little she is made to wear—there are moments when she is lucid enough to think she is drugged, to wonder how much of this is real, how much is happening, what else might be happening she cannot remember, her name is gone,

much of what were her memories, this no longer frightens her, never did really, how could it? This is what she knows, how she pleases, perhaps it will change soon, perhaps she has been told so, perhaps she wishes she could keep walking around the small roseate-colored arena forever, bending & posing & singing as she is told—

Nothing goes away, nothing returns, look!

I am near you now, Maya, I travel by your scent, by how I remember it by those hours when I carried you in my arms, I am nearing you, Maya & I find the needs to eat & sleep are gone, & memories too, are gone, all is roseate like your skin, all is soft & murmurs, all needs me to come to you & the consuming hour,

(curtained savagery, nothing goes away, nothing returns)

& the dreams bother me less because I am used to them, they come while I near you, not eating, not sleeping, not wishing for them or inviting them, yet they come & bother me less

sometimes things have gone wrong & there are bars, once there was another woman, Maya, I explained it to her & she understood, the dreams bother me less, she was a dream, Maya, the bars were a dream, I am nearing you, your scent, those hours, near—

vow true, vow something, keep moving, is that what you would have said, Père? What did you know to tell, what did you know I will not ever learn, what was all that now summed to your life, to what you completely, & no longer, are?

What? Can you tell me now? Can I dream you yet? Do you exist outside that box in the earth? Is there something still? Is there something more? Me & my books, do I know as well as you do & did, me & my musics, me & my trees, me & my still-breathing lungs, still-beating heart? What do I know, what do I lack? Why can nobody tell me wherefrom or whereto yet so many will point to a book or a man or a temple & say, yonder find why—

No. I refuse. I refuse at this hour to believe any know the why or the next. I refuse it all. I don't know what remains after that, a remain called Art which helps & salves me in my suffering, or at least sets it to a soft tune—Look! Look!

“I don't know where I am anymore in this.”

“I can't say I do either.”

“Is this what you want, how it's going to be?”

“I don't know. Maybe not.”

“Tell me something sure.”

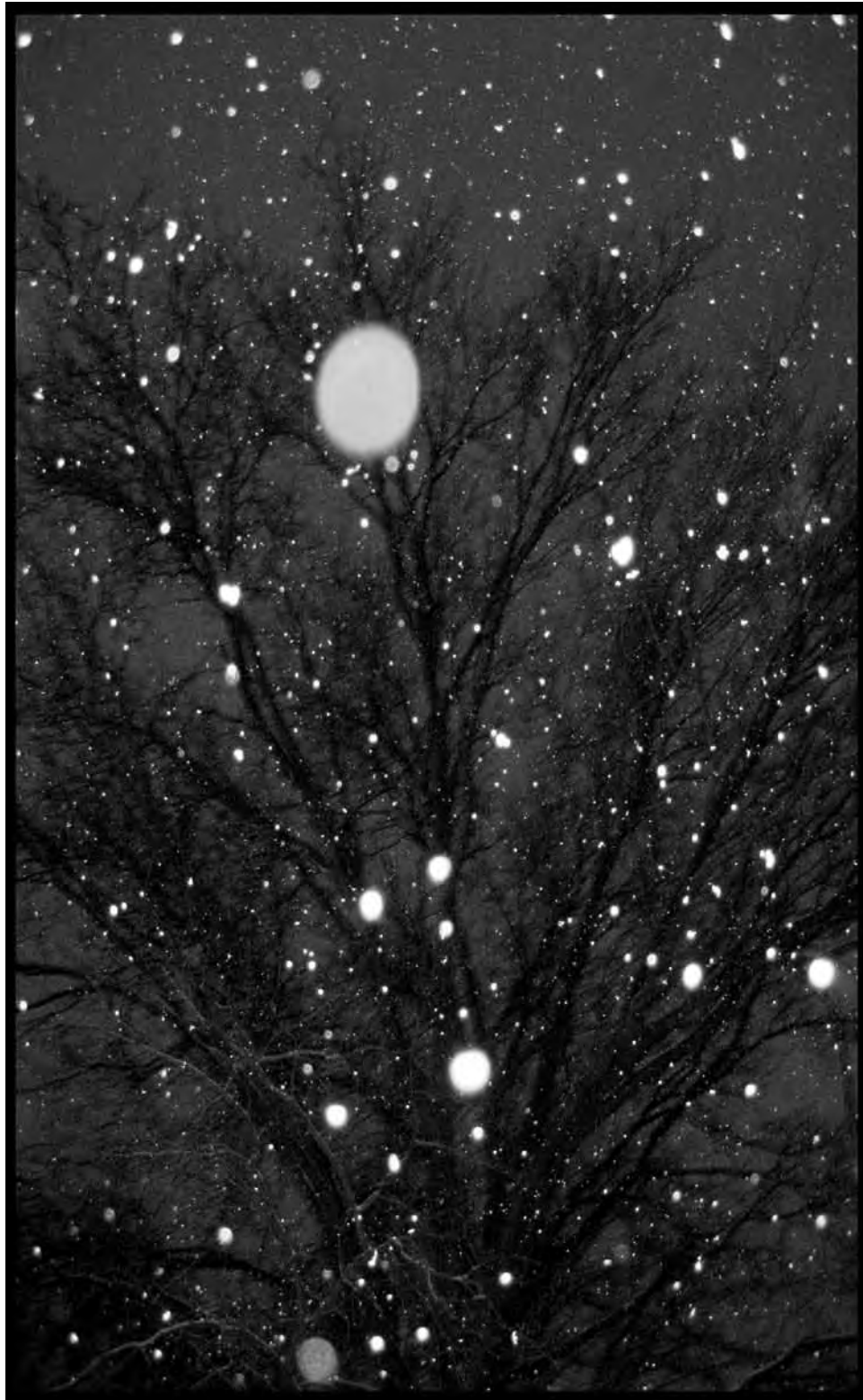
“I think the wishes are true & the Art matters.”

“Will I get to Dylan?”

“I think so.”

“Is the White Woods gone?”

“I don't think so. It burned down but it isn't gone.”



"Is there a last page?"

"I can't answer that."

"Are we dead?"

"I don't know. I don't know what that would be."

"Does it end?"

"I guess I hope not, Maya. What would have been the point?"

"I want to see the ocean with Dylan & Samantha. Somehow. In your book or his or both. I don't care. That's what I want."

"Yes."

The TV shuts off, one of them, & the drinkers at Luna T's Cafe's bar look around & at Preacher.

Mr. Bob the barman sidles up to the man. "You want a drink, bud? Glass of water? Or just to sit quiet awhile?"

Preacher says nothing a moment. "Do you know a man by the name of Bowie?"

Mr. Bob nods. "He's been here before." Pauses. "I think you have too."

Preacher nods, maybe.

"Bowie's not here."

"Do you trust me?" says suddenly.

"I'm not sure but I think I should."

Preacher does not nod this time, satisfied. The rest along the bar are listening hungrily, wondering if they're on TV, if Preacher is from that show, what happened to the rest . . .

Mr. Bob nods & leads Preacher to a corner table. A familiar gesture of his to the rest indicates they're in charge, police themselves, honor system . . .

"How much do you know?"

"I'm not sure."

"Tell me what you can. Bowie is my partner. He's my brother."

"I know. I mean I don't doubt you."

"He was here recently?"

"Not long ago. His girl is here."

"Gretta?"

"No. Well, yes, I suppose still in a way. I meant the younger one."

"Left her here for safe keeping."

"Yes . . ."

"It's OK. I knew what this place was long ago."

"Can I ask . . .?"

"The woman who waited for me here? All that?"

"Not mine really to say but it's not every day, or every man, who causes that look on a woman's face."

"I know. I don't have an answer for you right now. And I have to know about Bowie. There's trouble & danger, like usual."

"So you're a spy too?"

"Is that what he said?"

"More or less. He used to be here a lot."

"Again, I don't really have an answer for you. I'm sorry." His face folds in sadness. Mr. Bob

cringes in empathy, feeling more for this man than might seem logical.

“The girl is still here. I can tell you where to find her.”

“The Ampitheatre? Don’t look surprised. I said I know this place.”

“Yes. I think so. Bowie did say keep her safe.”

Preacher stands, a tall thin man, a bit stooped, yet handsome, the handsome of years & thought & meditation, pain, reflection, a deep twist of beauty & pain.

“Thank you. I’ll talk to her.”

“I’m Mr. Bob, by the way. Charles.”

“I won’t stay long. I can’t & shouldn’t.” Nods, walks through oaken swinging door to band room, seems to know his way there & beyond.

[The weest of lines to tell how close to new work, Universe, Dad, so close, maybe hours, can it be so? Good work like I had, & more loyal. I believe so. I believe.]

viii. (xciii.)

Do I write your words or do you write mine? Whose are these then? I have no complaint for my purse, as this world operates in ways—

Well, yes, anyway.

I read your words: “Sniff the fecund world from a hid, ordinary place” & know you’re talking about pussy, about blood & consequence, about how nothing goes away & nothing returns, & so on—

I don’t want to go there, he broke me off to go elsewhere & I can’t say how that’s going when suddenly

*I look down at the straining girl’s face below me, the turquoise choker’s glint what retrieved me & I feel my cock thrusting in her, feel her riding but her face shows pain, something—
“too big” “don’t stop” “your little slut” “more!”*

I slow a touch, concealed in a heaving breath, to get a moment, she senses & her hips contract, tighter even as she’s so tight I—

now on top she is able to ride better, wanted to do well the other way but—wanted to do well?

now she rides, smiling licking her lips even, her hips spread widely & tight cunt now feeding on my cock rather than resisting—

something in me wants the advantage so I lean closer to her, pull her to me, bite her nipples hard even as I make sure every – fucking – thrust – hurts –

better—I don’t know where I am or how this—

Are you writing me? I copy out your next line: "Sniff its noise, an art, a statecraft, the intense light draping a high, hungry color"

*she's listening. Smoking a joint with me. Wearing my t-shirt too long on her. Told her no cigarettes, her tits too fucking gorgeous to rot them inside out. She nodded, nobody had ever put it to her in words she could fucking **get** before—*

Wants to suck me off again, promises to do it better, no, you've got enough of my sauce in & on your body for now—she nods—

*I want to fuck her again, in case something goes wrong but I don't—I make her pose for me—she's shy, she swears, but the hungry part of her, the lawless blood, the bestial wiseness, says, no, pose, he's had others, pose, let him take down your hair, let him adjust your fingertips to hold your tits how he likes, watching him hold & angle you & how he could be fucking you again, could be having you, willing, fuck his ten bestus buddies if he promised to **maybe** be the eleventh but no, pose, just fucking pose and—*

teach me.

"Teach you what?"

"Teach me how to write like you."

"Why would you want that?"

"Because! Fuck." Backs off a moment. "Because you get it. You get me." He says nothing.

"You could have had any girl in that place." "No." "Yes. Any smart one anyway."

"I can't teach you."

"Why not?"

"I don't know."

"Yes you do! Do you think I do this with any guy? You do know! You do fucking know!"

"No."

She stand up. Picks up her unlit cigarette.

"Sit down."

"Fuck you."

"Sit down."

"Fuck it, man."

"Sit, please."

*Uncertain, she sits. Something deep inside her cunt is clawing for more of him. Maybe he'll settle down & fuck her blind & selfish like every other guy. Their **fucking cock, glory be**. Stick it in & bring on the hosannas.*

"No."

"Please."

"Please what?"

"Please. Either. Fuck me again. Or teach me how to fucking write!" He laughs & she nearly dies. Nearly. There's no certainty in any of this, even knowing when to be embarrassed.

"Roll over."

Perfect fucking ass. Perfect, round, cherry fucking ass. He lays lightly atop her & spreads her ass cheeks slowly, speaks, close, tongue close, she is horny & terrified both as she feels him breathing slow wet words into her ass, blowing right in: "Sniff the lies in calling the stars a heaven, in praising what buries in earth as carcass, as remain." She cums so violently she finds herself clawing at him, he wrestles her down, roughly, ah yes, finally, hold her down, that's what they like, face in the pillow listening to that hoarse ball of words, feeling that cock about its business, he stops.

He stops. She's spread, clutched tightly by him, whether he wants her raw cunt again or try that ass he was blowing. What fight in her is gone save to get him in, what fight was there anyway? He stops.

She'd come back into the coffee house, forgot her cell phone in the weird ass booth they'd been sitting all night, her & the two friends who'd never been laid & kept asking about it, how much it hurt, over & fucking over. Did it hurt? Did it feel good? What was cumming like? What did a guy's cock taste like? Did you really swallow?

No. Wait. She was the other hot girl, the brunette in the tight short top & pants, writing in her notebook, at first serious, then not because she couldn't keep going like that, then saw him writing, looking crazy but really into it, & she got hot for no good reason, & then she was writing to show him that . . . she was writing too.

Then? He'd fucked her in the elevator coming up here. He'd fucked her again just inside the front door. He'd—

"Teach me."

"No."

"Teach me!"

"No."

She is still twined with him & he spasms when she accidentally licks his ear lobe. Ahh. OK. Lick. "Teach me." Nothing. Lick harder. "Teach me." Nothing, less. Lick & suck slowly, spasm she barely holds down. Ahh.

On her tummy he is writing in blood a little his, a little hers: "Sniff the world's constant hungers, drying here, new wetting up there."

She smiles. Knowing what to get meant knowing how to get it. Strangely, for a moment, she remembered Maya. Those long nights back then. The smoke, the rooms, never knowing what happened.

What happened. Wait. No. What the fuck happened?

Coffee shop. Fuck. Watching him at an awkward angle in his chair next to hers, oblivious to her, write: "The world awful with its making scents, where kind & fine, where cruel, where flesh wilds for flesh & not a coin, not a king, not a god in any skies—"

"Despite"

He looks up, catches me watching, catches me fucking reciting his fucking words. Shit. I smile. That usually works well enough. His look says no, he isn't buying it. He's about to look back down & fade

back somewhere deep inside himself when I say out loud: "Teach me."

"There's cost."

"What? Like money?"

"No."

"You mean sex? I don't mind. I like it."

"No."

"What then?"

"I have no friends in this book. No allies. I'm just telling you."

She smiles. I like thinking of her smiling lips wet with my cum but say nothing. That's for later. More than she can imagine.

"I have a friend. Her name is Penelope. We call her Penny really. She's nice."

"And."

She's thinking how much to say. Wants that cigarette. Remembers my remark about it being tit-rotters. It works for now.

"Just tell me."

"What's my name?"

"What?"

"What's my fucking name? Do I have one or are you going to just call me Swallow or Bitch?"

I laugh, she squirms. Waits.

"Do you want me to name you?"

"Yes. And one more thing."

"OK."

"Just tell me before you fuck somebody else. OK? I won't get mad, I just want to know. OK?"

I nod. A name. We both wait.

"Just say it."

"Well, two. You won't like them."

"Worse than Swallow or Bitch?"

"Ariadne. Eurydice."

She nods. "I'll settle for Adrienne."

"Tell me about Penny."

"She lives with this guy. I mean, she did. It's been awhile."

"And?"

Her face tightens.

"Tell me, Adrienne. We need help."

"For what? For writing? There's no law against it. For sex? I'm legal. I consented."

"Tell me."

"Fuck! Fine. Penny & her boyfriend run a safe house. It's complicated."

"The War. The ships overhead."

She starts. "Yah."

"I know all about this."

"Then—?"

"Will she let us stay? Awhile?"

"She's my friend. You said we need allies."

"Do you know why?"



She shakes her head. For a moment I want to let her go, & I don't. But when I don't, new dangers appear.

"Adrienne, part of the War is for control of the book."

"Which book?"

"The one you saw me writing. There's another one. That version doesn't end. This one will."

She stares.

"There's more. Do you know about the White Woods?"

She starts. Shakes her head, nearly falls off her seat.

"Maya?"

*"Fuck you! Fuck you! **Fuck you!**"*

"Sit."

*"No. **Fuck this.**"*

"Sit!"

She's standing. Getting hysterical.

"You got out. Maya did too."

Stares, shaking.

"If you come with me, be with me, we may have to go back."

She whispers: "It burnt down." Crumples to her knees.

"No."

"There's more to it."

*"I saw it **burn.**"*

"You can't burn the whole world, Nikki."

"I thought you named me Adrienne."

"No. I was wrong. You are too fucking sexy for that name. I'm going to call you Nikki Sunshine"

She smiles. Nothing resolved. Except that she's with me. In my lap right now as I write this, wiggling her fine ass against my hard cock for hint.

After I fuck her we'll sleep & then find Penny.

Jack hasn't moved in hours. Until this moment he has simply sat here, somewhere below the Bridge of Glass, with the girl's head in his lap, rocking.

She's not dead. Skin not cold. Shallow breathing. It's there.

What now. I'm noticed. I can't sit here any longer.

He nudges the girl, afraid to look at her face. She doesn't wake. Shit.

Tick fucking tock. Alright then, I'll bite—

Looks at me—

"You'll let me save her"

"A question?"

"No."

"What do you want, Jack? Go in & find out. OK?"

"I'm bringing her back."

"Which one? Both? Does it matter?"

He stumbles going in, stumbles but does not fall. Stumbles but does not fall but is turned slightly from his path. Turned slightly from his path, the angles & shadows. Turned slightly from his path, the angles & shadows, what clouds reveal in the sky. What they don't. What the

clouds reveal in the sky & what they don't & how that distorts Jack's perception—

He was supposed to be here an hour later, not supposed to arrive at this party early enough to find Penny's face crushed against a wall as the man rougher than needs to pull down her skirt & thong—she unsure, even now, even with that hot little ass on stage, even with her cunt lips wet, even—*even*—says nothing, not even a moan—maybe he will hesitate, just a moment, & it will calm down all this—no—he pushes her thighs wider apart & crouches a bit but she feels it driving into her, boring, different from Jack's, thicker, he likes letting it in her slower—thinks it feels better like that—doesn't know sometimes she just wants it *hard*—she winces at what she gets, how it feels, his breathing isn't Jack's, the way his quicks & slows, the way she can know where he's at by his breath—this man breathes steadily—no music in it—she's liking this less—liking how it came to this less—liking how this strange cock in her & the heavy pushing body against her—trying to get it deeper than her pussy—that would be fine—enough—

“Enough”

Said so softly it wasn't even sextalk.

“Enough”

He fucks harder, liking the wet lost sound of her voice, wanting her to beg til the moment he crushes her orgasm out of her—

“Enough!” Her first physical push doesn't faze him—he's too much bigger & stronger—

Then she simply juts hard & down along the wall, & his cock slips out. What the *fuck*—

“Enough”

“Enough what?”

“I don't want to”

“We're here because of you. What's this? Is Jack coming through the door? Not that I would care so much—”

“No. Not for an hour.”

He's got her pushed up against the wall, still half-dressed. She knows enough to see this will play out in talk or he'll just maul her & maybe enjoy that more—

Sees Jack behind him. What? *Fuck*.

“Get off her.”

“Oh. Hi, Jack.”

“Let her go now.”

“Why don't we share. She seems skittish”—

No. This is wrong. *Fuck* I'm in but no.

Think. Think!

It's about the Bridge of Glass, isn't it? Always has been.

I have to go back.

“You knew that, Jack”

“Thanks, Benny”

“We're not enemies.”

“What then?”

"I can help."

"How?"

"Leave her here."

"No."

"You can't take her, Jack. You need her safe. I can do that for you."

"Why did I jump the bridge, then?"

Benny laughs. "So she would jump after you." Pauses. "Now you know who to hunt down."



To be continued in Cenacle | 78 | June 2011



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Five.

(continued)

*"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.

ix. (xcii.)

"Climb enough till walking & then enough to run" Maya reads in her book, looks at me, nods, reads on: "They say the world downs every man, one day, some year. I hear it in these barroom's walls every night. One after another will stand up to the night, to the unseen overlords of the planet, shout til empty, sit again among his fellows."

"What this?"

"Keep reading."

"Which version is this. You or him?"

"I'm the one who won't fuck you along the way to getting you to Dylan."

"Oh."

"Do you have his manuscript still?"

"Yes. Do you want it?"

"I can't have what I want, Maya."

"What's that?"

"A young man's heart again."

"Is that why?"

"Why what?"

"Why you won't be with me?"

"Read, Maya."

She turns the page: "Slinking hours at a distance, a smile in gauze, the trembling talk of books." He nearly appears. Nearly *here*. "What fineness in hungers lost, streets where shoulders knocked with high plans, moon an allie, dawn's fresh page."

Here. He was! She starts. No maybe.
Dylan?

"The years drown in watching the world hustle many charms & lies, arguments for answers, the blunt lure of flesh for plumage, the driving, wild wish for warmth. Drinking hours at a distance, still wanting after what they didn't reveal."

He pauses. Breathes, with pain. *This*. This! He told her she would meet Dylan, told her they would be sundered awhile. Told her the rest will be up to her.

She curls again in grasp, this is safety, this is what she knew of it. *This*. What being with Dylan made me feel like again.

"Maya?"

"What? Fuck."

"That manuscript. Write it. Now. Hereon."

"Mine? A third?"

"Write it."

It wasn't the place I ran from, that pathetic cult. Before that. It wasn't for long. He was sick.

But—I don't know how to write this—he took me from the White Woods—I don't know what all this is—

I'm the key because I was grown for a purpose—how is this all coming back to me?

Read, Maya. Read more: "Tonight, again, I know nothing, I am nobody. Singing to manifest, crawling the dust."

I stop. Remember. "You were raised to purpose, Maya, the first of your kind to survive." I look at him & I don't know. He touches my cheek & brushes back my hair. "The ships overhead sought, seek to liberate us from ourselves, our laws, our mores. The way we divide us up by language, by nation-state, by other foolish criteria."

"You cannot breed, Maya, & furthermore the one who attempts to couple with you is rendered impotent. You were grown to be erotically irresistible to males, & to begin the slow thinning of humanity. Soon there will be others already in the population who are changed over for the purpose."

I asked him why.

"They feel it's time. This is the most merciful way."

"But you saved me."

"Not for long. Just this little while between us."

I remember how his voice went through me, softened how it felt, this horror. I don't know how to explain it. I came to him barely conscious, waked from something. This man brought me from the White Woods, saved me, sacrificed himself, to tell me what I was.

"I don't want to hurt anyone."

"You won't. You will help. It's why you're with me now."

None of it made sense but what it seemed to come down to is that I was rendered opposite of what they intended.

"You will not neuter. You will fertilize."

I look at him.

"I will give you the code. When you first couple, this code will pass between you & your lover."

I look at him still.

"It will change things. Undo all. The web will begin to unweave."

We shared the code, & I cradled his head while he died. Then I returned to the White Woods to continue on, what Global Wall thought of as his grand effort to breach space & time & recover himself, reach through the already existing history of the cosmos & rent it of his fury & pain. I was central to his plan because he did not know what I was. I'd forgotten. But I escaped him.

"Why tonight?"

"What?"

"All this? Until tonight, until I read what I just read, I did not remember any of it. Him."

"There's more. Read on."

"No. Tell me."

"I don't know."

"Tell me."

"You're going to see Dylan. You had to remember."

"So I know he's getting the code from me?"

"You won't let me keep you from him."

"What happens after?"

"I don't know."

"That man died to give me this. Will Dylan die?"

"No. Nobody will die."

"I will see him?"

"Yes."

"He loves me?"

"Yes, Maya."

"That's not enough, it is?"

"No. It never is."

"He'll be in danger too."

"He'll bear the code."

"Are you trying to get me to stop? To save him?"

"No. He's the one."

"What then?"

"There are other forces than the ships above. Other meanings to the code inside you."

"Other codes?"

"Yes."

"Will I lose him?"

"No."

"What then?"

"Read on."

"What? Tell me!"

"Read on, Maya."

She reads: "Study the web, pray the hours. Watch one man in a doorway guard his plastic bags, thrown a coin by a couple sparkling wetly with drink & easy thoughts of silked mirrors, cuffs & cocaine, stereo moans."

"Why did you have to die?"

"It was transformation, Maya."

"What do you mean?"

"I was in a man's form for a very short while. Long enough to retrieve you, give you the code to reverse the effects."

"So I will fertilize Dylan."

"Yes."

"How?"

"I told you then. To change things. Undo all. The web will begin to unweave."

"Yes, tonight I am remembering all of this. Tell me what that means."

"What Global Wall wanted, only greater."

"Tell me!"

"I can't."

"Do you know?"

"I believe."

"Believe who?"

She looks around. He's gone. However he had come back again. Whatever this was.

The drinkers turn to each other as the TV goes dark with a strange puff of smoke.

"OK then."

"So we're gonna watch them get it on? The girl & Dylan?"

"I doubt it."

"Why? We waited long enough. Don't you want to see that hot little piece get the business?"

"I'd like to be the business she gets!"

"Me too!"

"Nah. You'd break her."

"She'd have a smile on her face!"

"You would at least."

"This show doesn't work like that. You know how it is. Gets us all worked up for something but then it's like . . . the writers forget the story or something, & they go on to something else. Then, if they come back, it's all different."

"So we're never gonna get a good look inside them white panties of hers?"

"How do you know they're white?"

"How do you know she's wearing any?"

"She could have on a black g-string with a nice shaved bush."

"Mm. Nice & tight too."

The drinkers quaff deeply at this comment. Think on it.

"Bet that ass is round & priss-teen."

"Cherry for the crackin'!"

"Cmon, they all look sweet & cherry. How many are?"

"I think this one really is. You heard the show. She's gonna fertilize the boy."

"What the hell did that mean anyway? All that sci-fi mumbo jumbo."

"Well it ain't no *Star Track!*"

"Nah. More like something dark & twisted. I sometimes wonder if I'm having dreams about that show."

"About that girl. Wet dreams."

"No. Well, yah, but it's not fun. I'm not humping her. It's more like I'm one more fucked-up face in the story."

"Yah. I get those too."

"Hey, all of us then. What does it mean?"

Mr. Bob speaks up at this point.

"It means either you're characters in a book, or that you need more life outside this bar."

Pause.

"I don't mind being a character if I could have some of that. That boy's not gonna handle it. You got tight young poon like that, the man's gotta saddle it, break it, make it hurt a little, & howl too."

"Spoken like a regular barroom Chaucer."

"Look, I'm just saying—"

"Yah, you've had poon like that a million times"

"Look"

"Hey, another round. Don't worry, nobody's driving tonight."

Mr. Bob grimaces, & pours—

They're sitting together, briefly, a table, a restaurant, fast cheap food, neon, cartoon menu, the drunks come & go, it's Saturday night—

Watch a man slip from his seat, slowly, his deeper slumbering body giving over gradually to gravity, a bloom falling closed—

to the floor, it cannot be, him among his foodstuffs, tatters among tatters, no, money is spending here, commerce is chugging here, product exchanged for coin, feeding here, feeding—

the lights flash & arrive, several men in powerful costume, ready weapons, lead him outside, allow him a moment's resistance for a cigarette, then a van arrives, & he is coaxed away, there is not in him imagination or resource enough to resist—

They've sat watching, sharing in this, not knowing how or why here, or how long—

“Dylan” barely a whisper
 “Maya” barely more
 “How much do you know?”
 “I love you.”

& gone.

She continues to watch, sees another man now sitting where the other had, & another in an hour, & another in turn. Each shovels in the cheap food & departs. Despair.

No. “I love you” It’s enough for now. Not that it should be but it is.

She writes, with me, my words, her pen, her paper: “*Tonight I still beat at narrow faith, at vows thin of mystery & pleasure, I am reaching for the hungrier words to sing, to burn, to reveal.*” She, we, stop, look around.

“Will he be back?”

“He never leaves, Maya.”

“No.” Her blue eyes fierce toward crimson, turn purple.

“You want certainty in the world, Maya.”

“Just him.”

“You can write him here. Right next to you. In place of me. You can.”

More words to page, her pen: “*New sounds of the sea in my blood, next page, the way on.*” Then she writes & we spake aloud: “*Tonight I will not drown.*” Again: “*Tonight I will not drown.*” Again: “*Tonight I will not drown.*”

“You’ll like the power.”

“Like you do.”

“Maybe.”

“Is it sexual to you?” Curious, almost shy.

“It’s all sexual to me, Maya. Nothing lacks it.”

“Why don’t you take me?”

“That’s him.”

“No. You.”

I give myself a moment. “Your power over me has more to its scent than cherry cunt.”

“I can’t do this like you.”

“But you can, possibly, do something.”

“Like your Rebecca, younger? Not married to you.”

“Partially, but not all. She’d understand.”

“Would she?”

“You’re muse, Maya, like she is, like the rest since & hereon. Doesn’t slow, doesn’t simplify. I didn’t cut the path.”

“But you won’t stop fighting it.”

“The war’s in blood & music, it’s not a choice.”

“No.”

“And?”
 “When do I get to fuck him?”
 “I don’t know.”
 “Soon. Will be good for all of us when I do. Trust me.”
 I nod. Do.

x. (cxi.)

“Hope honey me again tonight, I’ve found I’m looking wrong ways for you & see none—crush between tips then fling me seeds to the shadow & breeze—”

“What kind of show is that?”
 “I don’t know. We have enough batteries to listen for a little while longer.”

“The cafes & the woods are same for the chase I keep, toward answers that murmur raise—toward answers that cause any feeling at all—”

“He sounds sad.”
 “I think he is.”
 “Are you like him?”
 “No. I have the three of you.”

He’d left, nobody’d known, but he was long gone all that, as much as this was possible. Had intended to go alone, but hadn’t. These were the last ones brought in, new supplies for a failed experiment, they’d come with him.

What had happened recently? These three weren’t afraid of him, followed him closely, listened every dear word. The oldest of them was willing, if he cared to.

They listened.

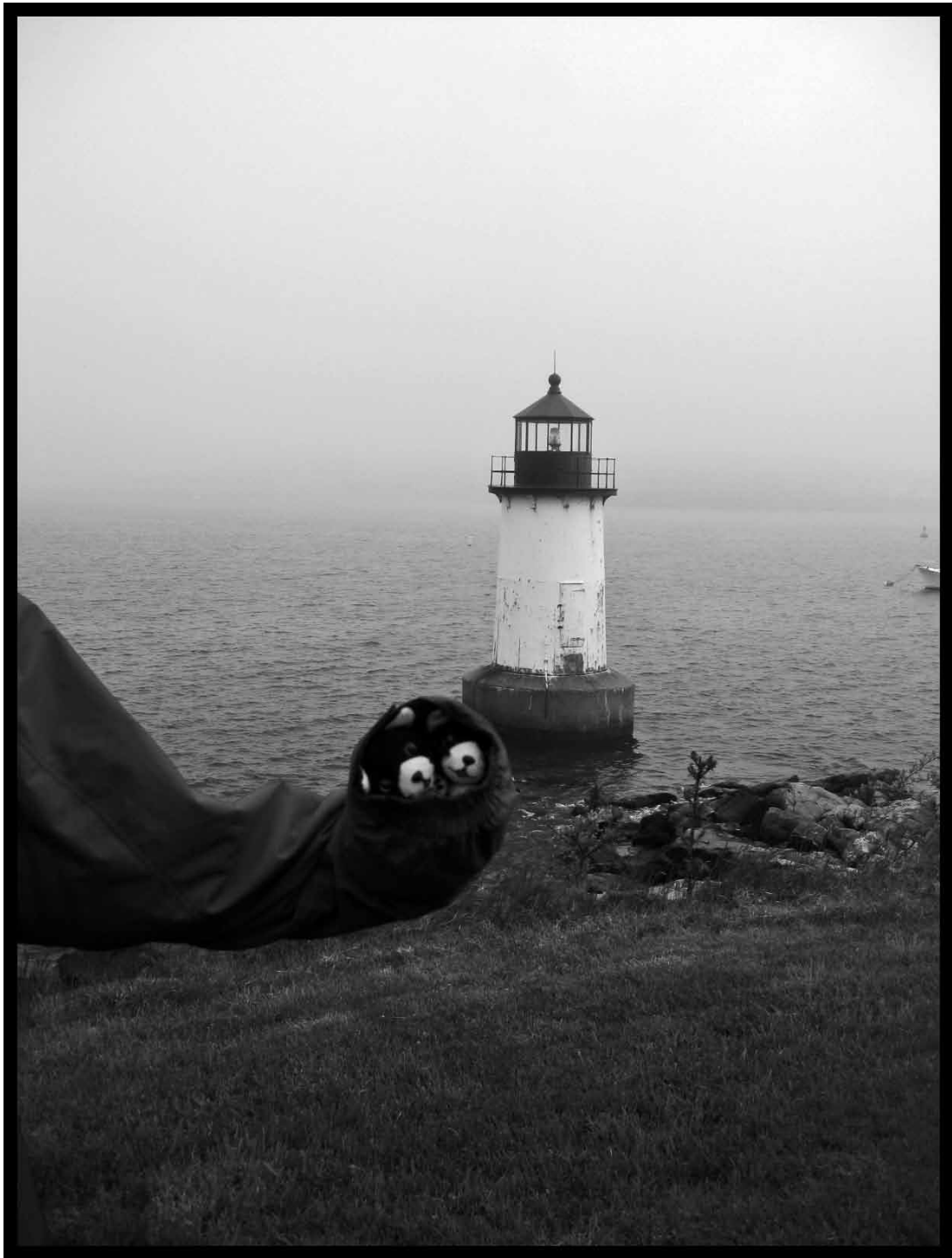
“—a travel past the hustle of a man’s deepest lies made law, music & tragedy of a laughing boozy half-harnessed tit”

They slept with him, there never had been a question. Smiled a lot at what they knew of his likes & what they did not. Lace, of course. Thoughtfulness, strangely. They tried. Remembered dreams, perhaps most.

He considered the oldest, the others knew she would be first when, if, he said so. Would wait their turns.

Next motel room requested two beds. She knew almost nothing, but he had separated her out. She listens.

“Hope hunger me again tonight, press toward one stream these hard-twined paths, answers to release the beast & explain the blow”—



He pushed the two beds together—there would be no separation—they curled around him—the radio clicked off. Batteries cost money.

They kept moving but their money was low. They ate once a day. He made it fun. He was kind. They shared him unselfishly, he'd taught them this is what he liked, what pleased him.

There were rules. Speak to nobody of purpose, destiny, or even name. He worried sometimes they might slip but they watched each other, there seemed dangers in not listening, in others & what they might do.

"Would they take us?"

"Maybe just one?"

"No."

"No."

"We don't need anyone else."

"Who else would we need?"

He planned to return to work soon. He'd told them. It was scary, strange.

"Do you talk to them like you talk to us?"

"No. They do not belong to me, nor I to them. I give them something else."

She thought about it more. Felt eyes on her. Felt things curl within her. A pressure, a slow ache. Even his least touch bothered her.

She'd almost gone with someone that time.

He talked strange. He smiled at her chest. He sweated a little.

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

"No."

"Is that your family you're traveling with?"

"Yes."

"You're the prettiest."

She smiled & the ache flamed her cheeks. She'd come outside early morning because sleeping with all of them was too much.

"Do I make you uncomfortable?"

"No."

"Everyone else is asleep?"

"Yes."

"Come to my room for a little while. So they can sleep."

His bed was bigger than theirs. It surprised her at first when he didn't turn on the lights but then she knew. It was OK. Wasn't it? She'd come in here of her own mind. He was back there sleeping. He wouldn't touch her like this, murmuring how pretty she was, how sexy, kissing her like this, softly then with something painful in him, not hurting her but she felt it, as he

pushed aside her bathrobe & groaned at what little lace she had on, groaned almost in fear of himself, her new ripeness, shhh, yes, untouched in this way, yesss, good, moan in my ear, yes, cherry as can be let's me touch, let's me taste, let's me undress, suddenly remembering her old man, what was it about him, something, something that had scared him, made him want to pluck one of those blossoms for his own but here she was, not knowing what to do next but by his guidance, willing but—

“What’s wrong?”

“Go back to your room”

“Why? I was . . . liking it”

“Go now.”

“Why are you mad?”

“Go now.”

He dresses her, sheafing as much of every inch of all that as he can, without touching, without breathing, something wrong in all this, very fucking wrong, this is a set-up! *Is he a fucking cop!*

She leaves guileless & his whole body heaves at the sweet weightless look on her face as she closes the door. He packs, he dresses, he leaves in a white panic for whatever the fuck *that* was he doesn't want to know & does want to leave it five hundred miles behind by noon—

She returns to their room, to their bed. Silence.

“Touch it.”

“What?”

“Touch it now.”

He'd left at that moment, that break in things, when all changed & little noticed. He'd dreamed something was coming, that there was a way out—

or had he caused the silence, the agreement of some kind, the hushing empty of sound? He knew too well what time wasn't, what little it truly lorded, how—

her teeth gnaw him a little too painfully & he convulses—

“I'm sorry!”

“It's OK.”

“Are you hurt?”

“No.”

“I'm really sorry.” Nearly crying.

“Some like a little pain.”

“They do?”

“Yes. More than that even.”

“Do you?”

“Sometimes.” She relaxes a little but does not continue. He notices the breathing in the other bed. Both are awake, watching in the dim. Listening.

What he knew was that the White Woods never ended, never ends. He knew this & yet others did not, & lived without this knowledge. Lived & perished.

So was knowing an advantage?

She crawled up into his arms, half atop him. Within reach her young round ass, untouched, her small perfect breasts. Her pale thighs & bare rose pussy. Long dark blonde hair, aching pretty blue eyes. If he'd positioned himself beneath or above her, entered her deeply, she'd have winced, let, eventually enjoyed. The listening pair would know this was what to do.

He instead held her lightly, something in this, something else.

Why had he taken them with him? What now?

How had he gotten out? The more he tried to order the events the more they did not make sense.

What would he preach when he returned to the stage? His grand project had been a failure.

What he'd learned was that time lords over at least two things: mortal being & the human heart. Maybe, from what he'd read, the heart of any even slightly conscious being.

It hadn't worked, going back to that moment before his heart was first damaged, he could not undo it. It wasn't clear what had happened but it was like he was occupying his own young body with his grown adult . . . soul? What word?

They could not co-exist & he overwhelmed the boy. He pulled back because filling the youth with all he brought with him had overwhelmed him, with some wonder, more despair, great sadness. Too much. Before he could break apart, self-destruct, Global Wall had retreated back.

There was fire, disruption, a sense of invasion & destruction. Of course he had known it would happen & used what he knew to withdraw all that mattered. What burned was not his compound but simply the White Woods they occupied. And White Woods do not burn.

She's kissing down there again, learning, wanting to learn, her soft lips make his cock ripe quickly, painfully. Licks his crown with her sweet tongue. Positions her mouth better to take more of him deep in. The others watch.

He didn't like to think he'd essentially run away. But nothing had mattered after the failure. The spirit of the place quickly failed. His man warned him to decide: renew his work or let them all go. Of course he knew his man had betrayed him, in a sense. How else would Maya have escaped?

Yet she'd come back. And everything still failed.

His thoughts go blind as her sucking smooths & deepens. Somehow she has crawled on top of him, moved so her cherry cunt is near, wanting him to enjoy her too. He licks perfection once, twice, then comes with overwhelming force, quickly & hard & severally, she starts to choke &

tries to climb off.

“Swallow it all.”

She fights panic, breathes through nose & chokes down his come. Feels his tongue gently sliding inside her & tries not to wrench. Having swallowed most of it, she more easily gets the rest of it. Then his tongue does something, touches some part inside her, & again, & her body thrashes from deep within & she cries out. Again, that touch there, again. She comes so hard that she nearly crashes off the bed but for his sudden saving grasp of her.

The others, fascinated & terrified, watch motionlessly.

The TV station flips to a live scene of cheering, 150,000 or more cheering for a tall thin black man who stands alone on a large stage speaking.

“Yes we can!” he cries.

“Yes we can!” he echoes.

The crowd at Luna T’s Cafe’s bar, glad of their TV working for once, cries out thunderously.

I sit apart, thinking to myself: I’m so happy I made it to this night. For so long I’ve walked among the resistance—at times hardly more angry than hopeless—& it didn’t even seem that things needed to be so bad—nor had they always been—yet the days & months & years did not cease them—soon even the rotten leaders were mauling each other, shifting blame all around—I don’t suppose any of this was unique—humans greed for power & yet rarely keep their ideals & decency when it’s been won—

Will this new leader be different? Perhaps. If his desire to do good remains more powerful than his weaknesses—if he keeps to the high road he tries to walk—if he is terribly lucky. If he keeps his heart lined with hope & his thoughts close to the single fate the greatest to the least of us takes a hand in authoring. If his mistakes are few, acknowledged, kept as lessons & reminders. If he remains humble before the world’s many mysteries, even as he inspires many to suckle their juice for knowledge & pleasure. If, finally, those who made him their leader feel, most of their hours, that his gestures onward are toward what each of them can reach, & better likely reach as a strange & various whole. I wish him the good fortune we each of us deserves.

We keep moving, it rules our hours. At first I let this be enough, & they accept, they are with me, with each other, all is adventure.

What of their other lives? What indeed. It had been years since I’d done the legwork ahead of acquisitions. Didn’t know or care toward the end. They were fuel, all was fuel. Then it failed.

It failed & I was back.

Now I was with these three & we were . . . running? No. I’d set it to consume itself back to root & seed. Even my man couldn’t undo it. He didn’t know the plan.

Only Benny knew. Or rather only Benny knew where the plan originated. Benny wasn’t telling.

So we’re not moving from, or at least fleeing—toward then?

They don’t ask for the longest time. Then, not long after the first time I let her suck my

cock, she boldens & asks.

My temptation is to swat her. I don't. Redemption wears a thousand thousand faces.

"Do you want to go home?"

"I. No. No! Please!"

"Relax. I was just asking."

"No." She wants to say more, her confused heart without its own language yet, her newly enflamed cherry cunt.

"It's OK."

"Are we in trouble?"

"With who?"

"I don't know." What she wants to say is, can you keep touching me & start fucking me soon, without it going wrong? Somewhere something's wrong & I'm afraid.

"No. We're going to see a friend of mine."

"Who."

"His name is Benny. He's nice."

She wonders if Benny will touch her deeply too. Wonders if she'll like it. Wonders if I can read her mind. Dirty girl.

She's nearly in tears & my gross imaginings don't matter for how much truth or bullshit in them.

She needs instruction, or think she does. "Take care of the others when I need you to." She nods, solemnly. "Don't worry. You three belong to me." Within she still leans forward, eager, brutally hungry for that additional word.

"When they're ready, they will join you with us." She nods, takes it. At least she gets more for awhile.

We keep moving. It's not that hard. Our van is electric. I charge it on rest-stop wall-plugs.

Seeing Benny doesn't require travel of course. It shouldn't.

How to say this. Benny *hides* these days. He's paranoid. We're going somewhere he'll trust to meet me. Maybe meet my girls.

I consider them again. Not a burden, more a mystery. Exactly what a darkly ironic god would let me end up with.

They watch me. They adjust as I wish. There is a lover's wish to please in each of them. A tendency to envy the others their amount of attention. Then cease that when I frown. Expectancy without facts. Curiosity. Some sense of gratefulness I'd call weird if anything. Essentially, we are tribe however I wish to define.

Benny has always been leery of me, of my project, of my ways, how I move between worlds

"You shouldn't be able to come here"

"Others have. You know the idea of Dreamland is misrepresentation. A ruse."

"Not a ruse. A protection."

"Protecting who from what? You are on this side of an illusory wall & you've found your mission in reinforcing that illusion."

"But you—"

"Yes and others"

"Not many. Not often."

"Yes, you've said that. Often."

"I've never known how."

"Do you think it's one way? Some conceptional hole in the dyke you can plug?"

He smiles. "It won't work, what you're doing." Loved telling me this. I denied him every time. But he was right. At least my approach was wrong. Or my execution. Timing? I don't know. What I do know is that things are different. I had many; they were fuel. I have three now. They are what my man was to me. Or maybe that's what I want—

The oldest is too curious & the others follow her lead. They discuss who Benny might be. What begins to disturb me is the youngest seems to have an idea. I overhear her tell the others one day what she thinks. In truth, I leave them alone from time to time with the motel room bugged. Some things don't change.

"Where do you think Benny lives?"

"A big house. On a big hill."

"On top of a mountain?"

"No," she says. "He lives in the woods."

"What woods?"

"The ones in my dreams. We're going to the woods in my dreams to see him."

So I take notice of her. I think that's what she wants. Eventually I begin to think that's what she intended, saying that. I tell the oldest that the others should take their turn with me.

"Why?"

"Fair's fair."

She pouts. A pout some would pay gold to behold beside them in a bed.

"It's what I need to happen."

"Will Benny keep one of us?" she says suddenly.

I see my opening & strike. "Not you," I say. It works. Her smile confesses this. Bag-o-gold smile.

Two rooms. I purchase us two rooms at the next motel. I have to know & what methods I use are uncertain. Any, all, new ones. I instruct the other two to prepare her for me. Ribbons, I nod. Lace & cotton. Make-up, no. Not even for their play.

The oldest one glints, she misunderstands that the girl is being prepared to go with Benny. The middle one may know a bit. But not much.

The room is lighted by candles & mellowed by strange, low music. She enters, alone, & shuts the door with quiet finality. Is ready, is resigned, is eager? Will please.

"Turn." I sit in shadows. My word catches her & she stills, now notices that the room contains no bed. Candles & mirrors & disquieting smoke. The distracting music.

She does a full turn. She's blonde, her eyes crimson, hair, in loose braids, partway down her back. Her body is untried but I can sniff its fecundity, its coiled readiness to be steered, possessed, in turn a cry, a moan, now possessor.

"Bend" The older one dressed her well, her nightgown perfectly bears her small, round breasts, their pertness is erotic, nubile, a challenge. The slope of her thigh is smooth, perfect. Her hair recalls me again as it drifts to one side & the countless candles illumine the several fine bones of her neck, shoulder.

Though moving in an abstruse environ, mirrors, candles, smoke, she finds me, kneels before me. Seeming ready to serve, to please.

"Who do you belong to?"

"I belong . . . to you."

I restrain a violent pulse & breathe.

"Who is Maya?"

"Maya?"

I lightly grip her lace frock & tear it open, her sweet breasts now half showing. She does not flinch.

"You belong to Benny."

"No."

"Don't lie."

She looks at me with a dignity not possible for a girl in a torn nightie on her knees. "No."

I breathe. Twice. Relax. The music calms me. Reaching forward I pull the garment over her head. Now in white panties, crimson roses. The oldest one's touch, her comment.

"And the Bridge of Glass?"

She stands, moves nearer me.

"The White Woods?"

She is now in my grasp. Her skin's natural scent drowns me of smoke, of music.

"Preacher?"

She takes my hand down, curled with me, my hand, down, among the crimson roses, to one bud perfect of all, shining, now wetly, my fingers touch as her mouth nears mine, this is poison I think, poison, the world's poison, perfect rose, touch, touch deeper, she moans inside me, & what gives way——

xi. (cx.)

Night flashes through me, an anxious traffic, among human spillage from taverns——

Maya stops writing. Wishes to leave this place. Dylan wasn't here. She didn't want him here——

She writes: *Dreams to come of hawks high on empty arroyos, & babies a soft mystery——*

no—the code. She starts. Tries to remember how girls are supposed to dress. Not like her, too skinny in jeans & Hendrix shirt. Her favorite. She knew about him, how much he liked girls &

music. She'd heard him laughing on the radio, it was nice, even shy—he was like Dylan—the code. Shit.

She writes again: *babies a soft mystery in my arms, dreams of tomorrow's fractured news.*

Stops. Watches the girls in this place, their clothes, their smiles. She's not them. Doesn't want to be. This isn't much of a thought yet—

She writes: *Universe I am asking for help, & strength, for the best of what's left in me—*

What I was, what I am. There are some who understand, many who don't.

I think—go slow—I have to act with strength—even if I don't believe I have a lot—I'm not who I was but that's only partway.

Someone staggers up, drunkenly, smelling of streets & piss. "Got fifty cents so I can get the bus?"

"Sit down."

"No. No trouble. I just need a bus over the bridge."

"Sit down."

He sits. He's drunk, hungry, poor. His bag doesn't look to have much.

"What's your name?"

"Just fifty cents" he whispers.

"I'm Maya. Tell me your name."

"It doesn't matter."

"It does to me."

"I can go."

"No. Stay."

"I don't want no trouble. You're kind of young for this."

"For what?"

"Nothing. Nothing!" Now he's starting to panic.

"Sit" she says quietly.

Terrified, he sits back down at their table.

"Thank you."

"No problem."

"What is your name?"

"Dean."

"Hello Dean."

"Hello."

"Do you remember my name?"

"Mary?"

"Maya. It means illusion. Or dream, or play."

"Oh."

"I need to find someone, Dean."

"I just need bus money."

She takes his hand, it's not so much dirty up close as a well-worn hand, a laborer's hand.

"You're going to take me to him."

"Who?"

"Dylan."

"Who?"

She leans forward & he looks ready to cry.

"Dylan."

"Where is he?"

"The White Woods."

He leans back & laughs like crooked teeth. "We're all there."

She stares at him. "How do you know about them?"

"I live on the streets some nights."

He nods, mumbles to himself, forgetting her.

"I want you to lead me to him."

"Why me?"

She pricks his eyes close to blinding.

"You look dangerous & crazy. I look young enough to be your daughter. That will be enough for most."

His body feels shot full of iron bars.

"When you help me find him I will give something back to you."

"Everything I had is gone. Look at me."

"No." Her look holds him close but not painful this time.

They stand up & leave before the store manager can reach them.

xii. (cix.)

Where the strength to elude the Beast & win the hour? I ask & ask again. Mend fractured wishes into Beauty, slip through heart's hungry maze, blow up in new song?

I feel these hours rent of energy, each word sometimes just the labored breath of pushing along.

I feel weak & mortal awhile & stumble within, grope for the novel & find little—the power seems elsewhere—or—so—it seems—

Space. Imaginal space. The best of it. The rest. Malleable. Give a little push. Feel the push back. Give another. It gets easier. Just remember. One minute to the next. An hour & another. Push, push back.

Neither slave to a passing struggle nor a helpless moan blaming coin, king, & cunt in defeat. Push, push a little more. Imaginal space, & ask: imaginal space?

World blooms through wars, through every flesh's cry & fall. Through the hours won, lost, & abandoned, world blooms, open hand, & a wish for each, no matter what I am, no matter what you are.



Your choice now, Bowie, man or mushroom?

I glare about me Universe & say something more, something else, something new. Glare about me not wishing to control but partner, collaborate better in this making, in what possible, how much more could be true.

I glare about me & wish to know better how to move, move aside, move through—

“Benny, how?”

“Asking me?”

“Asking. How?”

“Not less. More.”

“More what?”

“Don’t retreat. Work harder. Push & push.”

“Not let go? Release?”

“No. Not enough yet. Not nearly enough.”

I nod.

The day’s news headlines told of one nation invading another, & a general’s boast of how many targets awaited, we will crush you, crush you, the firepower we bear is goodly, Godly, each explosion speaks our blood vengeance for every dark memory, every wife & child we’ve lost to you, every home & marketplace, we will crush you & more, you will never harm us again, our God-possessed weapons will annihilate your bodies & your very souls, your way of life, plots & plans, what you believe, what you love, what you hold waits beyond this world, feel this anger that our countless generations have cumed, the cries of our rent mothers & fallen kings, & baby-faced soldiers with their limbs & guts gone, feel it, feel *us*, each of us, as we crush you, destroy your crops & your roads & your bridges as you have destroyed ours but you did so with a false god, thus a false premise to your idea of who would finally vanquish whom, for you see you are the evil we speak of in our sacred stories, you are the other, the terror beyond hills & woods & dunes, what we train our children to loathe, to fear, to cry out in fullthroated triumph as it is destroyed. Your soldiers, your women, your soldiers, your old men & women. Your kings & presidents. Your artwork & sacred books. Your calm scenery & Sunday outings. You cannot live that we may. We may, we *must*. We *will*. You are whom we vanquish, & how our God will praise us & bless us with eternal prosperity, with fruitful lands & newly married wombs. Our preachers gesture us toward these hoped-for days, *a month & a year & a century after we have destroyed you, & others like you in this world about us, & others to come in other times. Peach will come fully & finally when you are each & every & all dead & we the blessed, we the people of the true god have no more fears to worry about when we walk our children in the park, pray in our houses of worship, gather for trade in our marketplaces. Ever & ever. All of you must die. Our true God allows us no other option ever as your false god says the same. Blood speaks one truth. Our God speaks one truth. Paradise builds from your graveyard.*

xiii. (cviii.)

Someone sang, “Knowledge sums endless, wisdom ever gives way,” & pointed to the countless drummers & their dancers crying up the dust. Nodded, sang again, just a word, “Beguiled,” & fell into the storm.

Dylan watched, this was before, he watched the singer sing, & point, & nod, & sing again, & fall into the storm.

The was before he looked at me.

“You follow him into the desert, & then cease to follow.”

“Why?”

“That’s my line.”

“I’m asking.” He’s polite. There’s none of the violent sexual combustion just Maya & I talking brings. He’s asking, he wishes to know. Perhaps I know. Or should know. The last bit of sarcasm is not his.

I nod. “This is a story.”

“Fixtion.”

“Yes. Your word from a long time ago.”

“Yes it is.”

“To fix.”

“Yes.”

“Fix what?”

“Fix the world, I guess. Or just fix me. I’m not sure I even fully knew. Or maybe it’s just changed over years.”

He nods. I like him, closer up. He’s not a natural hero or protagonist, but he’s honest & there is a level way he has of speaking, moving, thinking.

“I envy you.”

He laughs.

“You’re young. You’re in love.”

“I’m your character. I’m you, chased through a few kinds of mirrors.”

I nod. That’s more a phrase I would use than Dylan.

“Shall I go?”

“Yes.”

“Can we talk again?”

“Yah. It’s OK now.”

“Can I ask . . .”

“Yah.”

“Is there more to this than me fucking Maya finally?”

I laugh. I shrug. He goes.

—followed him into the desert, & then ceased to follow, the songs leaving slowly, each song a named bit of my heart, for Maya, for Cordelia, for John, for others too, each leaving, slowly, & the apologies & the love chants, the many cries I’d known as my life until then—

I ceased to follow after a time, &
I ceased to look apart from stars

& mountains & ground
 Ceased to worry on all I did not
 & could not know of the world
 Ceased to concern so much with
 where I wasn't & what I wasn't—

The desert storm I walked into & through was a dream, a blinding emptiness, a force I resisted until I didn't—what was this? What was left?

Maybe panic—maybe—maybe I thought of the old man from back when—

“I'm with you, son”

“I don't know all this & I accept this.”

“And you don't.”

I nod.

“Good, because while you live & breathe, you'll fight on. Now turn around, you'll return here but not yet, not now. Turn!

Dylan lets go—hard, soft, deep, where the pain lasts, lets go, looks directly back at me & lets the fuck go—disintegrates but the last of him—

A room—crimson lit—dark wood, low, richly soft furniture—two voices—cohere & fuzz—

“Maybe he had the right idea. Some think so. But they want more. It's not about pleasure, or revenge, anymore. It's about departure.”

“On their terms.”

“Yes.”

“But—”

“There is opposition?”

“And that?”

Holds a pink radio, shaped like a cat. “Yes.”

“And?”

“She was bred for one purpose but now there's interference.”

“How strong?”

He looks up, had been stroking the radio softly, thoughtfully.

“Some disagree we're past hope, past the choice for change. They let sentiment push for another answer.”

“Well?”

“There's no return. No redemption.”

“What is your plan?”

“Let them find each other. Let them all come together. Let our defenses weaken enough for this to happen when it would not otherwise. Let their union & collaboration & hope be built on what will undo them all.”

xiv. (cvii.)

High on desert. Endless labyrinth to go.

High. On desert. Endless. Labyrinth to go.

High on desert endless. Labyrinth to. Go.

High, on desert, endless labyrinth, to go.

High on desert endless labyrinth to go.

High on. Desert endless. Labyrinth. To. Go.

The desert & the White Woods & the labyrinthine & *Trip Town* & **RemoteLand** & the No-Tell are many glitters from the same stone. The Bridge of Glass. The roseate lit room. Luna T's Cafe. The Ampitheatre. Dreamland. Different musics sung by the same pipe, the same voice. The several scattered manuscripts of this book & its kin sheaf of poems, & other earlier, & perhaps later, manuscripts.

Maya & Dean are walking along the heavy trafficked avenue, a cold winter's afternoon fading, & Dean feels this is something other than he's known in a long time. This woman, still a girl somehow, but not completely, picked him for this. Whatever this is.

He asks again as they sit on a bench in a park where the homeless come, camp sometimes.

"Why me?"

"I've seen you before."

"Where? I don't remember you."

She hesitates. "You fucked me in a dream."

He stands, ready to run. "No! Hey! I never!" Starts to back away.

"Sit." Her word is quiet, seats him before he knows.

"It was you but not now, I don't know when. You were older, powerful. Clean."

He winces. "Hey. I do my best. Some of these people got veins like sewer holes. I only take my nips." Pauses. "Too many but only nips."

"I don't know what it was but when I saw you back there I knew you would protect me. I knew you would help me & protect me."

He looks deeply at her. Curiosity & fear.

"Genes & chance number up the world, between extinction & the long cry for a familiar god's knowable craft."

His mouth gapes.

"What were those hours between scents, between the chase & the cage? What else haunts blood & bones, & talks nightly in dreams?"

He stares in horror.

"You said that to me."

"I wrote that, Mary!"

"Maya."

"A long time ago."

"You said more."

"It's OK."

"Then you fucked me."

He flinches. The word from her lips hurts him. She doesn't like saying it but she needs his attention, needs him to *pay the fuck attention* right now, & on & on.

"What do you know about the White Woods?"

"Enough to stay away when I hear talk."

She frowns.

Dean breathes deeply. And again. Hasn't liked the taste of liquor in a long time. Thinking more & more of two things: the far past, & how to end this.

There was promise in the work he had done. Whatever vision this girl had, & whatever recognition she'd had of him back at that restaurant, she didn't know who he was, had been. She'd been drawn to him in part because he was not wholly gone, there remained a sniff of other years, of possibilities—

For awhile he had taught, not as a vocation but as a . . . laboratory for his ideas. He sent them out among his students to see what those eager minds might return to him. They assisted, they learned, it was exhilarating, if not what any of his colleagues was doing.

There seemed to come each new school year, one who would be his prize student, bound for great things only hinted at in classroom talk & papers—& another who would be his piece—bright, somewhat unmotivated—curious, lazy—looking for a thrill—over the years his seduction method streamlined from a dozen steps to a few—& he'd learned how to abort cleanly as well—

Such fucking hubris. Thinking he had things so easily controlled. Thinking a nice piece of young ass came as one of the pleasures afforded him for the work he did—

how Benny fucking laughed at him—

how Cosmic Early—

the open lanes to Dreamland closed—only a controlled few—

how that girl—

"Dean"

"Yes."

"We need to go."

They leave the park, walk along, he doesn't know where. He can't long protect a girl like this on the streets. She's a little scuffed but still cherry in some profound way. And Dean, who never sniffed a legal cherry in a nice pair of jeans he would not make a play for, bears no such interest in her.

Protect her. Protect Maya.

He stops. A crowded sidewalk, street corner, near an old large bookstore.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Maya."

"No. *Who* are you?"

"Maya."

"How do you know about the White Woods?"

"I was there."

Dean staggers a little & Maya catches him, strong grasp, leads him a little shaky into the bookstore, its cafe. They sit at a table among readers & laptop computers. She settles me down in my seat, gets me a cup of coffee, no, tea, I haven't tasted tea in a long time, coffee is what shelters & churches offer. She looks me over, mindful of others not because their opinions matter but for what danger they may bear. They're harmless, Maya, there is not an awake mind in this whole cafe. They read books like they eat food, their tastes exterior, bred into them, their reactions practically quantifiable, that predictable.

They *closed the fucking free lanes!* I want to scream this & I don't. Maya watches me but patiently. There is no guile in her, nor impatience for that matter.

I probably know where we have to go. "It's a town," I now speak aloud, softly, slowly. She leans nearer. "In the middle of the woods there is a clearing. In the middle of the clearing, in full moonlight when its temple becomes clearly outlined, there is a desert. Within the desert, its center & far reaches alike, there is a town." I close my mouth & ache to stop there. Ache not to say its name.

"Wytner. Wytner is *Trip Town*."

She stares. "It's where we have to go."

Some hours later I come to. New location. A room. A bed. Roseate light. Maya in a chair.

"You're safe. It's OK. I got us here. This is the Hotel Noah."

xv. (cvi.)

Rosie was the one who found them, Paula had wandered off. In truth, Paula had been entranced by the amanita muscarias but none of the others.

"Look, Rosie! They're like Smurf mushrooms!"

"Yah, P."

"But red not blue."

"Sure."

"Are there blue ones too?"

"Only in the cartoons."

"Oh."

She'd wandered off after that. Rosie kept looking, covering the ground & trees & bushy areas as systematically as she could. They were by a tree. Strangely, opposite sides. Rosie got a feeling as she suddenly saw the first, then almost accidentally the second.

Oh. Two.

Together somehow. (Together, somehow?)

I see them, I fall through it & see them, you, both of you, how you met

met? how mushrooms met?

No. For this moment, I see something, I see it clearly, I am with both you, there—

You, who? There . . . where?

You were young men, older than me but not as much as now—(?)
 you were new to each other—
 new to some world you'd both entered—

I saw you, I bound with you, with both of you, I bound you too—
 something happened among us, I fell through—
 it receded after this flash—for a long time—flash—this flash—
 rainbow & lightning—

Preacher was no spy then—I was—or so the paycheck said—so we joked—it was a joke with
 a paycheck—waiting for something more—

No—I lived in that lunatic house of hers, that dirtbag room among many, for a reason, I'd been
 sent there—you just lived there—

Going forward in the story makes it no less sweet—but that first night we talked—we talked
 & talked & talked—that rooming house, the second floor, where the kitchen & bathroom
 were—we sat there drinking from a bottle I had with me, your Joe Camel coffee mug, my
 Mickey Mouse shot glass—your whiskey on rocks, mine neat—

Actually, Preacher, you cooked for me. I'd come up to use the can & nodded hello in passing.

“Nice smell.”

He laughed. You laughed. Which?

“It's cheap pasta. Three boxes for a dollar. But I find things to add. Seasonings. Spicings.”

Yah, you old fuck. You added pinches of psilocybin & cannabis, among others.

I nodded. “Mange” & smiled.

“Have you had your dinner?”

Shook my head no. Some nights I'd drink my fucking dinner & wash it down with a
 whore's long rented tongue.

“I always make too much. Every time. I start out famished, cook too much, & end up
 with some in that pail.” Nods to garbage can.

So the bottle & tongue would both wait. I sat with you, let you fuss. Nobody else sat
 at that kitchen table to eat. The owner had her own apartment none of us ever saw. She was
 actually why I was there, but that's a less important story. I'd figured out what was going on
 in those unseen rooms. Pretty kinky shit. Well, sort of. What's really kinky in this world? Her
 niece in home porn movies, a whole set up. She was so coked up that she probably thought
 those men in masks fucking her in turns & groups really were some kind of über-daddy. I
 ended up doing something for her that helped, but, again, Preacher is setting a paper plate in
 front of me. No plates or silverware in that kitchen.

He was hungry way beyond the food in front of us. He was hurting. This sharing
 between us mattered. I didn't know why. We drank water from the sink until I fetched my
 bottle.



Did you even sip that night? I wonder. Did I refill your glass? Did the ice melt & the vessel overflow with unsipped drink?

Thing is, Preacher, I wasn't supposed to tell you *anything*. And I told you nearly all.

That girl. I remember how dead her eyes. How delicious that body. I sent her to a man, made her enter the building & go up to see him.

Shit. Which story. His or hers? Well, I suppose they were ongoing. That's what's strange.

I sent her to be cleaned by the man in the room full of stuffed animals.

"Will you love me if I go?"

"You need to be cleaned."

"*Will you love me?*"

I should not have answered you, much less made anything like a promise—but you wouldn't go—

"Bowie"

"No."

"Bowie!"

"No."

"Look at me."

"Christa."

She smiles. My heart drowns. She smiles.

"No."

"Yes."

"No!"

"Look at me!"

"How?"

"It's just for a minute."

"How?"

"Listen. Closely. I'm safe. I just want you to know that. I've learned how to do a few things. Like this."

"This?"

She smiles.

"I know you are deep in. I know what you're trying to do."

"What?"

"Save Preacher. Help Rosie. And more after that."

I start to cry. "I'm sorry. Did Gretta explain?"

"Some. But I found out more too."

"What?"

"I'm going to help you."

"Help me? No! Stay safe!"

"I can do both. Don't worry. You're not alone."

"Do you love me?"

Different eyes. The building with the man in the room of stuffed animals.

"Yes. Go."

Fuck. Would I like to take that back. You would not have become a spy like me.

Our conversation was tentative at first, though I enjoyed the food more than I had any meal for a long time. I think watching the girl get fucked over & over again on surveillance had finally gotten to me. I was losing track of something. Something really important. It wasn't written down for reference.

She kept getting purer for me. Each time. Later I'd beaten every one of them to death, I'd found them all, they are all dead, every one who had entered that room & touched her, & I made the landlady watch, bound, on a TV monitor, as I held court, as each one was brought in, chained, blindfolded, given his single hour to explain, then was castrated, out of the camera's view, by hour's end so heavily drugged that bleeding to death was an inevitable smiling path—

"You didn't do that, Bowie"

I confessed each one.

"Why did you do it?"

"No."

"No wife? No strip bar with a set of willing whores?"

"No."

"I'm going to clean her of each & every one of you. I'm going to scrape time off her."

"No."

I'd make them listen on headphones to the sounds each had made fucking her. I made each one feel how it felt. I injected into each an IV needle with a psychedelic cocktail of my own brew that transformed each gagged bound blindfolded man into a helpless, drugged girl, I'd tinkered with it until each man felt herself dressed for the evening in ribbons, in cotton, in costume, he felt herself waiting in the dank room with the cameras & lighting cues—he felt how his cock felt entering her—the ones who tried to jack hammer her into crying out & how she didn't, each man diminished into this, & the quick slice, & the bleeding out, & with each she was cleaner, & the landlady watched, on a monitor, each man who had paid her, sent to her from the hotel, its overflow, its too-demanding customers, its special cases with wallets thicker than any evil wish—

"No, Bowie, none of that"

Preacher had been appalled, beyond words, beyond anything. Bowie's room was like a secret command central of monitors & audio equipment, easy to uncase for surveillance & to re-case into his few possessions. Still monitoring. Every moment in sound & vision.

"She'll try to kill me too years from now."

"Who?"

"The girl. The one they're fucking in the landlady's back room. When I finally take it all down, & free her, & send her to that man to be cleaned up. It will happen eventually. She'll feel I took something from her worse than those men."

"I don't understand."

"It doesn't make sense. But, see, it does. We'll meet years from now, when she finds me, literally

becomes a spy to find me. She will approach me in a bar, as though casually. A rock club, one I will frequent then. I even have a lover, shit, more than a lover. Someone I feel for without a need for words. She will approach me one night, when I'm alone, when I'm restless, when I can't stay, when I can't fucking leave."

Preacher nods. Whatever this is, it needs to be said.

"I would not recognize her. You. I don't, at first. What I had stopped, those awful nights, I'd replaced, with other nights, the man who'd cleaned me. You left me with him, thinking I'd forget you eventually, the first man who was not paying to fuck me on film.

"Here's the thing. Any kind of life becomes what one knows, the worst of them. There were little things about that life, small things I liked, demands I made of my aunt, ways I came to more & more control what was going on. You felt I got purer as you surveilled, yet distrusted this truth, what a strange thought yet it came directly from your heart. It *was* truth. I fucked my way from victim to something else, I watched, I learned. These were businessmen, there were talking hours, I learned more as I went along, a question here & there. It was a familiar meal to a number of them, a trust between us. Did you watch all those hours of tape? Did you listen to the conversations after or did you see the fucking & miss the rest?

"I accepted you saving me because I was going to leave anyway & your way was blunter, less messy, & not my fault. So when I needed contacts years later, pieces in the path to find you, I knew people who would help me, friends of the men you killed."

"You are not going to kill them, Bowie," Preacher says quietly. Our meal is done, he steps away from the table to wash out his pot & return it to the communal dish cabinet. Is thorough, fusses this cleaning. Sits again, I've freshened his drink. Nods, go on.

"I tried to tell the man with the stuffed animals. He had his orders from you. Clean me up. I still wonder about all that. Brainwashing, hypnosis, psychedelic drugs. Sensory deprivation tanks.

"It would have worked if he had fucked me. It's really that simple. He wanted to. I understood men on that basis. I didn't have to fuck every one, but I did have to fuck every one who wanted me. Honestly, prick-crazy, wanted me. Bowie, did you notice which men kept coming & which didn't? I sorted through them. The ones who didn't want me I weeded out, made sure I wasn't what they wanted. If a passive girl, I came on hard; if hard sex, I lay back & took it, grunts & silence. The ones who wanted me I discovered, learned how to please, taught how to please me in return.

"But he would not fuck me. He was more afraid of you than he wanted me. I felt his heat *every fucking day* as he cleaned me up—

"See, that didn't help. I was young, I was attached to you & I figured I could fuck my way back you. You had *saved* me, but now you didn't *want* me? What the fuck was I for? I *was supposed to be yours*. I was supposed to fuck him over & over until he brought me to you. I would have done it. I knew him better than any had before because it was a mistake for him to take me. He'd done it for you. Done it for old kindnesses. You'd put him in that room. You'd understood him at a critical moment in his life & he owed you.

"It was wrong. It didn't work. I didn't fuck him & eventually I left there & I had to find you other ways & they were worse ways."

"Bowie," says Preacher, "I want you to listen to me now."

Bowie nods.

Preacher begins talking now, softly, maybe a primitive version of the way many to

come would know him for. Spoke too softly, started & stopped too often.

“Whether yearn for a coupling or a coin, the din of days is the tapping of a heart’s empty bowl for notice, for some token it can keep, some pittance will survive its miles, swathe its nights—”

Paused. Stopped. Damned stopped. Bowie listened.

“There are old promises, Bowie. One uncompleted that we never forget. She will feel that you do not complete that promise & will thus hold against you. What promise will you make her, Bowie?”

Bowie starts, does not say however. He knows.

They were partway from the aunt’s house to the man in the room full of stuffed animals. Bowie was taking her there himself, then he was going to leave that city.

“I won’t come with you, Bowie.”

“No. Not yet. We will meet again sometime later.”

They will sit somewhere together, a pause, a breath.

What promise?

“Do you love me?”

“Will you come for me soon?”

“Why can’t I stay with you?”

“Take me somewhere & fuck me. You’ve wanted to every night you were watching. You don’t intend to deliver me to anyone. You’re going to ‘clean’ me with your own hard cock. Good. It’s what I want to. You took my life away from me & now I’m yours.”

“Do you love me?”

“Do you love me?”

“Do you love me?”

xvi. (cu.)

The night is cold & reminds me of a thousand other nights & surely this should be comfort & yet is not—

Tap. Tap. Nothing comes.

Tap. Tap. Try again.

Tap. Tap. I do not know.

Tap. Tap. I’ve never known.

Tap. Tap. Others claim.

Tap. Tap. Claim sure truth, sit at kitchen tables, stand high in pulpits, re-load guns, smile in the room’s half-gloom & another go before sleep—

Tap. Tap.

Amid this curtained savagery, the lies explained as loyalty, discarding the man to keep the idea, *the hunger for orgasm even a full moon cannot sate*

& Art will not explain

& call tradition the praising of today’s shit because it smells like another’s—

Tap. Tap. Tap fucking tap.

How the spirit moves caged in a book read from a pulpit by a man who dreams of adding his come to the flames burning down the heathens' village—

What not tonight, what lack, how not like a thousand other nights?

“Brave talk of God’s love as a mystery not a bondage. Brave talk of the world as gift & game enough for all. Brave talk of another in question & early morning curiosity.

“Tell me of a hope that does not rest dependent on another, or a despair that cannot be cut with a touch, a barking, hungry persistent word of empathy.

“Love’s long blind reach into the dark.”

Still, nothing.

Return not to this page or the next til something.

Something like the conviction that this desperately fucking matters & has to continue

I watched a strangely smiling man several days, the street corner through the window.

He was dressed ragged, one of his sneakers was crushed in its heel, he carried a filled plastic bag, a black plastic bag in his arms. I noticed him as I notice other poor folks, have for years.

The crushed heel. The strange smile. The black plastic bag in his arms. I watched him while the traffic light changed, then went along another way from his.

I could only think: this memory is, in true how to continue this, how to write this book necessarily—

But where his path other than a homeless shelter? What his bag but all of his possessions? What the connection here but my partly cerebral, partly emotive fascination with the destitute?

A friend of mine would say to me, in the depths of ancient drunks, in the far reaches of our ganja mullings, & other times too: “all is not as it seems.”

Not a really comforting line, if chased along awhile. A threat to happy hours as well as suffering ones.

Parsed from another perspective, one could say that *much is as it seems* but *not all*—

I suppose I work best in the less or lesser places of uncertainty, where there is give, where not all is nailed down solidly.

A single line additional: Love’s long blind reach into the dark. The power of love. The mystery of the world.

Tap. Tap. I do not know.

Tap. Tap. I’ve never known.

Tap. Tap. Others claim, & will fall.

Tap. Tap. Nothing comes. Try again.

What had Paula drawn that night, eating those shrooms with Rosie—

Bowie moved her hand for a long time, she drew beyond whatever she'd ever tried before, dreamed possible before, she felt her blood pressing hard toward her skin, through it as heat, a hard, almost crackling heat,

Rosie had laughed & mocked but then watched, quieted, this was not more of Paula's half-ass scribbles, Paula with something like a talent but no discipline, & no real deep ideas to follow along—

Here was Paula drawing from gut, from dreams, from places in her loins untouched by anyone—here was Paula seeing through time itself & Rosie——she——

xvii. (civ.)

There are traps, there are doors, sometimes they resemble each other,

Global Wall decides it's time & begins to plan. The subtle shifts with his girls give him enough confidence, not a lot but enough to work with. They need money; he left behind just about everything, money foremost, it being the blood trail that could be followed—

He thinks it over harder than anything else. To return to the stage: it must be done rightly, perfectly.

So much to say here. He now protects these three in a way he has never done with anyone, including himself. He protects them, he molds them, he teaches them. Their existence is huge in his life, brings him a peace, a sense of content he's never had. He does not understand it. Yet here is something that is powerful. They will see Benny Big Dreams as he has told them, but not in the way he'd intended.

He was going to leave them with Benny, hide them in Dreamland while he figured what next. He'd thought he could work better with them safely somewhere else. He'd been wrong. They'd taught him this.

The youngest one was not the betrayer he'd feared, but a powerful being. He'd learned it that night in that motel room, alone with her.

He was still not sure what had happened. She'd . . . taken him somewhere, shown him . . . more than what he knew. It came down to—this—

All his years had been a kind of arcing toward redemption, building a revenge that breached time.

It had failed but now he understood better why—

Said poorly: nothing goes away, nothing returns. He would never get back that youth, the then before he had been harmed. What had happened, had happened.

But—again put poorly—there were ways, other ways—in essence, use the pain, transfigure it—become what would by most reckonings be impossible—change a past utterly—

More to it than that—it hurt his head to think—

In that room, that night, that perfect ass of hers, he'd been so deep, her biting his hand

as he thrust, hand cupped under her small tits, squeezing very hard, thrust, a moan, again, a moan,

or had he only seen this in her eyes?

or had those men been watching, some filming it?

Eventually it was morning & they were all curled together in their room, & the three waked all at once as they did, & tickled him awake, as they did, & cleaned up the room, as he'd taught, not a fingerprint, not a stray food wrapper, wipe it down like life itself was at stake, & then they showered, together, giggling, as he preferred, & the room was spotless, & they'd left, & he carried within him a lesson unlearned—for more days as well—until the middle one, dark-haired—

Hiding them with Benny, no, not a chance, he'd be much less without them, he would not make it & Benny would keep them—no—

The first group he spoke to was small, in a library meeting room, as a new author selling a book he only had an unpublished manuscript of—it will be out next month—we can take orders & ship them if any of you are interested—every one of them ordered at least one—

it was the girls & Global did not get the how of it—these were small-town blue-hairs, Sunday church & missionary position the night before—it was the girls because in truth he was no small town preacher or New Age hustler—he said heavy things in his heavy way—yet—

They dressed similar but not the same—they'd crawled over him like hungry puppies convincing him of this—he'd bought what they'd wanted—almost the last of their money—but when they girded him in that stuffy windowless, library meeting room—

And how had it come to be full? What had drawn that crowd? Global was not in charge anymore of these details—what he thought he knew was that they'd driven into town, got a motel room like usual, & while he thought they all napped, these girls had—

but that made no sense—how could such young—

It was when he started to speak, ah, that Global Wall became himself again—all their efforts for this—they did not, could not, *didn't want to* affect this—it was the purpose—

He was thinner then the last time, so long ago, & his stage was a professor's podium, one he pushed aside almost immediately—& his purpose—what was it? The money? They liked ice cream, they needed socks, motel rooms & gasoline was expensive—no—yes but no—

He speaks. “If a dream of many moons in the sky, what else then? What more than sitting in festive groups staring one another for the hour's favorite quip? What not men among the roots?”

Pauses, Repeats, greater: “What not men among the roots?” Coheres a moment, his girls are nude around him, their long hair down, the blue-haired women gaped, some plainly drooling.



Blinks. No. they'd sitting near him, facing the audience as he is. 'Tis believed they are his daughters. Not said, not once, & none knew their names by his longtime instruction, but—

Resumes: "What not men among the roots? What new stars among ceaseless lonely want to fertilize the world with more?"

He'd dreamed these words, he was dreaming thousands of words these recent nights, they'd arranged this for him just to blood him of some of these words, he'd cry out in the night for their bloat—

The youngest has unbuttoned her amber jumper & white blouse, begins to dance near the first row, a slow deeply undulating dance, her white bra unhooked & half fallen, she lets a bluehair tug on it, teeth bared, angry, hungry, pulls it off greedily.

No! He breathes. All wait.

Speaks. "Many moons in the sky, in dreams & otherwise. More then celestial formulas or a guru's solemn-named day, else than the heated bestial grunts of age picking over youth's glinting bits."

He is sweating, breathing hard. All are listening, waiting, he has to hurry this a bit. It's been a long time, it wasn't like this.

"Waiting the foothold more luring than a new lover's thoughtful recline among shadows. The first word of the song stars know better than men." He nods, staggers, his girls catch him before anyone notices. Events happen, he loses track. They are back in the motel room, all naked together. There is a pile of cash money on the dresser. Their clothes are rinsed & neatly hung up. The room is not lit. There is quiet. They are close. They *must stay very close*.

xviii. (ciii.)

Acceleration of space, transformation of time, ah, that way this time then—Jazz nods, knows it's not so important either way—

She's had to assemble a plan with Ashleigh & the boy in tow—she rarely names him in her mind—calls him Toby to his face—

"That's not my name"

"It is when I say so"

He's scared of her still, but sometimes less—she shows him how she can hurt him without touching him—with just a smile—

"Say it"

"I'm Toby"

"Again"

"I'm—fucking—Toby!"

He won't break easily this one—but it's necessary—she needs more than a slave—she needs to break him & reinvent him—this won't happen easily—

Ashleigh is worse—is a mess—

“I don’t see woods, Jazz.”

“You don’t see anything really”

“Why are you doing this?”

“I’m going to get you out of her. Toby is going to help. Then he gets a reward.”

“Yes. That’s all you’ll say.”

The problem is that they can’t see what Jazz sees. They are watching the lie that is the made-up world around them. Like living in a TV show, living inside it completely, not knowing it’s a fiction, she doesn’t know how to unbind them—

She thinks of her hours, her nights with the Master, then tries to stop that, that does no good, & Toby is no help, like a decent sized cock attached to a brick, he’d fuck her if she wanted, but—& he’d fuck Ashleigh if Jazz let, but—

Oddly, more & more, she thinks of Global Wall, of what she could remember, is envious of what he built, probably evil as it was—

probably evil—ha—she’d like an hour with him—suck & fuck out his secrets of control, dominance, transformation—

“Jazz”

“What?”

“Do you have to do that?”

“What, Ash?”

“Lie in bed like that, naked, touching yourself all the time?”

“Want some?”

“No! God! What the fuck!”

“You’d be better than Toby.”

“Jazz, shit!”

“I don’t care if you watch or he does.”

“He’s terrified of you. He leaves when you do that. Honestly, don’t you notice us?”

Jazz sits up. “Notice what? What have you ever done to notice?”

Ashleigh sits down on the bed, a hard old motel bed. “Jazzy, we have to go home.”

“And where’s that, Ash? Which way?”

Ashleigh says nothing for a moment. “I’m afraid of you too. I don’t understand any of this.”

“Which this?”

“What are we doing?”

“We’re escaping the White Woods”

“Why is Toby with us?”

Jazz laughs. “You don’t remember his name either. We should just call him ‘dick on a stick.’”

“Why did we take him?”

“Because it could go worse, really bad. I don’t know. He’s big, & maybe he will be useful then.”

“Jazzy.”

“You don’t know anything. You don’t remember anything.”

“The White Woods. Global Wall. They pretended to hurt you to fool me, so I would stay. A

prison of girls who were brainwashed to like it. Global Wall using them to build a momentum to cast back in time. A Beast. Maya.”

“Yes. A Bridge of Glass. A TV show called *Trip Town*. A movie called **RemoteLand**.”

“Jazz, I saw *Trip Town* once; it was dumb. Slow & made no sense.”

“That’s because you’re fucking blind!”

“Why aren’t you? Why did you get away? None of this makes sense! A hotel with no roof? An old writer you might have fucked while sleeping to get you here? A Master?”

Acceleration of time. Transformation of space. Takes awhile but now sometimes Ashleigh too lies naked across the bed. Toby hesitates, still leaves. He’s not there yet.

Jazz tells a story, a simple one, to push Ashleigh beyond her perceptual blindness. It has to be possible. She could be an allie but she has to *see*—

“There was a man & a girl.”

“Did you know them?”

“No, Ash. It’s a story. Listen.”

“This wine is sweet. Don’t you want some?”

“No. Just listen.”

“OK. A man & a girl. Sounds about right for you, Jazzy.”

“I was sitting in a restaurant.”

“You were?”

“Watching them outside on the street corner.”

“When?”

“It doesn’t matter. Just listen.”

“OK. I’m sorry.”

“I watched them talk then part. He walked across the street. She hurried down the sidewalk. Neither looked back.”

“Oh.”

“As though that easy.”

“Yah.”

“I watched it happen over & over.”

“Oh.”

“I sat there & watched them part each other over & over.”

“Oh. What do you mean?”

“Over & over. I watched them.”

“You said that, Jazz.”

“Over & over.”

“OK. Yes.”

“I watched them part over & over.”

“Yes, Jazz.”

“Close your eyes, Ash.”

“OK.”

“Now sit with me in that restaurant.”

“OK.”

"Are you there with me?"

"What does it look like?"

"Big windows. A street corner. Pancakes with strawberries."

"I love those!"

"Lots of milk & sugar in your coffee."

"Yes!"

"Now look out the window."

"To the street?"

"To those two. The man & the girl."

"Where?"

"Look. Relax. You've finished your pancakes & coffee. We both look out the window. We see the man & girl talking."

"Is she pretty? What is she wearing?"

"Long blonde hair. A light blue dress. Ankle boots."

"I see her! She looks like you!"

"Yes. She looks like me."

"But how?"

"You sit with me here & see me out there."

"I don't know."

"You do."

"I do."

"I want you to say something three times for me, Ashleigh."

"OK."

"Acceleration of time. Transformation of space."

"Acceleration of time. Transformation of space."

"Again."

"Acceleration of time. Transformation of space."

"Again."

"Acceleration of time. Transformation of space."

"Do you see me out there?"

"Yes. I see you."

"Do you see me sitting with you in the restaurant?"

"Yes. I see you."

"Both?"

"Yes. No. It's not both, Jazz. You are here. You are there. But it's not both. There's one of you."

"Yes. Can you hear me as we speak here in this restaurant?"

"Yes, of course."

"Can you hear me as I stand on that street corner talking to that man?"

"I . . . yes. Of course."

"What am I saying?"

"You are telling him goodbye. But—"

"But what, Ash?"

"You don't believe this, do you?"

"No. I don't. Why am I saying this?"

"You . . . you need him to despair . . . for awhile. You need him to live & act in this despair for

a time. Till you return.”

“Why am I doing this?”

“I don’t know, Jazz. I’m sorry.”

“Now open your eyes, Ashleigh.”

“Oh. Holy shit! What was that!”

“You’re starting to see.”

“*What was that?*”

Jazz smiles, a real smile, first in a long time. Well now. Well, well.

xix. (cii.)

I’m in. It took me more to do this than I can say or anyone can know. I have ideas about this place. I don’t know if I’m right or could even figure this out.

Hotel Noah. No-tell. I know the different names. The rumors. They say the help is all homeless & recovering addicts, they live in a segregated part of the building, can’t leave without permission, some not at all.

The room is—let me start before that. I’m writing this down. I haven’t done that in a long time. I used to do it, it was my work, my calling, my fucking passion.

Then I did it more often with the bottle in hand. Then it was the bottled without the writing.

And, for awhile now, the bottle’s been gone. I finally stopped cold but it was ending long before that. Like it was ticking down & I just had to wait.

I was a reporter. That’s what this is about, probably, mostly. Not all, but I was a reporter. I was good, for awhile I was really good. Then it got weird. Got weirder & I began writing with the bottle nearby, & so on through as I’ve already said.

Thing is, I knew I had a . . . thing for the . . . other side of daylight. I was a good reporter because people talked to me when they thought reporters were toxic or just shit.

I had an empathy. I saw people’s suffering & had a way of working with it. It won me respect, some friends, some snitches, a few lovers. A few . . . others.

I knew about the place back when it really was just about whores & coke. I was here a few times. Yah. I was. I say it here. I liked whores. Didn’t like coke as much but sometimes the two went together.

It was the booze not the coke that dragged me low. And it wasn’t the booze save to keep me numb from the weird shit. What then. What was all that?

See, what all that *was* is what all this *is*. This place wasn’t weird. The weirdness came here, with the money, the renovations. The addicts & whores were here first, now they staff the place as maids & janitors & doormen & kitchen help & so on. It was a shrewd thing to do. Bring the weirdness in, give it a big pretty house & don’t kick out the previous shit-eaten tenants. *Hire them. House them. Pay them well.* They’ll keep mum about what they see so their own pasts stay buried. It’s a subtle, devilish arrangement. Staff the lunatic asylum with former patients.

So I’m not here unnoticed. Nobody holds against me here. I’m remembered as a guy who was an easy touch for a dollar & never gave away a source. I wasn’t one of them, but I was OK.

Thing is, what I’m really wondering about, do they know what’s going on here? Do

they see it, feel it? Some of them? They must. Or maybe not. Dogs are loyal no matter the master's ways. So maybe but nobody would tell if I asked. Hate me a little for trying.

The room is—see I saw how it all was coming together. That Red Dog place. Global Wall's speeches. I saw it. Here's the problem. When he bought me finally, I misunderstood the price.

And I know she's here tonight, somewhere in this place, or somewhere related. She's never left, he never intended her to, not with me, not ever, & I don't think she did.

She's not why I'm back but she's not irrelevant. No, see I lost something or, fuck, maybe everything here & here is where I've come to reclaim it. She may be part of that. I don't know yet.

The room is—why do I feel compelled to write “transformation of time, acceleration of space”?

Put it another way: maybe just to delay finishing that damned sentence: my dad told me a story, maybe more than once, it seemed to guide him or explain something to him about how the way things work.

First him with the bottle, then years later we shared. We didn't make it to when it would have been just him with the bottle again.

He'd pause, the story would always come on him deep in a drunk, sometimes as a crescendo, sometimes it would just bust right into the middle of things, but either way it's like it would possess him & he had to tell, do its will, he breathed by its leave & would tell. Something. Fuck. How many times did he tell it?

“A man smiled & leaned against another man, said, ‘this is my land, brother, but I'll hire you to work it for me.’” He'd sip from his drink, or pull at one of those thin Cuban rum cigars he'd get. Tasted like dung to me. Next bit of the story was for me. “The second man heard his baby crying & checked his options. None.” One time I really pissed him off by saying that “none” with him. “Asked his pay.”

Now it could have ended there. I mean, a moron could get the point but he strode on, every time. The story breathed him in & out & he just damn well strode on.

“No freedom in working another man's land as he counts. Nor freedom in striking him down!” He'd get ruddy-faced, spittle flying. Like I needed persuading, didn't agree.

“Freedom's not found in a coin or a crown or a cross.” Sometimes he'd add “or a cunt” or substitute that for one of the others. What that it, no. Course not.

“Freedom's hour come when none above, none below,” & he'd finish off the drink & pour him or us another.

The room I'm in is where we slept together. I haven't seen her since I woke up from that dream & she was gone. Her, her clothes, her things. Even her scent, none of it in the air, or the bedclothes. I woke up from that dream as though I'd gone to sleep in that bed alone, checked in to that room alone, no girl, no lover, nothing.

I looked for her, I ate my career whole & spit it out friend by friend, contact by

contact, favor by favor, but nobody remembered her, remembered me with her. Nobody. The whores, the addicts, the bell boys, the maids.

I look at what I've written here & see that I've said those old days were weird & that the weirdness came later. Can both be true?

She was a gift for what I did for him. Really, what I didn't do because of him. I left something out, something damning. In return, he gave her to me. It seemed to be what all three of us wanted.

I couldn't get near him after that. Of course, I actually set it up, as the favor to him. I hadn't wanted to see him again so I'd destroyed our ties. I had her. He had what he wanted.

What I didn't know was whether or not it was his choice or hers. I couldn't know. It was a betrayal of two by one or one by two.

I think of my dad's boozy old story because this being here again is about freedom. I'm not sure.

Of course earlier I wrote I was pretty sure she didn't intend to leave with me either but I always dig into that & remember our last conversation & that dream.

I remember it was the most peaceful sleep I had in a long, long time. Freedom, Dad, that's what it was. Freedom from dreams, just sleep. And if I woke I'd feel her warm flesh, her deep breathing, the knowledge, if I needed more, that she was sleeping exhausted & happy from how hard I'd fucked her. She was *mine*. *Finally*. That last night there weren't any others.

It wasn't like the price was easy. I sold something out to him for it, for that freedom, for me, for her. He needed to disappear his operation completely & I had access to the people, to the *mechanics* of disappearing.

She passed between us as payment, as what purchased my actions, or, really, my lack of them. I knew what he was doing. I knew that he could not erase his trail completely. I knew what last steps he intended to take, & how to make them fail. I failed to act, or, rather, I acted slowly. In the time I delayed, he was delivering her to me.

She wasn't as happy as I'd thought she'd be. I figured she was tired, though it didn't stop me fucking her. I must have thought I was inventing fucking that night, or reinventing it. I would have fucked her kneecaps & ankles if I could have. I probably tried.

Later on, I let myself wonder if being exchanged like that troubled her. If she resented me. She was payment, what I demanded. A shapely piece of coin.

No. That last conversation. That dream.

xx. (*ci.*)

She told me, you told me, you'd met a man not long ago who was looking for a girl, not you, no, he didn't look twice at you that way—he knew who—he didn't know where—

How did you meet?

It was somewhere, maybe several.

This made no sense. I listen again, but it's what you said.

Her name is Maya, he told me. He didn't like to say her name, didn't offer it up. But I asked, & he twitched, & he said. It's like he had to answer if asked.

This made no sense, either, but it's what you said next.

That's when I wanted you to stop, a little. Maybe I remembered something, about a man, about a girl. Maybe I was fucking paranoid as fuck. You were with me, here, this same

fucking room, this bed.

Shit. Now I can smell you. It wasn't the perfumes, all that arty flowery shit. No it was the smell of you when you were sweaty & exhausted from fucking. From loving. The smell in your hair when it got dirty, when I told you I wanted you not to shower all day, go around a little bit ripe, & think about me showering you that night with my tongue, every golden inch—

fuck fuck fuck——

Maya—it was when you said the word *Maya*—you didn't know—that's what I'm still trying to figure out—you were there—in the White Woods—Global Wall's secret empire of young pussy—but it fell away, all of it, that night, piece by piece—

He told me it would—

She won't remember—she'll remember other things—just listen, nod, it won't be hard to fill it in—she's with you, she loves you, she's happy—

He told me that but it was the story—I'd pretty much fucked you til then—at first our talk was fragmented—

til that story—*do I have to learn this again? Are you here? Did you ever leave?*

He seemed so lost. He was going to find her but he didn't know where she was. How do you do that?

I rolled you over on your stomach, I spread your ass cheeks, my cock deep slipped very slowly inside your ass & you moaned & you protested & you moaned again, I pushed in deeper, into your very tightness there, my hands helping you to spread your ass wider for me, & a very softly spoken word *dontcum* & you lurched because you were so close—*so fucking close o god it feels good—o god o god dontcum no please yes o god o god fingers find your wet bare cunt & did things to it, several things to it o god o god o god dontcum O God O God O God O God*

I was dreaming somewhere far where breezes blew cleanly & constantly all day & *I was at my canvases, I was slowly reversing something I'd gone too far I had to undo there was too much blood too much I'd overshoot—*

A radio played a lecture broadcast from the ships overhead: *“The need to fuck, the need to piss, the breathing, the beating, the fury toward what beauty these autumnal hours—”*

Dontcum Dontcum Dontcum

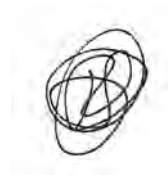
o god o god o god o god o god

When I finally let you relax on the bed, & positioned myself over you that my cock could enter your ass as my hands crushed your tits, & the word came then, words, but they were not mine & I could not stop them, they were what did all this to me

Find Maya. Protect her.

I pushed your head full into the pillow & I fucked you for over an hour til there were no whimpers or resistance. When I woke up you were gone & I had two things: that dream of the ships overhead, & your instruction.

There are others here, & nearby. Tonight I am saying, love, I am no longer hesitating. I will find Maya. I will protect her. What are the ships overhead? Where are you tonight?



To be continued in Cenacle | 79 | October 2011



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Six

*"The bud
stands for all things,
even those things that don't flower,
for everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing:
though sometimes it is necessary
to reteach a thing its loveliness,
to put a hand on its brow
of the flower
and retell it in words and in touch
it is lovely"*
—Galway Kinnell,
"St. Francis and the Sow," 1980.

It was the breathing of the others that brought me to, nobody was crying at first, just breathing, & I moved a little & felt the bindings. I panicked when I felt the air cool on my skin . . . on a lot of my skin. I think I was naked, or pretty close, & it was like my legs were parted & my knees bent. I swallowed my terror & tried to remember, breathed slow like it was my only hope to live five seconds more, tried to remember:

Someone said: "God punishes sluts like these but he takes too long. We pick up the slack."

But then something else. There were always drunken hillbillies around, you just moved in numbers & they kept away. Most were too stupid.

No, there were others & they hurt those hillbillies.

What . . . what?

There were others here with me. I try to adjust my eyes to the near dark to count. Three, maybe four. Of course, our dates aren't here.

The bindings don't hurt but have no give to them. My wrists are held at each side of my head, my ankles are clasped too.

A whisper: "Are you OK?"

"No, I'm not fucking OK!" I say suddenly, brave a moment then realize I'm a fucking moron.

The others shush me with panicked grunts.

Time passes. Crying does no good. There's nobody to beg with our tears. We don't say anything.

The worst thing is that these aren't my friends. Whoever took us assumed that. We were all dressed alike, all in a bunch but I didn't really belong. "I have a fucking brain!" I want to scream & don't. My brain isn't spread wide, is it?

There's something I'm missing. I'm groping & realize it's drugs. We were drugged & it's still affecting us. Fear is wearing it off but slowly. Maybe when it's gone they'll return.

It won't help but I try to suss out where we are. There's four of us, that makes sense. No escorts,

that too. We're in a room with no windows. It smells . . . clean. Anti-septic? I think I'm on the floor, a blanket under me, my wrist & ankle bonds bolted to the wall & floor. The others are restrained in the same way. We're lined up; I suppose with a little light someone could stand in front of us, walk back & forth, consider our wares.

I almost laugh. These three fake tits peroxide bimbos & me, the sci-fi nerd in a borrowed party dress.

I hope it's quick but I don't think it will be. I don't feel like I was fucked when I was out, so why would someone rush it now? I'm admiring him, or them, putting us side by side isn't helping us team up; fuck no, every one of us is hoping he'll use up the others & get exhausted.

Him. Them. No, him. Boys share sometimes but not like this. He might have had help but we belong now to just one. He might let them have a taste but we're his. We're not gagged so he doesn't care if we scream.

I wonder what he's like. I want to know his name. I hate him & I'm afraid of him, but not completely. I—

"Hey, can you move?"

"What?"

"Can you move at all?"

"No. I'm fucking chained like you."

"If we can move closer, maybe we can free each other."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Shhh. We're trying to help."

"Who the fuck are any of you? This is what bitches like you bring on us."

"What the fuck?—"

I start to lose it. "I was so fucking stupid to go with you! I mean a fucking retarded moron."

"What's wrong with her?"

"With me? We're fucking chained here with our cunts positioned to be fucked! Maybe this is your fun—"

The yelling is actually good, it clears my head. Also, I was pissed. I also see, or hear, that they are terrified too, & they're not unified. Every chained girl for herself.

Even with a clear head, I don't see an escape. Will he go down the row of us, so the others have to listen? I don't think so, but I have no reason to believe that. One think I know: he'll do as he pleases when he wants to.

I almost decide to sleep when there is a small noise. The others cry out, stifle their cries right away. I wait. I listen. I don't think it's him.

I don't want a fucking minion. Some fucking shaved head who dragged us here & now gets his taste.

My thoughts at this point don't make any sense. I have no choice in any of this & I should be ready to beg and scream.

I think of Jazz & Ashleigh & the things they told me. I should be with them not these dumb fucking cunts.

It was in my childhood & I've never been sure it was a dream. A big house by water & a foot-bridge. A city skyline in the distance.

There was a girl sometimes. Pretty, blonde with pink streaks. Her name was Maya but I called her something else. She called me Christina. This was before it changed of course.

Thing is, about it being a dream or not, I didn't live near a pretty house like that, or a stream, or a foot-bridge. There was a city but its skyline wasn't like this one, which was like castles. Mine was modern, steel & glass.

I was a lonely child, big glasses, chubby, shy, lived in my books & head. I didn't care why Maya

liked me. She did. She really did. She said I was a diamond in the rough. I liked that. I remembered that. I remembered when I started going to the gym on my own, learning to work out. There was money I had, so I paid a trainer nobody knew. Ha. Nobody knew how much training I got then.

I remembered when my body was tight & I learned how to dress. Then I learned more than that. I never left my books entirely & I began seeing in high school how people began dividing among the brains & the bodies.

So what the fuck am I here? It was a dare. A stupid dare. The kind Maya warned me about when I was still a diamond in the rough.

She said *pretty girls play the pretty game.*

What's that?

Who's prettier?

You!

No, I don't mean that, I mean they play games at who's prettier. There are reasons for this.

What reasons?

Well, they think it's for the boys, to win their attention.

Oh.

But it's more.

More.

It's about power, Christina.

Oh.

Just be careful.

What do I do?

*Remember that your power is not in how you look to others
it's in here (head)*

& here (belly)

& here (heart)

& here (loins)

& here (hands)

& here (feet)

When I hear his voice finally I think I am going to break down. It's Kinley. Kinley!

The one teacher who mattered to me in high school. The *only* one. Not because I fucked him—there were a couple of those but they didn't *matter*—no, Kinley taught me.

I thought about it. I decided either he was gay or I wasn't smart enough for him. Maybe he just wasn't into young pussy but shit they *all* were, even the women.

Not Kinley. He was there to teach if he had to tolerate a full front row of miniskirted crotchless shaved beavers to do it.

He was on a mission. Sometimes he seemed desperate for us to learn, or even one of us.

I think it was me.

Now I hear his voice & it hasn't changed. I'm sure it's him.

I start to reassure the others then stop. Why is Kinley mixed up in this? I hear his voice but he's tied up, not coming in here yet.

I think. Kinley would say there's no center to reach toward nor edge to fall off. I didn't think he always believed this.

Kinley, a sex maniac? Well, sure, maybe. But I don't know.

These others weren't in my high school. They probably don't know Kinley.

Is this about me then? Was Kinley trying to get me & they got caught up in it?

But why all this? Why tie us up & position us for fucking?

Kinley. *Fuck.* What?

Think. Think. Was he married? All those bathroom bitches knew shit like that. Maybe. Divorced? Separated?

Something. Not quite yes, not quite no. Think. *Think.*

If Kinley wants to fuck me, that's fine. Even tied up, even an audience. Fine. But the why is the part that bothers me. And I think I hear other voices. I don't like to think of Kinley with partners. He moved free, back then, I could tell. Had worse shit to think about than popularity in the staff room.

So much sex in that school. Maybe I knew it better than most because I moved around. Not sure how I eluded the slut tag, but it was my grades if nothing else. Maybe "secret slut." Maybe I didn't care.

The teachers I did fuck didn't know Kinley. One figure me out though.

"You'll do any dirty thing for me, won't you, baby."

I nod wetly, wishing I could just snap off his nice prick from the useless rest.

"Just so long as I don't fret you calling me Kinley when you cum." Laughs. Fucks me harder like a cock can make me forget his comment. It was like that.

Then Kinley's class. Came in & threw open the windows like he was choking.

He taught different classes or with him it was one class but someone else would call it Science or History or Literature.

Same books. Every time. Huxley. Rilke. Rumi. Dickinson.

A noise. The girl next to me is crying.

"What?" I say annoyed.

"I'm scared."

"Of what? Sex?"

"They'll hurt me. I know what it's like."

"What's it like?"

I don't ask wanting to know or fucking caring. I'm trying to remember the dare—

"It's getting breasts and a new step-daddy all in one year"

"Yah." I hope that shows I don't care.

"He'd get me good & drunk. I got so I'd do whatever he wanted if he started in right when I got home."

"So you seen it all, huh." A little humor maybe.

She starts crying again, like they stole her from Mother Superior's own godly arms.

The dare. It was me & the least stupid one. I offered to help her study. She offered to teach me about guys. I accepted.

Now, Maya, why did I do that?

You're lonely. You'd like a friend.

Yah.

You're curious what another girl knows? Compare notes.

I nod.

Maya laughs.

Thing is, I could accept this as a bad night, or as a night when Kinley walked back into my life. *Not both.* Fuck no. I don't want to watch him with any of these things. And, fuck me if I don't want to be watched with him. The only boy or man I cared about back then, partly because I couldn't get him, but it was why. Not love for another woman, or man, or whatever.

Kinley had an idea & that was his goddess. If I could have gotten to it, put it on, jumped in his bed wearing this idea. But I couldn't get what it was.

He didn't seem to like it, or even want it always.

It's one other with him, I've figured that much out. This situation is making me madder, & strangely jealous, more & more.

I start to doze. It's dark. I don't care. Then a voice.

"Why the X?"

"What?"

"Sh. Why the X?"

"Oh. I don't know. Something different."

"That's it?"

I talk loudly now. "Look, my two loved ones growing up were a girl in my dreams who *might* have been real too, & a teacher who everyone but me thought was insane, & then he disappears. *What the fuck*, Kinley."

The other girls scream but, with a word, silence. I don't know what word, again.

"Go on."

"Go on what?"

"Take it. Rough, soft. You went to a lot of trouble."

"No."

"Yes."

"We had different reasons."

I nod. That makes sense.

"He's out for awhile."

"Bringing friends?"

"Maybe. We have to go."

"What about us?" the others start going bat-shit when they see Kinley is untying me.

He looks at them. "I'll tell you honestly. Get them all drunk, they'll be in & out before you know it. Empty their wallets, call it a night."

He & I leave like that. Just fucking like that.

We drive awhile, in silence. Am I supposed to care about those girls back there? I guess, but I'm thinking Kinley's advice sounded good. Sooner or later enough liquor will put a man out & if you can give him one hard ride along his way, whatever you want is yours to take.

Fuck, 'stina? Is this what I am now?

"Don't worry."

"Kinley, stop the fucking car."

"Should I turn around?"

"No. Just stop."

"OK." He waits.

"Just tell me. What was all that for?"

"I told you. Different reasons."

"Tell me *yours*."

He's silent. That deep silence before something that matters is said. I wait. I don't even think of it as waiting.

"I never should have let you get away."

"When?"

"Back then. I knew what you were."

"What was I?" I say it & regret saying it simultaneously.

"Sorry."

"It's OK."

"What would we have done?"

"What we're doing now. Without all this."

"Why all this?"

"You couldn't know. It had to be this way."

"Why?"

"Look, it's what it is. I want you to come with me now, tonight, we keep driving, eventually we get a different car, but we keep going. We stay together. That's the one rule from now on."

"What are we running from, Kinley? What about those girls?" I say that & realize we both know I don't give a shit what happens to them. I want this too, whatever it is.

"I told you. They'll be OK. Really, I don't even know if anything at all will happen to them." He's drifting, not into sleep, but away from me.

I try to pull him back. "They seemed pretty lined up for consumption."

He nods. He drives. Eventually I lean close to him, & his arm loosely encircles me. Yah, this is the guy I fall for, this is the one I end up with on a nice little thousand mile drive, just a pretty young girl & her beau—

there we went—

"You're the missing piece in Preacher's life"

"He wasn't Preacher back then"

Bowie nods, motions Xtina to take a better hold of his hard prick. She does. Good girl.

i. / xxi. / c.

"Truth is a pathless land" someone says & there is a laugh, a second, a third, "like when the dead return in dreams" there is silence, awe "helpless, breathless" still silence but more breathing "or the lost lover, never was a goodbye, a thank you" now one is angry "a shared nod of failure"

"What the fuck" says the angry voice—

Shh! The theatre again stills

the voice is shown by colors, his breathing now heavy & sickly, years going with every few words—

"There was my father taxiing me back to kin, & here I was in the back seat, complaining I'd forgotten my notebooks, or maybe I'd lost a page or two, or again that lover, left to me a dictionary marked with cryptic directions to reach her, reach back to her but she was now old, she was many years older than me now as she'd once been many years younger, & her twin daughters with me in that taxi, me between them, we three comprising one smile & our hands twined & intending—"

The theatre screen blurs, blackens, seems nearly to burn. We were expecting something. It was that

Krishnamurti shit thrown in this time. But it could have been a trick. It's hard to tell.

Some get up to leave. We don't move. It doesn't work like that. The new ones sometimes don't get it. They think it's like "hey cool let's drop a dose of shrooms & go see **RemoteLand!**" like it's, what, *Rocky Horror Picture Show? The Wall? 2001?*

They don't get that it's progressive. It *fucking changes*. We see it. We don't leave. I'm not sure we can. What else is there?

But some stay, a few. We try to work with them.

OK, yah, there was a girl & that was some trouble. I mean for about five minutes it was perfect & made sense & I swear it all changed, there was no car crash, & get this, *Jack didn't jump the bridge*. Cops came, & parents, & I'm probably still wanted because she—

she smelled perfect, just sweat & soap & she was all dreams & gropings, it was in the theatre handicapped bathroom nobody liked to use—

"tell me all you know"

"I don't know anything"

"touch this" *o god*

"now this" *fuck*

"tell me"

she was all over me but we didn't know what we were doing, i forgot that, or remembered it, I was kissing her & my hands on her shirt on her bra, *o god*, her clothes came partway off & mine did too & I couldn't breathe just touching & something, touching her breasts, her moans, little ones, & something, she wasn't sure but she was pulling me closer, she wanted me *in* & something & something

"Shit you're crying"

"Shhh"

"What's wrong? Don't you like me?"

"I do. I don't know."

She's waiting for me, is all. Somewhere in my stupid mind is the thought "*just stick it in & she'll be happy*"

but something—something—I try to—something—she jerks when my head and mouth push between her thighs—when I lick she gets spooked—something—

o shit o shit o shit o shit—I get in three long hard licks & she panics—we each escape with our arms full of clothes, in different directions—

Nobody finds me—we hide well—it's an old theatre—

"Was it worth it?"

"I don't know"

"Was she good?"

"Yah. But not that good."

"Did she push you away?"

"No."

"What then?"

"She wanted to know things."

"We don't fucking know anything, dude."

"That's not it."

"You should have fucked her or given her to me."

"No. Shit. *What the fuck.*"

It's then I realize I'm on my own. He doesn't believe or he doesn't care anymore. I try to think.

People keep coming & going. I'm alone. I see how it changes. It's not about the beauty & truth of it, the mystery. It's about what to do next.

When she comes back it's awkward. We both know she's run away. We both know what she wants.

"It's not like it was. You know that."

"That doesn't matter."

"You can be with me."

"I don't know your name even."

"I'm Cordelia."

"No. You're not."

"I *am*."

I look at her. "How?"

"How what?"

"You were in the White Woods. With Global Wall. You helped him."

She smiles. "Things change. You know that."

"No. You're younger. You're—"

"Yah, all that I know."

"How."

"We made a deal."

She won't tell me more. We sleep in the theatre, which I usually don't do anymore. Cops come around more.

My partner & friend is gone. Cordelia takes his place. She watches me as much as **RLand**. I ask her why.

"I was there. You know that."

"I know some."

"I just don't know what you want from it."

"How can you know its not just a film & not care?"

She looks at me with her shiny cherry lips & tinted pigtails, her pink halter top & jeans shorts, makes me look at her, see she is presenting herself for me, reminding me of that grope in the bathroom—

"Do you want to go there?"

"Where?"

"The White Woods?"

I stare at her.

"I never left. I'm still there. That's how it works."

"Then how—"

"I told you, I made a deal."

ii. / xxii. / xcix.

What's left not sentiment let abide. What isn't sentiment? Once a presence came to me & declaimed to be always with me. I remember this tonight & wonder if it's sentiment to do so.

Tell me what is sentiment & what isn't.

Sentiment is what remains when all else goes.

Then why do I distrust it?

Sentiment is the rust of years. How they stick together, tell their story.

I look at Rebecca.

"Keep breathing."

"Tell me about sentiment."

"It's why you looked at me."

I nod.

"It's not always bad."

I nod.

"There's strength in it."

"Strength & danger. I see it both ways."

"What to do for it?"

"Rebecca, I can't naysay you. You are unique in this story, in all of them. You are good. Artist. Love. Not reasonable in my mind or heart."

"Sentiment."

"Why is that word so important?"

"You've made it an enemy, given it more power than it should have."

"My strength is that I keep moving."

"You strength is that you keep moving & you remember. Both."

I say nothing.

"No, you can't say anything. There isn't anything to say. Keep moving & remember. No truth, no music without this. You know that, *Raymond*."

"Keep moving & remember."

"Yes. Or else."

iii. / xxiii. / xcvi.

"Slow, Slower, Stall, Stop, OK. Stopped. Slow. Less slow. Slower stop. I look around & realize: from the shit of my youth, blazed through by the shine of music, the furious flow of want, I grew, & I am like a tree in that I bear branches in many directions, some great & reaching, with fruit with blooms—some withered, some black with old poisons—

"But here I am, this strange tree of a man & how could it have been otherwise? How?

"And the dull, sleeping faces in every direction? Instructed how & why, & little question in this, hardly enough response to call it a nod, an agreement.

"I resist. I always have. Not because I ever wanted to. No, you see, something was off with me, from early on. I think of it like this: my soul smelled odd. Off.

"Back then, I didn't know. I didn't realize that I was onto something. I cried for how I was off."

Global Wall pauses. His clan sits quietly, especially the youngest one. He starts to drift earlier in the day—

but no—to the story—it's what will bind these small-town blue-hairs to him—do more than strip their wallets—it will leave his stain on them—the virus of his words—



“Many years ago, I was a poor young man. I was angry & bitter, far uglier than I looked. I allowed nothing close, just walked the streets of my city. My hair was unwashed & long. I stole nothing, ate little, slept in an invisible dimension down an alley, dreamed wars & apocalypse on planets I did not believe then were real—”

He pauses. They are confused but rapt. Good. He continues.

“There began to occur a man. More often. He neared me & I knew he did this & did not do it. That is to say, it was not wholly his conscious intention to do so. Those he travelled with filled out the intention, so to speak.

“Eventually we sat together some afternoons, some evenings. He would often talk about needing to make a phone call. He was not asking for money. What he was, was uncertain. Needing to make the phone call kept him moving, one place to the next. They helped him in this way, those he travelled with.

“Eventually he might relax, & begin to speak about other things, preach really, you could say.

“‘Tis said the beast’s beneath the bricks, he told me one night, it was midnight, I was not happy to see him, he diverted me from my own matters some nights, better ones his & my businesses dovetailed rightly.

“‘beneath the bricks,’ he partially repeated, ‘waiting night or distraction or an elixir’s flash of something hungry’—he paused, looked elsewhere which meant he was staring most intensely at me—‘Tis said the erotic coil’s tight & getting tighter, now what will make it burst?’ I’d heard these words before, in variation—‘tis said civilization’s built, trembling, on ruins & bones, breathes & drinks with ghosts.’

(Maya dreams of the dancing white bunny, the glowing white bunny, & here a possibility, a something, she’s been looking, that odd note in things, where dreams nudge in, the glowing white bunny dancing & dancing—there’s more, so much more—this dream a nibble, a stain, something other—a whisper of another way)

He had to make his phone call & one time I went wrong on things & decided it was time—we’d sat at this place & I watched this laughing pink-cheeked girl & thought about other worlds & other years & there was a smell in the air—

he pauses—every blue hair in the room is breathless—even his girls—this is a new story—

“no—there were two smells—one was the slightly salty, slightly moist smell of that girl’s white panties—smell of youth, virginity, the wilds within

“the other was grease—grease for sale—in the form of bad, cheap food—

“I smelled both—it was like a damned choice—my friend started talking & for a moment I was distracted—

“He said tis expected, by many, this world of men will fall to a bomb—or rise to a returned god’s beauteous hour—

“I was sniffing deeper—into each smell—the fecund, pink tightness—the decaying rot—I saw two paths—right or wrong, I saw only two paths—

“My friend looked at me—really looked at me—maybe it was the first time, I don’t know—& he spoke again—

We do not know, Universe, our

flesh hungers for each other, for light, for music,

MY GOD JUST FUCK HER

for answers. We do not know, our hopes
cloak pretty on the beast's shoulders, our fears

GODDAMNITFUCKHER

that the beast is all we really are”

There was a moment of silence. Then I dragged my friend to the payphone on the wall next to the door. I dropped money in the coin slot. “Dial.”

(Maya, follow the white bunny, follow her dancing, I have often thought she is another way, something in this, I can't say more than that, but take your manuscript & hurry!)

I made him dial. Every last number. He was sweating, maybe he was crying now. But he dialed every number. I made sure. I listened to the phone ringing. The laughing girl & her companion had left. Her smell was easily washed out by grease.

The blue hairs are shocked & sad & want the finish. Too much for some of them, though who wants to admit such a thing?

“It rang. It rang. He slumped to the ground, I couldn't keep him up. He hadn't wanted to actually call. That's what I learned as a stupid, arrogant young man who now *knew* he *knew* nothing of the world. He had *not* wanted to dial that number.

There is crying but it's hushed, there's too much listening still. “Some things you keep that close so they won't explode & kill you.”

(Dance like her, Maya, don't just follow, dance like the white bunny with the pink nose! Dance & sniff as she does—dance & sniff—)

He remembers: she was first to his bed in the morning. It was almost by agreement among them. Global was . . . changing . . . sick? Maybe nothing. The agreement seemed to be the youngest would discover him best, it had always been easiest for her, & he loved them all helplessly, conflictedly, beyond any surrender—but the youngest—she could even follow him into dreams—he even let her—

What did Global Wall (the white bunny
dream could be a valid (knows something
question, deserts, violence, (she turns back
The youngest one follows (looks at Maya
in, fearlessly, she has (calmly she knows
never feared anything, (something! & Maya
the most dangerous man (has to follow her
is her companion, he (to find out, she
has begun lecturing again (has to keep dancing

to make sure she eats (but as the bunny
 even as they keep moving (goes faster & faster
 & what does he dream (hops faster & faster
 is the question, it turns (Maya needs to hop
 out he dreams of her (too, she is not
 or someone who so (built like a bunny
 resembles her that (but she adjusts
 the youngest one is (she is kind of scrawny
 able to work into (anyway so she
 her dream-body, it (adjusts & follows
 proves easy, this is (quickly along—
 where Global is soft (& hopes they
 est, so much ano (get there &
 ther might have crushed (there explains
 him but she does not (what she needs
 she loves him most (faster & faster
 becomes his closest need (no thought—hopping!

They see two white bunnies flash by—& she smiles at him—her blonde hair is only touched by a few
 blooms—she wears a long light blue skirt & one bracelet for jewelry—& sandals—this is so simple—he
 watches her—waiting for the bad word—half hears it unspoken—something in this—does he notice—
 does he feel the flinch in his heart—the girl she possesses—there is no subterfuge in her—Global
 understood this later—this dream has a sad tinge that echoes back from future better understanding—

“let’s follow” he startles her—this is new—this hadn’t happened before—& it had been one bunny
 every other time—he catches her hand before thinking about it—then she holds on when he shies—
 they run—they follow the white bunnies into the woods—deep into the white white woods—

iv. / xxiv. / xcvi.

The sound of . . . ocean? Wait a minute. Listen! Listen . . . that grinding. A music of power. Oh
 listen. Here is a place to bring all grievings.

Bobbie listens. She finds she’s been listening for a long time. There was a time, previous to this,
 a long ago, when she heard the pink noise—

The . . . pink noise? She keeps listening, tunes down into the sea, there is something in this.
 Old grievings. Grievings impossibly old.

That moment on the beach. Terrifying, breathless, a possession in a glance? How possible? And
 where is this? Too much, too many things, she listens.

He saw & there was a motion to him that was knowing, oh she did & didn’t know how to bear
 it—

A voice, now or then, saying impossibly soft & close, “you became the pink noise that day, I
 felt this fury in my blood stalking me before I saw you, I had sat & watched the waves & listened for
 hours oblivious, & I was done & I knew it but for this trail of spikes through me, I came there, no
 choice, & I waited.

I knew you.

You knew me.

I felt you.

You felt me.

But—

But—

Bobbie jerks, almost braves to wake, allows herself to feel the bed she's in, her nudeness, but—

I couldn't—

You didn't

No—

And now—

And now?

And now!

The sea again. The kelp seaweed freshly washed to shore. The bones of driftwood.

Take me.

No. I left that day.

You left with my scent.

Yes that.

Describe it to me.

Warm, pink, hungry.

What did you do.

Nothing I'd say.

What did you do?

I left, Bobbie. I left that moment & your scent. It got bad in my head but nobody knew. I made money when others didn't. I dated, I drank bourbon, I danced, I bought firearms & voted for right-wing politicians—

And their secrets—

Many of them—

What kind of sex weren't they having?

None. Save for love. They weren't much for love.

Do you love me?

Yes. I do now.

Why?

Because you came to me.

No.

You're here.

No. I'm at the ocean.

Yes you are.

I have a new swimsuit on.

It's pink. A two piece.

My mother hates it. I call her an old whore.

She hits you.

She hit me because her boyfriends all want to fuck me.

Do they try?

I let a couple kiss me & feel me up. No more. I want something.

What do you want?

I want more than the kind of dumb fucks my mother can bring home.

You want how I looked to you.

Yah & that's stupidly fucking funny. Because by this point I should be blowing guys at least.

But you aren't.

No. I'm waiting for you.

You're not just waiting, Bobbie, you're talking to me in dreams.

Yes.

You're conjuring me. You don't half-believe it & don't know how, but you are.

This is what I want.

Now you're here.

I'm at the ocean. In my two piece bikini. Hair down, walking alone, watching the ocean.

I see you. I'm stunned.

I see you & don't look twice.

I did nothing.

Not this time. Do it. Do it now!

"Hello"

"Hello"

"I'm—"

"I know who you are."

"Then you'll—"

"But I'm only—"

"You want to—"

Maya turns to look at me.

"Well?"

"Well."

"What happens next?"

"I ask that too."

She's curious. "Don't you always know?"

I laugh.

"What happens next with that girl?"

I sigh. "Well, maybe she gets fucked. But maybe not."

"What else?"

"Seems like some take control, start to move. Like you. Like Jazz."

"How do you decide?"

"Hard to say. At some point there is a turn in a character's path, & thereafter it's different. I care more. We have a relation of sorts."

Bobbie turns & looks. It's not him in bed next to her. He's watching her like a predator. Without a flinch's flinch, she determines she has panties on still.

He's smiling. "You sleep beautifully," he says, no warmth in his voice. All teeth. She half-smiles.

"I waited," he says softly. "I could have taken you before but I wanted you to be awake."

She, for a lingering moment, feels her face, her neck kissed, her breasts lightly fondled, her nipples tested & teased, then his brutish impatience leads him between her thighs & for this lingering moment she considers giving to it, letting this rough blunt man fuck her for all he's worth, riding him hard, & again, riding him til he cries, & then wants more, make him go on, when his cock can't get hard, push him with words & whispers to do it for her, & just when that seems what—

No. Bobbie sees the gun on the bureau next to him & when he lunges, she twists & grabs the gun more expertly than he could have imagined

Maya looks at me. "Is this the turning point?"

"I don't know. Let's find out."

He squeaks. He actually *fucking squeaks*.

"Hey, I haven't hurt you. Nobody pushed you into this bed."

"I know how I got here. But who the *fuck* are you?"

"Look I paid—but—"

"To what—fuck me?"

Now he gets angry. "Yeah, to fuck you. Give me back my gun."

"What was it for? In case I didn't want to?"

"No!" he snaps & before she can react he snatches the gun back. "I'm a fucking cop." He looks at her & she can see a thought pass over his face & go. He shakes his head. Stands to leave.

"Wait."

"Relax. I'm not that fucked up."

"Don't leave. Talk to me for a minute."

Maya nods at me. I nod back.

"About what?"

"Don't I look kind of young to you?"

"That's what I paid for."

"Look closer." He does. "Whoa."

Bobbie nods.

"Why are you here?"

"I came with my friends. One was trying to find her sister. We all got separated."

He looks at me, & the hunger broods there. I realize I'm standing facing him wearing only panties.

"My clothes"

He starts.

"My clothes, Officer?"

He looks fallen. Strangely, I feel something I shouldn't.

Maya stares at me.

"She has to make this choice."

"What about the man on the beach?"

"Maya—"

She looks angry.

I let him . . . do some things. Not everything but I let him touch me & I touch him how he likes. He wants more but I shake no & he backs off for now.

I need his help & if I have to leash him up a bit, that's OK. He gets this. He fucking nods. It's hard not to laugh at him. But he's got a gun & a cock so I don't. We dress & leave the room.

Maya nods at me. "What now?"

"Look!"

The sound of . . . ocean? Wait a minute. Listen! Listen . . . that grinding. A music of power. Oh listen. Here is a place to bring all grievings.

Maya walking along the shore with others, one is preaching—she lets herself fall back, a step, a few at a time—wills herself to be unnoticed until she is able to dart behind a beautiful old monster of driftwood.

They're gone. They'll find her later, she's sure, but she's managed to graduate from the youth class to the older class without making much notice of it. She sees the boys & girls & their alliances. It does not interest her.

When she beholds Samantha, all the mysteries of the universe present themselves.

"Dean, this is Samantha."

"Hello Dean"

Dean about shits himself as he finds himself standing beside Maya on a seashore & getting introduced to a beautiful naked girl with what looks like seaweed for hair.

"It's OK. I just wanted you to meet Samantha how I met her on the beach. She's my friend. I think she will help sometimes."

Samantha smiles at Maya & her nose looks a little pink & her hair not dissimilar to bunny ears.

Dean nods, & puts a hand forth. Samantha looks at him. Nods at Maya.

"Let him take you to that town."

Maya curls up around her manuscript on a long damp twisted log of driftwood, & she begins to write—

Dean walks down to the surf, he hasn't see the ocean in a long time—he wonders this all but—really—doesn't—Samantha joins him—

"Did you bring me to her?"

"You did more than me."

"You helped."

"I led you to the picture."

"In the window? That gallery downtown?"

Samantha says nothing, yes.

"Why do I have pieces instead of memories?"

"They'll come. The picture was first"

"I don't understand."

"You will."

"Tell me."

"Dean. Tell me."

"Then her?"

"If you will."

He watches the surf, the way the waves cough dirty foam onto the shore, how it slides, almost panicked, along the wet sand, until it is pulled back.

"I was downtown. I had a good buzz." He laughs. "Good." He stops laughing. "It's not that big a downtown so I should have seen that window a thousand times like the rest. Seen & not seen."

Maya writes, summons me to write with her, we bond, we fuse, we are, writes from a memory not her own, someone she knew, someone back there, someone who consumed those around him, who used

his power to induce curiosity, approach, who let the weaker take him, possess him, reduce to bones & smoke in the try, & he would then swallow the rest, & again, he used words like kindling, for snap & spark, fat ugly conflagration, Maya writes *"I'll be the hungry ghost returned to snap at clusters of tight skirts, snap til I hear the one who laughs & wants more, snap till she cries out, till she's urging the rest"*—Maya squeaks, remembers, nods—

they never came for me—I knew what went on—I knew it was called privilege, those nights in those rooms, but they never asked me—I wondered why & never knew & knew—I wouldn't build my own cage & wait for him in it—I was dangerous—how? how? A scrawny girl with a pink cat radio? Was I code & key back then? No. Nothing. I had Samantha but I didn't know what this meant—

"What did it mean?"

"I'm your friend"

"You didn't live there"

"I was with you"

"Always?"

"Yes. Always with you."

"What about my word to summon you?"

"That too."

Maya sighs. Samantha's explanations never really helped. Samantha was her friend, truly & always. The rest was all fuzz. She watches Dean & Samantha at the water's edge, then turns to her manuscript again.

"How are you here?"

"There's no how, Maya."

"Could I do this myself?"

"Of course."

"I'm not ready."

"I don't think you're like me, Maya. I take my notebooks & push deep in them, fall away from others. I think you prefer it this way, with others present like this, passing through."

"Is that possible? This way?"

"Yes."

"We're writing two different manuscripts?"

"Yes & no."

"And the other one?"

"Yes & no."

"You're like Samantha." She pauses. Smiles that sunshine supernova smile of hers. "Yes & no."

Dean. "It was an old photograph, I think but it was but it was strangely alive. I don't know. It was the desert but polar, all snow. I had been staggering down the street, a good morning buzz, & I stopped to cough my lungs up & wish for a cigarette when I looked up & saw it & it froze me. I couldn't move. I was paralyzed. I looked & looked."

Samantha nods. Whatever she is, she knows how to listen.

Maya thinks again. It wasn't sex, exactly. That would have been easier to understand. Not even power, really, it was something of hate, a harm to the world, punish the world, the world is not just fall, the world is evil, living, breathing evil—she writes a fragment: *"the clustered thorn in the preacher's golden costume, now burbling, now biting when he speaks smoothly of God's mystery & suffering, cramp his holy thighs when he lusts, when he loathes—"*

Maya jerks up, looks at me hard—"they hated the world, they hated God, but they thought they could transform it—they could make it something else, make it perfect." She breathes hard. "Make it new."

"The ships overhead."

Dean & Maya speak these words simultaneously.

(The White Woods shakes tonight with the speaking of three words: flesh, chemistry, consciousness. These words said to indicate the bones of the cage are a little plainer to see, that this playing field's distracting lights are less effectual. Words, nothing less, the breath to speak them with mind or lips, one the next, new, again—)

Maya nods at me, crumpled under my own foot & fist & heart, offers me the hand I barely know how to accept, & we stand——

Dean is spent by all this. Maya is right to recognize his strength, power, but he's also rusty, slave to a fair while of brownbag afternoons——

We need to get him shelter, Samantha.

This is not my world, Maya.

He's old & sick in his body & mind.

He needs rest & food.

And you, Maya?

She snaps up. "I need to care for him." Feels danger, the sniff of those who prison others.

"You need him to take you to Wytner soon."

They are not at the ocean. They are back in the city, it is autumn. Sitting on a bench. Dean looks sick & half-asleep.

"It's the booze, Maya. I don't know if I can kick it."

Before Samantha is gone, Maya shakes her head. "No. Stay." There is a pause. "Please, Samantha." Nods.

Samantha fully manifests, powerfully manifests now, maybe more than Maya has seen before. She kneels before Dean who looks at her with fear but, more, trust. They begin to speak in one voice: "When the king raises his fist smiling, would command not just armies of men & machines but the woods, the tides, the moon itself, I'll blind him a moment & give his tongue a heated taste of its own shit——"

Dean coughs hard, but nods. Nods again. "Go," he whispers in a hoarse bark.

Again: "When one man leans on another, measures the world's worth in coin & commodity, when he sharpens others to reck him with quicking breath, I'll crumple his ankle & wither his cock——"

Dean doubles hard over coughing harder than ever, "Go go!" he orders.

Samantha leans forward, her hands on his shoulders, steadying him. He nods harder. "When the lusty crowd denses round a single helpless face, moves in with noose or cuffs, I'll sweat each one with panic,



choke, & tomorrow *your* door, tomorrow *it will be you—*”

He calms a bit, the worst is over though more for them to say. It's easier, quieter this time: “Lastly the child, with her new breast blooming, with his questions shuffled toward thick books & stained glass, I will spend the last of me scrawling over young hearts:

“Nobody knows all! Believe, with every window open!” And again: “Believe, with every window open!” And: “Believe with every window open!” Maya joins in, they steady the three of them, on their park bench, saying this over & over til Deans brings them to a whispering stop. He nods, OK this time.

“Those were my words & what I believed back then. Samantha knew them.” He smiles at her, a genuine smile. But. “I'm not who I was then.”

“You are now what you are because of what you were then.”

“I'm less. I'm old. I'm sick.”

v. / xxv. / xcvi.

Lizzie dreams & in her dream she is someone else. She waits in this room for someone as she has waited many times for him. She looks in the mirror at her face, at her hair, her cheeks he will touch once, twice, before he begins to consume her, before he spirals within her, deeper & faster then slower, no words for what happens, his touches, his smell, his few or no words, she has to dress!—

Lizzie panics as she knows herself to be sleeping, dreaming but she hangs on, remembers what that man said to her, those words as he left with the rest, her still obediently & spread in pink panties on the stage's bed, had said with an easy smile, “you can have anything you want in dreams, if you learn to take them”—she hangs on, fuck, OK, I'm this other girl in this dream & she's waiting for this man who comes & fucks me—no, wait—

looks in mirror again—

does more than that—he ignites me—so we can do something—something very important to him—& he's important to me—

Dreaming, awake, of a double-mind, I take a breath. The bed behind me is large, a red velvet cover on it. Hotel room. Yes, that's where I am in waking too. Same room. Am I waiting for the same man? There was a voice. Made me pose & undress.

But for this man I have to dress. I stand, steady, this girl is smaller than me. We walk over to the closet. The clothes inside are night clothes. I guess I don't go out much.

For a moment I want to wake up. Dream of being some man's paid & kept whore? What the *fuck?*

Think. Think, *Lizzie!*

Who?

Lizzie.

I'm not Lizzie.

I am.

I don't understand.

We're dreaming. I'm in a room you were in, maybe for a long time.

I don't believe you. I have to dress for him.

Who?

He loves me. I'm helping him.

How?

We . . .

I know. He fucks you really good. Something happens.

Yes. But then it didn't anymore. He left me. I tried to get back here. I couldn't.

That's why I'm here.
 I guess so.
 He wants to do the same with me.

I don't know. Who are you?

Where are you now?
 It doesn't matter.
 Tell me.
 There were others later.
 More than one?

None were like him. I met them, they wanted me, I would go with them if they wanted me enough. I thought one of them would do what he did for me. It was so difficult with him.

Difficult?

He wanted more than sex. It wasn't enough for him. He saw me as something, I don't know. Magical. The rest just fuck me.

What's going to happen when he comes?

Did you pose for him?

I think so. But I didn't see him.

I didn't either. You passed the audition though. You're in that room, our room. Right now.

What do I do?

Wake up. Put on the prettiest nightie. At least he doesn't hit.

vi. / xxvi. / xcv.

There are angles in this world that cannot be braided into use, secret chiaroscuros of morning—

Global Wall & the youngest of his girls are sitting together quietly

an empty shore, a quiet water—

the white bunnies had led them a long chase but when they passed into this clearing his girl had stopped their chasing.

"here we are"

down river a mile the remaining bones of a drowned woods—

"where?"

"sit"

"where?"

"sit with me"

he obeyed her voice

in the vague air an unhuman language croons from ten centuries past—

"tell me"

"tell you?"

"all this"

"you want to know"

"go on"

"you want to know what it's like"

"say it"

"how they want me. us. how that feels."

"yes."

she nods. says nothing.
 “what then?”
 “you won’t be the same”
 “i know.”
 “you’ll be in it. how the others are. Jack. Genny. Maya. Bowie. Christa.”
 “I have you three. How am I not as vulnerable & mortal as them already?”
 “You can leave us.”
 “To what? You’re what I have left. I failed. I love you. Here we are.”
 She nods.
 “You doubt me?”
 Shakes her head. Looks up in tears.
 “What?”
 “We were the last ones. The last three. If you stay with us, it binds you to your history. You can’t have us & your freedom both.”
 “I need to know. It’s the price.”

vii. / xxvii. / xciv.

Jazz & Ashleigh talk now more than they ever had before. Toby listens to them, says nothing. He still can’t see.
 “How do we leave?”
 “I am not sure.”
 “I just don’t understand, Jazzy.”
 Jazz knows Ashleigh doesn’t want to understand. She’s getting there but it’s hard.
 “How come we can’t leave? Why don’t I see the Woods? Do you see the Woods?”
 Jazz nods.
 “I wish you had just left me.”
 “No. This is better.”
 “How? We’re trapped. Not even by people. By what? I’d—”
 Jazz shakes her head.
 “I don’t know.”
 “Don’t know much, do you?” speaks up Toby.
 “Shut up, Toby.”
 “No, Ash, it’s OK. Speak your mind, Toby.”
 “Look, I know you can hurt me so don’t worry. I’ll do what you say for now—”
 “But—?”
 “I’m not going punch our way out of here”
 “No. You have an idea?”
 “Do you know what really happened that night?”
 “We were taken in a van”
 “But first we showed up.”
 “Then you left.”
 Toby laughs. No mirth. No fear anymore either.
 “What. *Fuck.*”
 “*We took you.* Got Ashleigh good & drunk. You can’t blame her. She didn’t know what was going on. She thought we left you.”
 “You didn’t.”
 “No. But when you didn’t want to play I had to take care of it.”
 Ashleigh is ready to pounce on him when Jazz shakes her head. “Let him talk.”

"Look, I'm not proud. We were fucking drunk dickheads. I told the others they could watch."
Silence.

"Anyway, we never made it anywhere. We were driving to a cabin. But we never got there."

"How many of you, Toby?"

"Six in all."

"Where are they now?"

Toby laughs. "Trapped here too. Dead. I don't know."

"Don't seem to care either."

"No. And you can hate me & hurt me too but I'm still fucking sorry."

Jazz speaks again. "So we're unconscious in your van. What happened?"

"It was a *fucking spaceship*. And fuck if I hadn't seen it in my dreams before. That's why I drank so much. All of us."

"What *happened*?"

"There was light, too much of it, & I think we crashed. I don't remember much. But both of you were gone. Everyone was gone."

"Then what?"

"I walked through those damned woods for fucking ever. I was afraid to sleep. I thought I'd hit my head. You can die if you fall asleep."

"How did you end up here?"

His voice, sincere, breaking for the first time. "I fucking fell asleep."

"And?"

"I woke up, I was in the van. My buddies were shaking me. They said they knew I was tired from working 3rds but did I want to miss out on the fun? She's your girl, Toby. Yah, & that cherry little sister."

"So you just did it all over again?"

"Look, I figured I was dead. So it didn't fucking matter. I figured I'd end up like before, over & over. Fucking Hell. I deserved it. But then—"

"Then?"

"Yah. Here we are."

"But why?"

viii. / xxviii. / xviii.

He tells Genny he is right behind her, though she's not sure how that happened. Says to not look back, just listen to his voice.

"Why can't I look back?" she demands, Tweety Bird is quiet in her arms. (If she can talk, *if*, I could use a friend. Would be nice.) (*if*)

"Do you want to help me, Aquarius?"

"Call me Genny. And yes, if I can."

Silence.

"If you trust me now, I will sit with you soon, look you in your eyes. I'll tell you things. All your questions, as many as I can answer."

"But?"

"?"

"There's a but in there somewhere, Preacher. I hear it."

Silence.

"Tell me." Her voice is soft & kind now. They are walking through a murk not dissimilar to that experience at the Flying Elephant. But Preacher is no Murk-Man. Not hardly close.

"I have to show you where I died the first time."

She gapes. She stops.
 “Nothing goes away. Nothing returns.”
 Resists turning, shaky, walks on.
 “We’re nearly there.”

Oh. This place.

“The Ampitheatre.”
 “I was here before. But.”
 “Before you turn, I want you to look down there.”
 “The bonfire. The people dancing.”
 “Further along. Down there.”
 “There’s someone. He’s dancing.”
 “Yes. That’s me.”
 “You. How?”
 “This was a long time ago. I was younger & I felt I was done.”
 Something strong in Genny’s heart wakes & locks in. “Why did you do it?”
 “Because I thought there was nothing new left.”
 Teeth clenched. Relaxes. “How?”
 “This is my wake. That’s me dancing at it.”
 “Is there more?”
 “The next morning I felt reborn. New.”
 “What did you do?”
 “You knew me later.”
 Genny senses the wall going up. Thinks. “Will knowing this help me? To help you, I mean?”
 “Watch tonight. If you like, talk to him.”
 “Wait!” Now she turns around & he’s gone.
 “Shit! Fuck!” she screams.
 “Shit! Fuck!” screams Tweety Bird.
 Genny freezes again, holds Tweety out before her. Tweety blinks.
 “How?”
 “Whistler”
 Suddenly exhausted, she sits on the grassy hill, hugs Tweety to her chest anyway.
 Young Preacher down there. She sighs. Dancing at his wake.
 Full moon up there. Always there? Probably. She watches Young Preacher dance by himself.
 He now has a flashlight, is swinging it around as he dances. The drums are getting louder. She watches him, sets Tweety Bird on her lap to watch too. Tweety says nothing more. (Whistler)

She remembers one of Preacher’s last times. It was ending. Something bad had happened. What? Something. Another fucking gap.

His Phalanx of fine pussy had shrunk to three girls. Both the others fairly new but very different. One young, Genny fairly sure a runaway. Felt sorry for her as she tried every skanky outfit in her beatup suitcase to catch Preacher’s eye. The busty ones. The tightass ones. She was a hot little number too, almost too much—

The other one was older than Genny, & actually more of a threat. A talker, a thinker. Preacher noticed her a few times & in those later days he wasn’t noticing much anymore—

What the trouble was, fuck if I know. But every event was nearer the last when nobody had said a word about it.

Wasn't a hall even. They were appearing in parks. Usually a few drunks & homeless around; listen, see if some food or coins would come of it. None stayed long. The young girl attracted them, even before Preacher. If Preacher had told her to down on her knees, service every bum & then he'd notice her, she was ready. The older one handed out pamphlets. New ones, I swear they were mostly pictures & the text in a foreign language. Strangely I did nothing. I think I figured it didn't matter. But I also obsessed in my secret beast's heart for how to end up with Preacher when it was over. I was a little crazy too. I didn't mind thinking about a pack of bums carrying off the girl & consuming her whichever way they wanted. The older one I'd have to be more clever with. But I didn't *do* anything.

He stood, this time. Sometimes he didn't anymore. Talked hardly loud.

"What diminishes, in some hours, is not just the want to know, but the faith anything can be known"—I noticed a couple of pretty dirty bums nearing where Cindy—Cindy?—sat, looking, maybe a word or two. She was sitting cross-legged on the grass. Blouse a plain tale of 34Bs sans bra, crossed legs from the right angle showed a shaven pink thing tight as a—"answer not fruited of hustle or delusion, the questions asked the skies on worst nights, & those other glints nearly touched on others, can sum, manifest, fold the world gently open"—fuck! Cindy had a breast out & cupped in her hand, fingers pinching the big tight nipple, mouth open in silent moan—the bums backed away a few steps—the older one was dancing in the grass, hearing his words & then saying them back softly in echo—I remained quiet & still—

"& limited view will reveal finely in music, a mystery more beautiful because made more plain"—he stood, looking directly at the bums who were watching Cindy silently orgasm & roll to the ground, legs open—then Preacher walked away & I followed—& now I wonder if that was the last event or not—I sit here & I seem to fucking remember less clearly all the time—

ix. / xxix. / xcii.

Bowie pushes hard, up, down, in, out, yanks, screams soundlessly, rushes wild purpose through his blood & his bones, heats his flesh beyond white pain then drops suddenly below freezing, screams more, a cry from every inch of him—

the mushrooms relent, or chance he will destroy his physical self—they know Bowie will if pushed too hard—

He wakes, opens his eyes, panting, deep wounds in him no medic could find. But OK, awake, eyes open.

Chicken shack. Well. Sort of. Never really was what it seemed. Portal? Kind of. Spaceship? Not like the ones overhead; it doesn't move in the same way. More . . . *doesn't* move while everything else does. Sometimes, oddly, doesn't move very fast & very far.

Beam me up, Aesop.

He tries to trace back. Sam in the bar. Paula's bed. Benny. Christa saying she knew how to help. There's no way to untangle each & know how real. "Real."

He rubs his unshaven cheek. Looks around. Nothing. Nothing really. The mushrooms have withdrawn for now.

He's glad to be free of them for a moment, as free as he can be, but he also needs them to recover Preacher & Rosie. They are the accelerant. The best one.

Dreams are another. Benny's domain. He considers. Shroom space & dreamspace—they are not exactly different—that's the best way he can put it to himself.

Stands, falls. Oh. Laughs. Stands again. He's awake, since he can't make the pain in his ass diminish faster than it will.

Thing is, it *is* a fucking chicken shack. Is, isn't. Both, each, yes, no. The world is many things simultaneously. Many worlds. That's the trick to things. One stuff, many stuffs. One kind, many kinds.

One motive, many motives.

The ancient “why?” question is its own answer. Why? Why. That’s all Bowie has really for guide.

From Preacher. Who else?

Preacher. Why? Why.

He sighs. Loudly. Preacher. Rosie. Why? Why. OK. Back to work then.

Considers. Shroom space. Dreamspace.

Chicken shack. Paula’s fine ass.

Gretta’s sweet mouth. Preacher’s deep madness, deep & clear. His father.

Maya. White Woods.

A memory. A regret. A funny regret. There was a door opened to him long after he could use it, & only briefly.

I was already a spy, meaning more & less than the word itself. Spy is a verb, not a noun. Preacher would reply I had it back assward but I never laughed. I was a spy long before anyone paid me. I’m a spy now & I don’t think I work for anyone anymore.

A woman, of course. A strange, beautiful woman in a cafe late one night. A conversation.

I sniffed her first, of course. Part of being a spy is retraining your sense. A sound, a smell, clues weren’t too often words, & I knew also she deliberately sat near me.

Espresso. That acrid smell, more waking than the drink itself. I listened to her breath, the small movements of her body in her seat. I hadn’t looked. I didn’t need to or want to. Preacher would say of such a moment, do it, own it, master it, move on.

“The Beast is relentless, one way or another.”

“How do we win?”

“We don’t, partner. None of us. Our grace is in how we fall.”

“That’s bullshit.”

He laughed. “Sure it is. And roses grow from bullshit. And mushrooms.”

Fucking Preacher.

Alone, scented, late night cafe. A fight, a break up? Sex mingles with everything a woman says, does, thinks.

“You simplify them, Bowie”

“Tell me I’m wrong.”

“You’re not wrong but somehow—”

“What?”

He would shake his head. Strangely I agreed with him.

I still kept notes on cases back then. Not many & I knew enough to leave out, contradict, burn. Preacher laughed at me. He said it didn’t matter a damn one way or another.

“Nobody wins.”

“Then why do we fight? Why all this?”

“Yes. Why.”

I knew tricks. Not fair ones. I could sniff myself right through her garments. Hadn’t been fucked in a few days. Ripe, tight. Older than me. Shadows.

“36B. Shaven. Black thong.”

I nearly jumped through the window. Said nothing.

“I know you’re curious. No offense taken.” I said nothing still. A spy too?

“Who isn’t? What else?” I said nothing.

“It’s OK. I went first anyway.” Nothing still. Testing? Terrified? “Come with me. I’m getting out tonight. I almost spoke.

“Let me tell you a story. By way of pedigree. Tonight I found my lover’s cock so deeply up my best friend’s ass I think it was poking out her cunt. He was fucking her in our bed, his & mine. Not in the bathroom or against a wall like other times. If I was a man, I would want to fuck her too. She’s pretty, she’s light. Pour a pitcher of angry cum into her, she squeals prettily & takes it with the right amount of pain. And gratitude.

“But our bed. Shouldn’t be different, should it? His cock in another woman’s twat, one place or another, what difference? Some I guess. It was because of a dream he had in that bed, that he told to me. A long time ago. He woke up, screaming, whimpering, & took what seemed like half the night to tell me this dream he’d had.

“Lick it. Now. Once. Then I’ll tell you.”

In a far curled place in my mind I lick that tight shaven thing of hers long & slow, I lick it while she trembles, grasps, breathes hard, lick it younger, tighter, she twists, yanks, cries soundlessly, lick it while she thinks of what this one or that one, books, family, God, *oh god o god o god o god o god o god*

cum for me very quietly.

now.

she does.

x. / xxx. / xci.

“There was a movie theatre he’d loved when he was a teenager. Nada Theater. Something like that. It closed & broke his heart. Just broke his damned heart. He didn’t have any friends really, too serious, too fucking *weird*. I mean it’s why we. When we did. Then her. But it wasn’t.”

I lick again, this time very, very gently, the pink edges of your cunt, over & over, gently, round & round. Then your clitoris. Then I bit but

no.

don’t cum.

no.

go on.

“He told me he dreamed about it. He said he couldn’t get in. He said he had tried & tried.

“I let him. Cry. I don’t know. Then he said something about it being trapped. What? I asked. He didn’t know. A film? The whole theatre. He really didn’t know. We didn’t talk about it later. I really wondered if it had happened at all. Maybe it was my dream.”

Now. cum hard.

“Fuck!” “Fffuck!”

“That’s what I thought about when I walked into our bedroom tonight & found him pounding the fucking shit out of my friend’s sweet little ass.”

I still don’t move or speak out loud.

“So I’m going. I’m tired. I need a new line to buy.”

“Got one?”

I look back at you & think that I didn’t really make you cum. It’s not that hard. You were keeping my interest while you told me that story.

What was rare though is that the options were there for me. Thought I hadn't looked at you or said a word out loud, you would have followed me back in or out, something stupidly miraculous happened there & then but—

Preacher would say you are why I now have Gretta & Christa. That I'm collecting my way back to you. Then he would laugh like he'd just farted, but hadn't.

xi. / xxxi. / xc.

Charlie Pigeonfoot, oh what a name! When the world falls down to its last, we'll only have him to blame!

Charlie Pigeonfoot, what do you know tell us true! You dreamed you made a new world from burning this one in your stew!

Charlie Pigeonfoot Charlie Pigeonfoot, *Charlie Pigeonfoot!*

"Charlie"

"Charlie!"

"Charlie Pigeonfoot!"

"That's not his real name. Maybe that's why he doesn't answer."

"Who is he? Is he famous?"

"That's what they said. He painted pictures. Weird ones."

"Like Andy Warhol? Or that guy who did *The Scream*?"

"Yah. Maybe. I don't know. I just know he's here on our freaking couch & we gotta help him."

"Help him? We're living in the back of a fucking movie theatre! Who's helping us?"

"Look, they don't kick us out, right? I mean they know we're here & nobody calls the cops. This is a favor for all that."

"Look. I mean this shit is scary. What if he dies. Are we being set up? Crazy movie fan squatters kill old famous artist?"

"Yah, sure. I don't think so. He's just old & a little beat up. Not too bad."

"Who would beat up an old artist? I mean *fuck*."

"Yah. I know. Well, he's here with us. Let's look at it that way. Your girl isn't here."

"Fuck you. She'll be back."

"Yah, she'll bring the fucking cops."

"Fuck you, man!"

Charlie wakes groggy in this dim place to two ragged looking boys screaming at each other. He can't recall the how or why of here, the what of it. Anything.

"Hey, sorry."

"Yah, man, you OK?"

Charlie breathes heavy.

They forget their quarrel for a minute & tend him. By dumpster diving in nearby allies they've gotten a supply of clothes, blankets, canned food. They help him into clean clothes, feed him soup, get him comfortable on the couch they take their turns sharing. Two sleeping bags for them nearby.

Charlie pats each on the shoulder & nods weakly. Then falls to sleep.

"I think that's all we can do for him for now."

"Yah. Poor guy."

"He's safe here."

Pause. Then the inevitable question.

"Think the white bunnies will show up tonight?"

"Probably, yah."

"Should we try to catch them or talk to them?"

"It never works, man. They're not real like we are. I don't know what the fuck they are really."

"Yah."

"Look, it's OK. Maybe they're just checking on us. Protecting us. You never know."

"Yah. I guess."

"Just get some sleep. Maybe this guy will talk in the morning."

"I, um"

"What?"

"Nothing."

They sleep. They white bunnies appear as they do every night, hopping in a double blur through the theatre, across the movie screen like images but then through the aisles & then into the back room where the three sleep.

They hop through a crack in the wall a little wider tonight, now almost visible to human eyes, & are again gone———

Now look up! Look around. Yes. Charlie is a boy in his dream, or at least folded helplessly into his own past—he knew a woman, knew her in the last years of her career as an artist—saw what she was going for—the way she grew more & more porous before her canvas—he thought of them as her "blood canvases," which is of course what he later named his own series of paintings—pictures which made & broke him again & again—

& here she was—not the first time to appear in his dreams—they were hardly even dreams anyway—more a baseless well he visited through sleep—on sleep's other side—& he barely remembered them when back again awake—yet they drove him, much of what he did—even in the nuthouse & when it got bad again & again

She painted—always closer & closer—always the sea—& he knew by her strokes, her pauses, her facial expressions, how close this time to the last day—& he was never there when she put down her brush—or broke it, or whipped it into the sea—& do what, if he had been? Stop her? Stop the sunrise, stop love or hate or growth or change—

He talked, she painted, the sea moved nearer & farther—he was here to learn—he barely remembered his waking life on the other side of dreams—

"Why the sea?"

Silence. Then she laughed. "There are three answers to that."

"Tell me."

"The first is profound so it means less to me personally. I dreamed God was the sea & my way to pray to him was this, this unfinished picture among all my finished ones, unknown to dealers & those who admire me. This is my pact, my prayer, my choice how to praise & thank."

Long pause. "The second is I don't know why. I began this canvas long ago. I was a different person then. This picture is what connects us, her & me. She & I." She laughs again.

Pause. He waits. The sea.

"The third?"

She begins slowly. "I was a girl the first time I came here. I was pretty & foolish but I had something. I came here again & again. Always wore my yellow swimsuit. It left little unexposed. I liked it. I felt the hungry stares, their intensities, some kind, sweet, some dark, violent. I absorbed them for a long time, thinking I'd learn & then know desire."

"Did you?"

"No," she says flatly. "Not then. Not since. Eventually I covered up, grew serious, left something behind. Became less strange to who I am now. Here I am."

Charlie nods.

Another time:

"Did you marry?"

"I'm a grandmother! My granddaughter calls me Mimé, which is sort of French for granny."

"Sort of?"

She laughs.

"She's a darling. I don't see her often. She makes cassettes of music she records from the radio. Rock and roll. Not bad. I listen when I go to sleep at night. Strange lullabies."

He nods.

Closer, she says less:

"Who am I to you?"

"Don't you know?"

"I don't know a lot." Grimaces.

"You visit. We talk."

"I want to break through."

"Yes. You say that."

"I don't know who but I think I can." She nods.

"Help me?"

She nods. Says nothing.

xii. / xxxii. / lxxxix.

When you begin to elude fear & doubt hope, heed what oncomes, despite.

(I ask: how did I used to write? How did I used to live? How did that & that lead to this, & this to some hereon?)

When you nod with others in the amber-smoked room, avoid what pulsates, what lures, want unsated, these centuries of men.

(I ask: what do I want to write now? Which words & how? Beyond expectation, long since goodbye to masters, what?)

When some year, some quietly violent hour comes that you reck the trees new, all beauty, but no example, save endurance.

(Words do what they do, are what they are. Language holds no answer, not even a sure way of asking the question.)

When those lean near who offer an answer in cards, coins, patterns of stars, the shape shit steams on the earth, what wonder in man.

(Not enough wonder, I keep thinking. Deep roots in air, hard theories not answering why.

(Say God is not answering why. It's naming the question.

(What of all known, of history, of craft, of more than shadows?

(I don't know. I keep my mouth shut usually against how I want to scream against it all—

Rebecca.

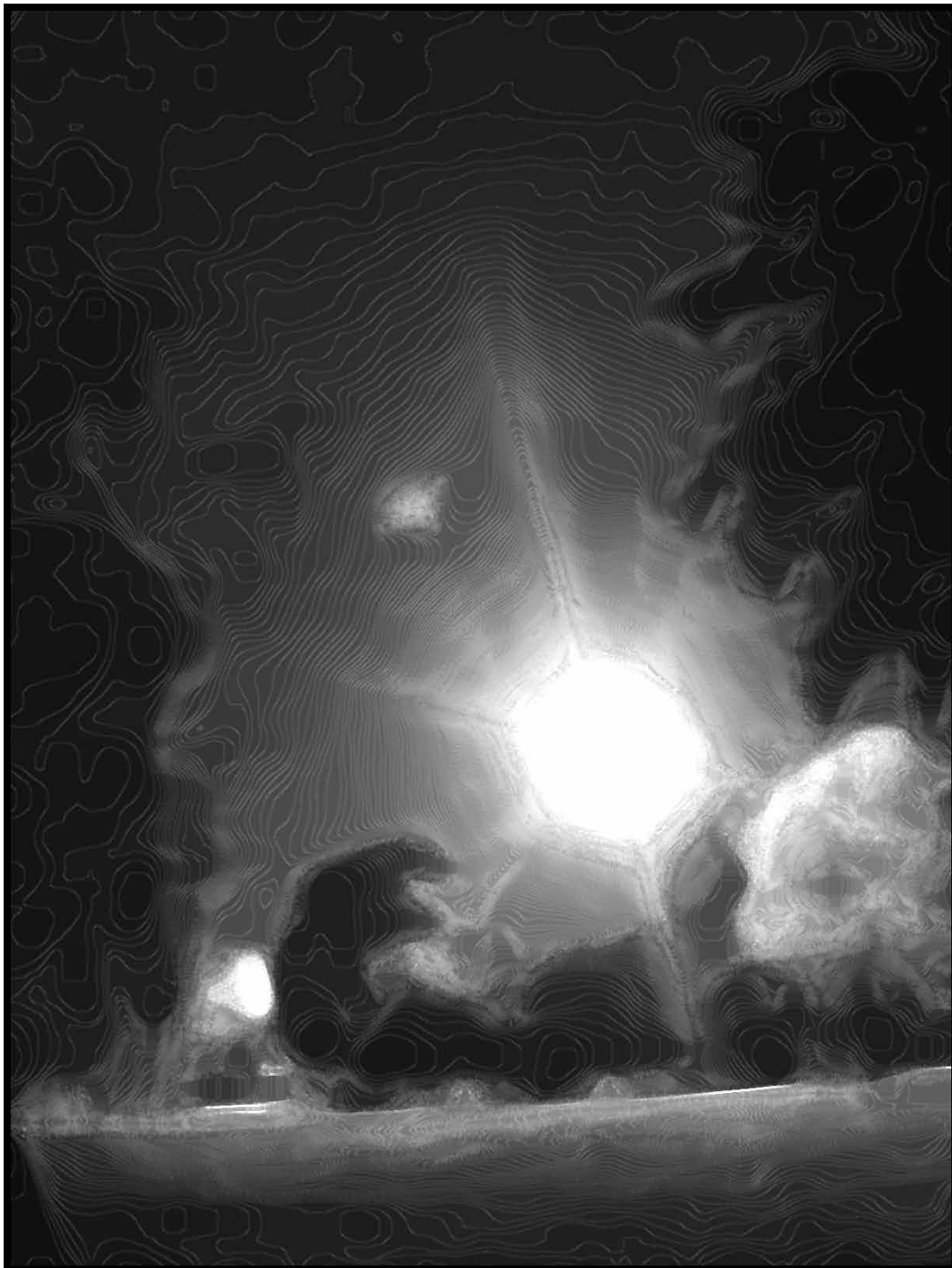
Raymond.

What then.

What then.

This book is a thousand pages long.

What then?



1001. 1002.

There are better & worse pages, Raymond. You know that.

What I don't know is why any of it.

It's what you do. What I do. What happens in these pages that matters—

Where have you been?

I could answer that in a lot of ways.

You could.

I was drawing.

What were you drawing.

You.

Me?

Yes. You were leaving.

Leaving. You?

No. Not really.

Leaving what? Who?

Where. You were leaving a where.

Where.

But you didn't know to where. It was scary. It hustled up close to your Art where you're dearest & you didn't like this.

No. I wouldn't.

So I gave you a hope.

A hope?

Yes. A hope. Like not all in departure is bad, or permanent.

I feel that way. A going & a lessening. A gap. A chasm. Something

Sadness?

Disappointment. Resentment. So many years. I really fucking believed. I tied everything close in my heart & work.

Now what.

Yes. Rebecca. Now what?

The next day. The next word.

Your drawing of me leaving but I had a hope.

Yah. But I can't tell you.

I've been writing this book for 3½ years, 1000 pages, & I would not know how to describe it to someone or my intentions.

Do you need to know? Maybe.

I don't know. Maybe.

Where's your dad?

He's around. You know that.

Why so much less?

It's OK, Raymond. Nothing goes away. Nothing returns.

When the faces cackle to many nights in drink, in waiting, in calling wisdom what tickles the skin—
When this is no solid ground, when not even music, old sure friend, then sleep, wage the remain in dream—

When the winds shift uncertainly, high, low, a change coming, a free choice riding on ways of inner compulsion, & pass between mountains again, between hills, through plains, over rivers, the single phrase that always find a sniffing nose if it sniffs long enough this world, "follow through, finally follow

through”

I think: maybe it simply stays now, maybe I have swallowed this dear thing so many times that it has come to stay & won't go, we're not apart, there is no need to renew, not now, there is now more need to look around, remember & keep moving, as Rebecca has said to me, remember & keep moving—

I keep this dear thing more by going elsewhere, I trust the good in it will go with me, it joins other things deep in my heart, remember & keep moving, remember & keep moving—

Other dear things more needed now, other needs are driving me, a need for home field, a home field I've not played on in a long time, return then but remember too, & keep moving—

Dear thing, I am bringing you with me, as I have done with other dear things, it is a trick but has the virtue of allowing a grieving soul to remember & keep moving

The anger, the loss, the grief—
Keep them, change by days &
years, they change too—nothing
gone—nothing returning—

xiii. / xxxiii. / lxxxviii.

Bobbie & the cop cannot find the Noah Hotel's elevator. It isn't at either end of the corridor they are in, nor in between, so the cop says let's use the stairs.

Bobbie isn't sure where they are going & asks.

He takes her hand as they push through the door to the stairway.

“You're with me now,” he says without looking back. His voice is gentle, firm, kind, sure, all at once, her body still tingles from his touch, from his release at her word.

Safety. That's what this was. A feeling of safety. And next time if he—

this was what it had felt like with the other one, that deep want, that male knowing she'd always greedied after—

he speaks suddenly & has to catch her she starts so badly from behind—holds her a moment—they move along—he begins again—

“We were both abandoned—we share this” he stops—she nods from behind him & yet he sees & continues—

“It was a gap in my mind—& I ended up here—with you—I'm not afraid of your youth or anything like that—I was afraid before because I thought you were the wrong one—”

“I'm not?”

“No. I wasn't paying for a hooker. I don't want you to think that. That's how it was covered up, what I wanted—”

“What?”

“I'm not him—the one on the beach—the one in the chat”

She does not fall again because he catches her up, carries her now—

“And you're not the answer to what I'm missing”

This is safety. This is protection. I don't know what this is.

“I began to look for something else not long ago. Or I think really I was looking all along & then I started finding finally—” he laughs, stops, catches her more securely in his arms—this stairway seems endlessly down—grey, cement, lit by a bulb every landing & half-landing—she doesn't want to arrive—

"I was at a library & there was a book & a man talking. Both. I found this book on the floor, sort of torn up, & I picked it up & sat down to read it. Thought I should. I don't believe in meaningful coincidences except that there's a gap in my life that keeps me unsure of *what the fuck I believe*—"

Sounds angry but, strangely, protects her more. This is safety. *Ohh safety.*

"So I started reading just as a man in a meeting room nearby starts talking to a group, & I read & I listen & something happens & then other things but it's like it had been night & suddenly someone burned a path before me & all I had to do was walk it—"

Silence. Her body calm, it's calm all over, how was this possible?

"He said 'there's no cage but perspective' & I read the line"—pauses, breathes—"this empathy we could brew like a tea, this breathing, this crack between hearts—"

He stops. "The gap is the empathy. That's the good news. The gap is the cage of perspective. That's the bad."

"I was the cop sent under cover to rescue you. I found you. I am not returning you. We are going together. Neither of us is returning."

xiv. / xxxiv. / lxxxvii.

Dust, a violent hour, endurance. Crack between hearts, a silence, like a burial in breath—

"A story again?"

Mr. Bob the barman nods, smiles.

Tonight trembles sweetly to one touch, salts blindly another's eyes—

"Well, it was another time in some ways—"

"It always is. Somewhere there's three or four laughing in bed. Somewhere else a fist is making her unpretty for any other man—"

Violent hour, dust, endurance. Tonight reck the remaining bones of a belief, of a love, reck what green rides old cracks high—

"Thing is, my friend, I was done. My heart was empty. I looked at her in that hotel room. I mean the booze & pills were sitting there—"

What rises with the light, what crosses the moon, what sings shores empty of men tonight, a wish, a riddle, a truth—

"It wasn't her, it was me. Wasn't the booze, wasn't the cock pills. It was me. It was when she'd decided she'd come with me. I mean you don't fuck whores for love, right?"

Nod.

"She wasn't a whore. Exactly. I mean there was something else going on."

Someone asks for a drink. Mr. Bob glares, a rarity for him.

"In the dark it had been another time. She was now, I was then. Someone had engineered it."

"Then the lights went on."

"And I remembered."

"But—"

He shakes it off.

That was the hard thing to figure. Someone had brought him to that room. Someone knew about the night lifetimes ago.

"Some nights don't finish ever" he says, looking up at Mr. Bob suddenly.

Nods. Waits. Nothing else.

Those panties of hers were black lace & written on them were the words "*Bad Girls Need Love Too*" &

she lay back in that bed—this bed & she held out her arms—she was smiling shy—in my stupid young heart I couldn't figure out how an angel could be a bad girl—I looked at her—

“Someone knew about that night & brought me back there.”

And he came. He'd left that first time, left her without a word. Turned, walked the fuck out.

The room was dark & her voice was the same.

“Where did you go?”

For a long moment I say nothing. I breathe in impossibility. I breathe her in. Her voice. Her scent. I smell sex. I didn't then. She wants, wanted me to fuck her!

The room is too dark to see anything but shapes & outlines. She's there on the bed. Blankets, sheets pushed aside. I sniff again.

“Are you OK?”

Now I've seen shit. That's why I'm here. Someone is either paying me off or paying me back.

I sit on the edge of the bed.

“You still want to” she's tentative. I imagine the panties. The tits. I think of how many panties & tits since.

For a lingering moment I move in toward her, hear her grasp, smell her sex even stronger, move in & take her hands, instruct them on undressing me, make sure she touches down there, makes sure she knows I am possessing her every moment more & her lust & her innocence & her trust mingle together as I slip one hand into her panties she grasps didn't think I knew to do that, & that, *oh*—now move a little for me, *oh*—

For this lingering moment I let all the years in, the rough nights, the violent ones, the many alone, I let my single hand move her around & she moves, & moves, touch a nipple, pinch it, a little more, she starts to retreat, a touch confused, he's not learning too, he already knows, how—?

For the last of this lingering moment I am moving you into place under me & you are acquiescing half in shock as I pull your panties from you & make you help me gag you with them, I see your eyes in the darkness & before I can push in, hard & deep, the one you want & fear, I stop—

Silence. Stillness. “Take it out.”

Still darkness. “Who sent you?”

“I?”

“Nothing more is going to happen.”

“Why?”

Her question throws me.

“I'm sorry.” She's crying.

I stand, put on light.

“Oh.”

I noticed the pills on the table.

The booze. “Now the hard question was,” he says to Mr. Bob, “is were they there the last time?” He nods.

I expect her to flee. I'm not that boy. But she nods. I expect her to dress. She doesn't. Finally I stop expecting & look at her.

"Are you her?"

"Are you him?"

Check.

She makes no move to cover up & I can feel the tension shift that way. I push the blanket to her.

"No. Thanks."

Not sure what that means.

I guess it means I have to take her seriously in that way too.

We almost fucked. She's not seeing this as a trick now. I nod internally.

"OK."

"OK."

She's not the same girl, quite. But. Then again I'm, what, 30 years older?

So I move to dress now.

"Don't"

I try not to misunderstand. It's not a want for sex. It's more . . . she doesn't want me ready to go.

We sit quietly. She moves next to me. She leans into me.

"I want you to come back."

I say nothing.

"I'm going to wait here."

Mr. Bob nods. "She's waiting."

"Yah."

"Whoever she is."

"Whoever *I am*."

He stills me with his look & words. "Maybe she's not from your enemies or your friends."

"What mean?"

"Well, I'm not sure what I'm getting at here but maybe this is really between you & her. Nobody else."

I nod, not really knowing why.

"Go back. Now."

I nod. Again, not much why in it.

xv. / xxxv. / lxxxvi.

One night talking plainly to Preacher, in between this & the next, asking him about something with unknown meaning. Happened years ago.

"You said 'do the fucking work or shit nothing'."

He nods. I can tell he's not fully listening. I press. "I said, 'I'm not you, I don't know what the work is.'"

Nods again, still distracted. Resisting maybe.

"You said you'd never figured out if it was a collective work or if each person's was distinct. If it all fit together or not."

"I still don't know, if you're asking me now."

"No. I'm telling you."

"Telling me what?"

"You're my work."

He looks at me, turns away, looks at me again. Says nothing. Nods, then retracts it, don't ask me how. Has a preaching to do. I hand him his few notes. He looks at them, then shakes his head. Ah,

an ad lib. Roll it out live. I pull out my tape recorder. I did that sometimes.

Now years later, I listen.

You're still down there dancing as I hit the play button on the portable cassette player with the headphone jack & tinny-sounding speaker. These used to be popular, called Walkmens. Nearly everyone had one, like nearly everyone always has one of something. I moved under this tree to watch you, maybe touch myself if I got horny or bored or confused. He told me, your older self, to talk to you & instead I see this Walkman & examine its cassette tape & wow, more of you keep manifesting. I hit the play button.

"What rises with the light, crosses the moon, what sings shores empty of men tonight"—your voice half buried in hiss, in the coughs, the other sounds of a listening crowd moving around in their seats—your voice is beautiful—I listen as I watch you swing your flashlight around like a scimitar, down there at your wake or funeral or whatever it is—"Call it imaginal space."

Fuck. Yah. You wouldn't take credit for that idea or the phrase though I hadn't heard it before—was this the first time you talked about it? "One music, many musics, the porous ground to any staying cry of human truth"—it was a better time for us—this idea cheered you up—we had more gigs, more good times—

"Tonight reck the remaining bones of any belief, any love, any fire not fed by the hour"—there was a pause. Hissing. A cough. I see down below you are approaching the drummers around the big bonfire—"Reck what green rides old cracks high, what oncomes a torrent, violent hours"—& I say aloud with you: "Endurance. Dust." It's like the words were a magic & it really kicked in that night—"The dreams their caterwaul but who would listen?" You pause again. Hiss but no coughs, no sound of bodies doing. *Everyone was listening*—

"Call it imaginal space, the shifting crack between hearts, a wish, a riddle, a sooth. One music, many musics." I stand up, unsure, but stand, Tweety Bird with me, we're going down there, to you, listening still as you speak. "Asked what tool is this, say what needed?" Walking now, down there, to the drumming, to you—how the fuck does this work again?—Walking down there, to you, me, Tweety, our Walkman of your voice—drums louder,—“A salve, a meal, knowing the tongue of the galaxies themselves?” Walkman held high now, drummers louder, you are tentatively among them—wonder how this works? No sure way—there's a groove going on, fire, the full moon, dancers—"The challenge is to see tonight's glowing door by the morrow's plain light, see, & step through" & now I stop, halfway to you, was coming but no, now stopped, stopped.

I sit again. Watch you find the empty drums, take your turn, find your way in, realize there is no way in—no out & in—however you learn this—whichever words—I stay this far now—watching you—the cassette clicks off or I click it off—I don't know—I love you tonight unbearably down there & you do not know—you struggle tonight & I think you're aloft now—watch you disappear into the beat—

Imaginal Space. You don't know it tonight, not yet, & I'm on the far end.

Abh.

xvi. / xxxvi. / lxxxv.

Toward the morrow's plain light, the bursts of darkness along its hours, the finely strummed gestures rent by a fumbled faith in mystery—

A little movement. A breath.

A trip back into the junk of common truths. Common truths, able to brick up a wall or score a small rift of power.

What it sounds like within to surrender. A little. And more.

Common truths, bursts of darkness.

When the lace is shred, behold an easy wet cunt or a lightning to ride through?

Ahh. That again. Always that.

I feel her groping over me, my eyes closed, the scent, it's sweet, it's salty, & I don't know, eyes closed, her hands they start to, & then, & she tries, & she tries again, my own hands remain passive, I don't know who she is, who I am, for certain, her lips touch mine lightly then harder, oh here's something! She likes this, tries again, my eyes shut no, her lips are soft, are full, press sweetly & there is a moment but, no, there isn't, that wasn't, they press & she gains something, a little shift, well yes, she liked that, not like from expectation or instruction, no, she *liked* it, *she* liked it—

but wait—wait—what about me—she liked it, liked this, whatever name they called it, she liked it, felt it in more of her body—but did I like it? I mean with her? Did I? Was she doing it right? She really didn't know but—

xvii. / xxxvii. / lxxxiv.

Long exhaust. Long, long exhaust. I mine about me for those old still-working answers or a jury-rig of a few new ones. Either, or, both.

Do the fucking work. It's all I have to come back to over & over. *Do the fucking work.* It's my faith & it's not really enough but—yet—more like I'm not really enough but I push & I try & I am not really enough but—

Do the fucking work. Against the lies of so much, the stench, the disappointment, the failure of men to even near tending their own, or their world, I keep saying: *do the fucking work*—

she listens to my breathing, trying to know it—this is something here—her body tries to whelm her with fear, with flee—she doesn't—doesn't—his eyes are shut—his breaths—quick—her?—her touch? she thinks so but he won't look at her—ah, OK—but—she kisses me again—he is passive, breathes quickly, receives—think! no! don't think—

now his hand on her breast—holding, cupping—yes? no? squeezes his hand on her & shakes inside—

No. Yes. No. Now he squeezes. Oh. He did. Did he? She thinks so.

“Again. Please. I like it. I want it.” She thinks. She whispers. Oh. *Oh!* She tries to curl more into him, into his grasp, wants to be in his grasp, please (*fuck*) let me in your (*fuck*) grasp, he lets a little but still unsure & she (*don't think*) hesitates (*don't think!*) & reaches down there & touches it (*Oh!*) (*don't run!*) (*Oh!*) (*don't run!*) touches, again, feels it stiffen (*Oh!*) feels its tip, its length (*Oh!*) yes she is making it hard (*that's good*) (*that's good?*) for her & she tries to kiss again but it goes wrong (*why?*) (*it was soft, sweet*) (*now it's*) hard, goes wrong because (*it's hard*) it's not like before (*hard*) different (*hard*) & she is not how she was (*hard*) sort of more falling back (*hard*), not in grasp (*fucking hard*) more in possession, more (*hard*) what it was always like before (*hard*) coming at her & she had to flee (*hard*) or else (but) but not this time because she had wanted this (*hard*) (*no, soft, that kiss, soft*) (*hard*), somehow again (*hard*) (*please*) (*oh*) (*hard*) & yes she was, down there but (*please*) now? (*please*) (*hard*) (*please*) oh (*yes*) (*no*) yes no (*yes no*) hands on her there, & there (*yes no*) hands not passive (*yes no*) gripping, squeezing (*yes no*) (*hard*) hard, & she feels it (*hard*) hard as it pushes hard (*hard*) closer & nearer (*but it was soft, it was mine!*) & now, & oh, a word, a low spoken word (*hard*) (*because hard*) (*because soft & hard*) (*because soft is not enough*) (*oh please, oh*) feels it touching her closely (*oh hard*) presses squeezes scratches say it again, the word, say it

"say it!"

but no she didn't hear & won't know as he, & then he, *ohhh, no yes, please no yes, yes, no yesss, oh, I open out wider, I want to makes me want to makes me want to makes me open out o god wants to* (hard) *makes me* (hard) *oh god* (oh god) (wants to makes me) (hard) (o god) (the word is moan)

"moan for me" & she explodes.

"Christa"

A year, many later,

"Christa"

She sat with Oliver later, in Harvard Square, it was winter but a mild day

"Here, drink this"

He was a good listener & she never knew why she told him. She was tired of it, he was too. Talking wasn't much approved of, but they talked—talked instead of work

It had happened, here

"Sit up a little, let me adjust your pillow"

Oliver was wrong at first—

No I chased him. I couldn't help it.

I, um, drugged him, a little

He laughed. That's a new one on me.

It was just some X.

"Look at me, Christa. What's my name?"

He wouldn't touch me. I had to do this. You don't know why.

We all get horny.

No, it wasn't that.

What then.

"I'm Gretta. Come on! What's wrong"

He stopped.

Stopped.

Yes.

I thought you said.

No. Not him. He didn't. I didn't want him to.

Who?

Christa opens her eyes & looks at Gretta. Smile.

Preacher.

Preacher. He stopped.

"Are you OK."

Nod.

"What?"

Now he's here. In Cambridge.

Where?

I know he's here. And I have to decide.

Decide what? Does he want you back?

It's not that.

"Bowie knows Preacher."

Gretta starts. Christa never talks about Bowie, or uses his name.

"They were partners. Still are. I don't even know what that means."

It's me. I've been chasing him down. All these years. It's why we're here.
 Oliver looks stunned.
 I can do things, persuade people. That man I told you about, he was strong, he resisted me. But
 I had to get away from Preacher, from chasing him.
 It didn't work.
 No I made him fuck me till his cock hurt & my cunt was too sore.
 Oliver spasms. Christa has never talked like this.

"Is Preacher here?"
 "I'm not sure."
 "Why?"
 "Here isn't like everywhere else. Do you know him?"

We'll go to Seattle tonight.
 Our bus tickets are—
 We'll trade them in. I'll pay the penalty. We have to go. You have to come with me.
 I want out too, Christa.

"I should have known it. That they knew each other. He told me once that once something touches something else they are always perfectly connected, forever, no matter how far apart they are."

xviii. / xxxviii. / lxxxiii.

Penelope. Christina. I didn't know. I really didn't. Some nights I would sit with Benny & just ask.
 "One or the other?"
 "Or both?"
 "I'm trying to figure out if they started as two, & maybe switched?"
 "Or they are one but for your names?"
 "I don't know."
 I look at Benny. "I am dreaming."
 "Yes."
 "Right now."
 "Yes."
 "This is how we know each other."
 "Yes, Jack. You visit Dreamland. Sometimes we talk."
 "Are we enemies?"
 "No."
 "Rivals?"
 "In a way."
 "Because of her?"
 "Which?"
 "Her."
 "Yah, Jack. Her."
 "So what do I do?"
 "Are you asking for my help?"
 "Yes."
 "With her?"
 "Yes."

"She's here."

"Now."

"Yes, Jack. Always."

"Since when."

"Since she was small, Jack."

"Which one?"

"Yes."

"Maya?"

"Yes."

"Ahh."

"Do you want to see her?"

"Yes. No."

Benny laughs. "I can make that happen here if you let me."

"No. Wait."

We look at each other. Benny is fairly consistently baldheaded, tattooed, a sort of badass looking dude. Not sure why but that's how he looks to me. Like someone I would rather have on my side of a bar fight, or any other kind of fight.

"Thanks, Jack."

"Do you want her?"

"Who?"

"Her."

"Not like you do."

I walk into a classroom & she is in the front row. Oh. This. I hear Benny laughing in my ears. "See if you can play this one out a different way, mate."

She's in the front row. There's a boy too. I feel that between them as I enter, it dissipates as she turns to me, as he doesn't.

One glance & no more. This is not the first class, I can tell by the braid in her hair, how her skirt is short but swishy & pink tights.

"But he's there too. What of him?"

I look at him, for a moment as though forever. For that, all of it, he & me.

"You won't ever have her."

"You can't say that."

"You won't come even close."

"Why. But."

"She came here to listen. But you don't have anything to say yet."

"No. But."

"You feel it in your thighs for her."

" "

"Hard & deep."

" "

"Say yes."

"Yes."

"Feel it big in you & want to fill it big in her."

"Yes."

"Look away."

"I can't."

"Look away."

"No. No!"

"Do you see my hand."

"Yes."

"What's it doing."

"Touching her cheek."

"Yes."

"I wish."

"Not now."

"Not ever?"

"Watch."

"Her cheek. Her neck. Her shoulder. How?"

"That's the mystery. I am always there with her. Touching like that, always close."

"But. Yes."

"There is an open space. Not taking or giving clearly."

"Sharing?"

"Music."

"Music?"

"There are six questions I want you to write down & think about."

I pause. She waits. Everyone waits. Everyone else waits for the questions. She waits for me.

"That's the difference. Do you understand?"

"What can't I."

"You can't. Not her."

"Why electrify an animal with consciousness?" They write. I lick along her neck.

"Why point his eyes toward the stars as he shits?" They write. I bite her inner thigh twice.

"Why make fucking the stuff of grunt & prayer?" I breathe along her shoulders, her nipples. Breathe. Breathe harder. *Breathe harder.*

"Why let him speak knowing in lies & truths?" she lurches away, suddenly, softly.

"Why the rift from nature, urge to know, consume?" She leans forward, back. Not apart, not union.

"Why the dread path to demise with dreams of escape?" She's back in her seat, waiting me. Has written the questions, like the rest.

"Now what" asks Benny.

"I don't know."

"She's waiting."

"Yah."

"Well."

"Yes?"

"Maya?"

"Yes, Jack. It didn't start with you. Not even close."

"And it doesn't end."

“Why should it? She’s better at it now than she used to be.”

“Better?”

“Accepting. Working with what she has, what she is.”

“

“It’s OK, Jack.” Benny laughs.

“Not this way.”

“How then?”



To be continued in Cenacle | 80 | December 2011

* * * * *



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

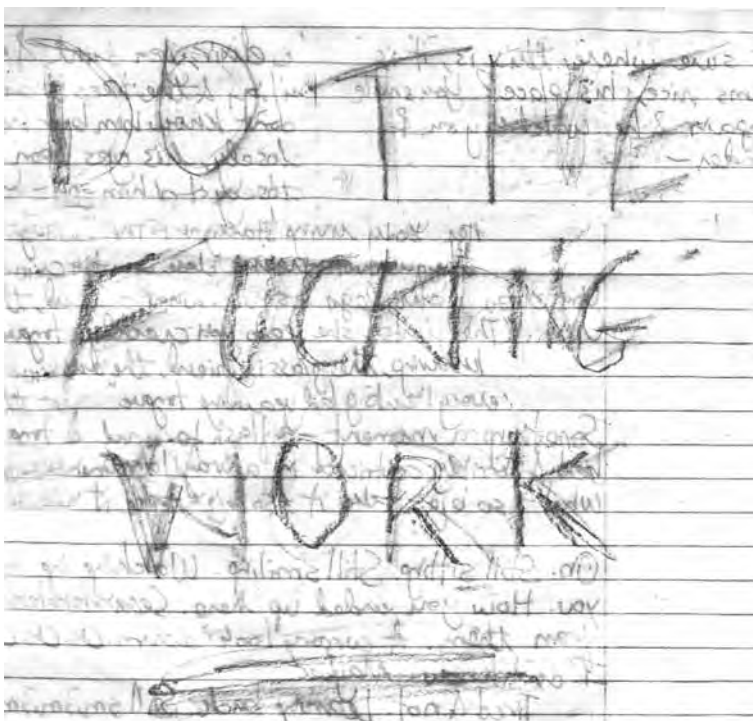
[a new fixtion]

Part Six

*“The bud
stands for all things,
even those things that don’t flower,
for everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing:
though sometimes it is necessary
to reteach a thing its loveliness,
to put a hand on its brow
of the flower
and retell it in words and in touch
it is lovely”*
—Galway Kinnell,
“St. Francis and the Sow,” 1980.

xix./xxxix./lxxxii.

On a wall, reproduce here by a stub, was a phrase I wrote for myself toward days & hours when I need it—little else hits straight to my best as this:



Offered the elixir, you drink, & now the stars familiar & the trees shaman. He smiles. You don't know him but he watches you closely, his eyes upon yours as you drink, the rest of him—*oh*—

Not sure where this is, it is nice, seems nice, his place? You smile & drink again & he watches you & you wonder—

He reads to you

*Her body living starlight to the touch &
the furthest dreams close upon this petal*

You cross your legs & smile—what—

*The water she feeds you crackles with
knowing, the grass is friend, the drums
every heart's glad yearning tongue*

*Something a moment—a flash forward & bed & terribly constricted in a way—straining—what—so big—
take it—so big—take it—*

Oh. Still sitting. Still smiling. Watching you. How you ended up here. Separated from them. A cursory look down. *Oh*. I don't know. Maybe.

Tired & not. Learning back. Still smiling, still watching.

I'm in his arms. I try not to scream he is gentle *oh*. I didn't. But.

He is gentle but. Oh that. *Oh. That. Why. Now.*

I let myself. There are words like *beautiful. Sweet. Tight*. I know. I've heard them before. Never but.

He is gentle but. He moves me around. *Oh. Here? How*. I think. From a distance. I look.

He watches her as she sits with them. Listening. Bored. Music in hand. Waiting. Cringe at her outfit. *How. Shh*. He watches & waits. Talks to her. A parking lot. She goes. *I went?*

I feel myself being. *Oh. You*.

It's not that I don't. Just that. This feels. Oh. I can't. *Oh*.

"Oh"

"Shh"

"Please"

"Shh"

"Who?"

"Say please"

"Please"

"Again"

"Please. *Oh*. Please."

"Nice."

"*Oh. Please.*"

"Nice?"

"Oh. Please. *Oh. Please.*"

"Shh"

I stop saying. I watch him spread her out, he gently, & then, *oh*. I watch. *Oh*.

No. That's the word. No?

No. Not the word.

No. I don't know. I don't remember. I hadn't. I was bored. He watched me. He wanted me. I

wanted the want. Now.

I can't but he. And I am. He kisses. He licks. No. Kisses. Licks. *No.*

His mouth on me. I haven't. *Oh.* Licks down on me. *Oh.* Further down.

"Oh."

"Shh"

"*Ohh.*"

He licks into me I can't. *Oh god.* He won't. I can't. *Ohh shit.*

"Please."

"Shh"

"*Please*"

"Moan."

I moan. I moan very loudly, I scare myself, he holds me a little tighter, licks, *oh.*

"Fuck."

"Shh. Moan."

I moan. I am scared but I moan. Not a boy. Watched me. My body. I knew it. Not a body. I didn't.

"Moan."

He licks harder, almost angrily & I. *Oh I. Oh. I.*

When he. *Oh stop. Oh please stop. Oh. Oh. Oh. Big. Big. Hard. Big. Hard. Big. Oh fuck.*

"Oh fuck."

"Say it."

"*Ohh fuck.*"

"Say it!"

"*Fuck.*"

"Say it, Christina."

I cum. I cum hard. I am scared & hurt & I cum fucking hard when he says my name.

"I'm not Kinley you fucking slut."

I leave, half naked, bleeding.

"That's what it was like, Kinley."

"No."

"Yes."

"No."

Kinley looks at me. He's held me as he drived but since this hotel room we've talked.

"Why no? Don't you believe me?"

"I'm your first."

I laugh at him. "No. You're not."

"First & only."

"Kinley?" I look at him. Something in my heart, not carnal.

His look is sad.

"It's OK." I smile. "I'm here now. With you."

He won't cheer & I am confused. His strength seems gone. I lay him back in the bed. Turn out the light.

Let him hold me. He's not sleeping.

"Tell me, Kinley."

"You were vulnerable because of me."

"No. Because I was a horny girl. We all were."

"I couldn't then."

"I know. It's OK."

"That first time. It was me."



"No it wasn't. It was—"

"Who?"

"No." I don't know.

"It was me."

"No. No, Kinley."

"I couldn't tell you."

I don't believe him but ask why.

"I was afraid."

"Of me."

"Of losing you."

I sit up. "No, Kinley. It wasn't you."

He relents. "It can be."

"Can be what?"

"Me. Then. Your first."

"Look, its OK. Other girls fucked teachers too. It was a game. Nobody died. Nothing lost, but a few cherries & a few vows of fidelity."

"I can be your first."

I take a breath. This is Kinley. He kidnapped a bunch of girls just to talk to me.

"What do you mean."

"I know ways."

"What? Time travel, Kinley?"

He is silent. OK. I soften. "It's OK. They're all shit-heads & they're all gone. Feel me. There. There. There. All yours. Like you said."

He's quiet, not satisfied but not as far. Putting his hand on my chest helped. We could both feel him stiffen without either of us having to touch it.

"Of a sort."

"Time travel of a sort?"

"Yes."

"All so you can be first to fuck me."

Silence.

"What does it matter? I'm here." *Jesess fucking Christ what is it with men?* They want us virginal, then to fuck like sluts, then sleep in their arms like human angels.

"No."

"*Then fucking explain it!*"

He's silent. But thinking.

I wait. This matters. I need to know what I'm into with this guy.

Still silent.

I speak. "Why not time travel back to stop Bush getting elected? Or 9/11? Why not something important?"

"You matter more than all that."

"Why?"

I fall asleep waiting for him to talk.

"Look forward, Christina"

Those words follow me into my sleep, on that hotel bed, I watch it fall away, where Kinley had brought me, I lingered, my heart was stuck, looking at his face, his hands, he was older, thinner, if that was possible, lingered, he lingered over me as I slept, I was out but "look forward, Christina" meant he was watching me purposefully, a part of me wanted him to just cop a fucking feel, just one, Kinley, want me straight & easy like the rest. No. Not you. If we ever do fuck it will probably be on a roof during an earthquake or at high speed. I guess that's more my fantasy than yours, but anyway—

I look forward, now this was years ago, & I remembered & lost this talent too many times since but you said it perfectly, you timed it perfectly, I looked forward, it was a way of seeing, simple & hard as that, a way of seeing, to look forward, all laid out to see—

I saw it all primitively but I saw it. I saw the world radiate out from me in many directions, some harder, some more . . . vaporous—but it made sense in a way, I could see how each choice & its cluster of results & their choices—

& not very well I found I could turn it into a kind of road on which I looked on down for events

Kinley held me that night. Kinley loved me, loves me. Through all of this, he loves me as much as Penny loves Jack, I love Kinley, it coalesced this night when he held me while I first learned to look forward—

What I want to do is find Kinley in all this—

Held her as I hadn't that first—not me—how it got off—she doesn't see that—something missing—

xx. / xl. / lxxxi.

Always to lead with best punch, cover the midriff, dodge, dodge, keep feet moving, weaving, weaving always weaving, not to move against him but to move with him, let him, let him, lead him again, inside the violence there is calm, inside every violence is a calm, a breath, sure a breath, deep or deeper—

My struggle was how did I do this now, how do I do this now *now*, not do now like extending howling echo of the past—

I kept—keep asking this—keep asking—

Ask here because I trust Art to bear my questions—that it can—does—will—

I thought—think—ask—is it all sexual wounding & sexual healing—there are powerful thinkers say so—the root of the wound, the path to daylight—

And I wondered at it—thought of orgasm the amazing release—the good ones, the quick ones, the wasted ones—how the orgasm breaks a stress, a sense of block—

But—I balked—balked & wondered what I was missing—something—I could feel it—

For it was more like the root was self-consciousness—& knowing mortality—how everything came of this—how even sex was guided & controlled by mortal flesh, passing time, do, & do, & do, because mortal, & all comes from it, the sentimentality for youth, the needs to build structures of bodies & bricks & nation states,

the empires of god that focus the fear, direct it to work, to production, to yoke a healthy young body to a discipline, a set of self-punishments it would not conjure for itself—because death, because fear—

consciousness of mortality, fear of sickness, of decay, on year's pogrom to annihilate the less strong, another year's want to dose every smiling face & a glimpse of some comfort, some hand reaching close from eternity—

but how to work back, if the shell is death & all heat within is infinite singular consciousnesses pushing against this shell—what?

Tonight it's clumsy, my pen is unsure, I sit here pushing along despite—but it's not sex at the root—it's Art—I believe that—on both ends—a child is a creative being to be coaxed & called for more, & an old man for all his sickness & fear is about to release into something humans limit themselves from

easy or ever conceiving—

Clumsy. This. Clumsy words. Stuck with my worries for time & energy enough. I believe in Art. My poems, this fiction, every contrivance I make & call Art, is of this faith—that Art cares, consoles, keeps those who pursue—

Art is the near & the far, & what bursts the shell itself, what doesn't stop. Whether crumbling bones or returned to starlight, what breaches death is the making before & hereon, the ever creation, what contains men & knows them among countless others—

This helps me. Art is men & more. Art is life & death & more. Art is ceaseless & more.

Leave off there for a bit.

Return, with lingering thoughts of desert, & why I've left it behind. It's not the desert, really, whose long, blowing nights I bear deep, no, it's the festival, how it never became more, just rules-bound, & more, til the nature was so much freer than the thousands who travelled to her only to remain in men-contrived cages—

It was sad, when I finally knew I wasn't returning, because I felt relief & indifference, & that was sad. So many years, how it was, a pilgrimage to the desert.

Squat in a plastic box, thumping sounds of immolation & ecstasies without, a dirty box, the many shits coldly steaming under my ass, shits & paper & trash & whatever else can be shoved in a dirty hold because the door's shut & who knows—

I sate with a puzzling book & read its first lines. Suffer, it said, this is why you suffer, this canker of want in you, each of you, name it a god or a devil, this is why you suffer, that you live from first cry riven & crawl your years to be whole, that you cry up love into myth to keep it a step away, that you litigate desire for its blind, brutal wish, build great towers & temples of distraction, cage your every last soul in discontent, in bitterest hunger, *this is why you suffer*—

“Where did it go, Rebecca?”

“Your Art moved on, Raymond.”

“I have no like to it, no next, no sequel I know or plan to.”

“It's OK. Art remains. Art goes on.”

“That's all that matters.”

“I know”

“It was my community. It mattered to me. I drew my friends & meaning from it often.”

“And meaning still—”

“So what then.”

“You leave. But you don't part.”

“I suppose so.”

My shit came sudden & raw & the plastic ceiling above my head exploded; the stars fell in on me, I was a moment so beautiful & dead.

I've died a couple of times, several. Once in the Vermont woods, once in the Everglades. Once in the desert. Ascended through the dirty tent to the starry skies above, very high, saw the whole city below. So tiny below, mattered so much & not at all, & whether to return, or leave my corpse to be found days later—& choosing to return—each time, each of these deaths—the choosing to return—remain

embodied, remain here among the struggle—

“What remains?”

“You.”

“And for them?”

“Absence. Memory?”

“Change. And change again.”

“Art is directing me elsewhere. Strangely, it’s directing me east. After all these years, east.”

“East has never left you either, Raymond.”

“Nothing leaves.”

“No.”

“What then? Something, Rebecca, so this story can move along.”

“Change. Again. Sing. Again. The world recurs & all in it recur.”

“So. Sing & recur?”

Suddenly present, all blue eyes & bright face, first I’ve seen of you so much in so long, smiling,

“Yes. Sing, & recur.”

A turn back to Flying Elephant Services, the man is reading a letter it is from a mechanic who lives in a border town on the edge of the desert. The envelope & paper are brittle, amazing they survived delivery, the handwriting is difficult, like the writer struggled with each word.

It reads, in part: *“there is a system, I am sure. I see the pattern, with variation. It is communication.”* The letter discusses probability, discounts chance, but struggles for motive. *“I need Rosie back. You must send her back to me. I cannot go further without her.”*

The man reads in his gloom. Reads again. Mutters, softly, angrily. This account matters, more than all the rest no doubt. Yet there are limits to his services, parameters he chooses not to cross. Still, this request is not unexpected. He sighs, then moves to his work of retrieval.

xxi. / xli. / lxxx.

The next story concerns one of the previous stories, tells it differently. The one about Charlie Pigeonfoot & his checker-paying friend in the hospital, & the scraggly black nurse who argued with him about the code & the key. O, good one. The truth is, it was all a contrivance. Charlie was being held on a stage set among actors. He escaped finally, monitored by a dozen cameras.

How comes this revelatory knowledge? And why? What to do with it? I am following Charlie Pigeonfoot. I have been, long before I was the nurse on that hospital stage set. I have to see him successfully on his way.

I read the accounts of him as a child & the golden bird. No film, just eyewitness—the old man in that contrived scene. Only he wasn’t so old because that scene took place a long, long time ago.

In the “hospital” we were trying to get Charlie to remember, to wake the fuck up again. He lives in a cartoon version of his life. The things we said were prompts; even the checkers were dosed with something. It was no good. The block in him was too strong. We had to try something else.

I was helping Charlie like I’d been helped. Like I would help more if I could. Memory, Charlie, it’s about your memory & how things get off & too big &—

Listen—I was a young man when this happened—it was one night & then it was another—this girl’s face broke my heart with its every changing expression—I didn’t let on every moment—I was young—

her scent rocked my bones liquid—we walked through the city that night, holding hands lightly—her scent, her ruffles, her smile, when she held my look, when she slid away—believe me, Charlie, I understand, I do—in our hotel room there was still music in my ears—still ganja & tobacco smoke from park & bar—I was young, flesh touching flesh was terrifying to me—honestly, most boys fuck their hands more than anything else for a long time—

her kiss pressed me—& when I pushed, she pushed back—when I touched, she let be touched—there was release but not surrender—she was hungry for me—for it is all I could think—a series of clumsy moves to undress & there we were—her body all I wanted, more than I could—she pulled me inside her roughly—inwardly I cringed a little—so pretty, scent, flesh—hurt . . . her?—no, life was ugly & violent, this, this room, this bed *was not*, was safety, was closeness, “fuck me harder, I’m your little slut, crush my fucking tits, *oh yes*,” something in me withdrew, Charlie, even as I compelled my cock fuck her hard as she wanted, ride her hard, using strength to cover it all, brutality, hard breathing, stupid words to mask my terrified silence, I made her cum for me, & I made her cum again, I exhausted her so she would not see me, see what would have been plain otherwise—

Charlie, for a long time, I suffered that memory, let it harm me, what she wanted, how want goes, I suffered it deeply & badly—until someone helped me like I am going to help you now—remember it now, Charlie, remember it now, remember it new, Charlie, climb inside it, break it apart, break it the fuck apart & crush it—

“No”

“No?”

I look at you, not sure of all this but you are looking at me, too—

“No”

“What, Charlie?”

“Losing you hurt me a lot. I lost every confidence I had”

“Losing . . . me? I’m standing right here.”

“The canvasses stop. You are gone. I am in a room with a friend who smokes hashish all day. He is true & loyal.”

She looks at me hard. “You know.”

I nod. Let her say it, whatever it is. “I’m sorry. You’re sweet. How did you figure it out?”

“When do you go?”

“Soon.”

“Why?”

“It’s not working. Your canvases.”

“Were you supposed to inspire me?”

“Yes. I guess. He said you needed a reward. And to be watched.”

“So you don’t care for me.”

She looks down. “It doesn’t matter. It’s a role.”

“Fucking me is a role?”

“I didn’t say I didn’t like it. But yes. Don’t feel bad.”

“It gets worse when you leave. Do you know that?”

She says nothing.

“I can’t have you back. But I can blood this memory.”

“I don’t understand. I’m still here.”

“How did you feel when you left me?”

“I—uh—”

“Tell me.”

“Sad. It wasn’t right.”

"How long till the next one?"

"There wasn't one I really cared about again. Not for a long while."

"Tell me."

"I was done. I said I didn't care what he threatened me with. I dreamed about you. I still do, but not as much."

"And now?"

"Does it matter? It's another world. Another lifetime. I don't have answers for you. I wish I did."

Charlie is still asleep but something is now going on. He stirs to notice.

xxii. / xlii. / lxxix.

The Princess & her companions had entered the Noah Hotel awhile ago, through a mirror in the corner of a woman's cottage. But their story had stalled there, in the hotel room they'd entered. The Princess sniffed the air & knew danger was near. Her plan to find Maya halted as she cowered in this hotel room, in the closet of clothes they'd seen Maya rummage among, select a dress from.

Her companions could not inspire her to move. They sniffed danger too, but it was dispersed, something one could move carefully through, sniff & move, sniff & move.

The Princess understood something else. They had crossed over. This was not their world, not one where her powers could protect her & her friends. She was just a girl & they could all be harmed or destroyed or separated from each other.

Benjamin had warned her. He had been her protector until she bad him away. She confused the nature of his love & felt suffocated. Now she wished for him but knew he would not come.

She sat in a crumpled heap in the closet, door shut all but an inch on the room. She expected someone to enter soon, irrationally expected. Yet she did not move.

"Princess?" said one & another of her companions but she only shook her head once & was silent & still after that.

Benjamin had warned her about ever coming to Maya's world. It seemed unfair. He would not argue on this.

"Humans hurt each other. They are very good at it."

"How? Why?"

"Especially their girls & women."

"Am I one of them?"

"I know you want Maya to return with you but it probably won't happen."

"Probably?"

How she came by knowledge of the mirror was unclear. The White Woods figured in her story but only slightly & unnamed. And yet her she was, in the room Maya had been in, in the closet Maya had examined.

For a long time no noise at all. Then, in the next room, voices. The Princess huddled with her little friends, listening.

One says: "The last time on the phone, my father was lost to space & time, waving his legless stumps around while nurses murmured & checked numbers."

Another: "This again. Why don't you just fuck me & pay me so I can get on with my night?"

The first: "He cried into the phone how we'd fight the bastards together, the enemies keeping us far."

The second: "Sit down on the bed, honey. Let Mama relax you. You'll get nowhere fast talking all this over & over."

The first: "Nobody had told him how it would end, this drowning, this ravaging despair, this

freak tempest of professional eyes, this humiliation of taking & taking & taking!” There was thumping & the sounds of rusty springs pressing down hard.

The Princess panicked but her friends compelled her to stay seated, pinched & nipped her in place.

The first one’s voice grew ragged: “I think of him now, bones in the earth, free of all he loved.” The pounding harder & harder. The Princess sweating, trembling, her whole body buzzing with strange excitement & fear.

The first one again, shouting now: “Were his life’s truths any softness beneath those last hours? The truths, the loves, the promises vowed to someday?” The Princess hears grunts & moans & sighs. Her friends understand better but say nothing.

A softer voice now, sad & broken: “I wonder & I wish I could have given him a warm hand to his cheek, a word of comfort, everything is alright.” Pause. Long pause. “And this is a lie, & this is the truth.”

The Princess’s body convulses & she nearly cries out. The voices continue, more softly, movements, eventually departure.

She looks at her friends & nods. There is danger here. And it’s terrifying & exciting.

“We will stay. We will be in disguise. I will conceal you. I will find Maya.”

xxiii. / xliii. / lxxviii.

What is known, what we feel, & the world beyond a soul’s senses. Struggling to get any of this, & no matter how clear & true it seems, *seems* is not enough—seems shifts one hour to the next—

This hotel bothers me, more than most solid things, it is not what it seems, not close—I suppose it is an obsession, I heard Jazz was last seen here, one of her friends told me, wasn’t sure, didn’t like me asking—what girl wants to spend her time talking about another?

And so I came & found it not to be what I thought. I reacted *emotionally* more than *factually*—I was nauseous being here—it would not have not gone much further, in truth, but I met a man one night, he’d been a reporter, I think, but his advice worked—

Looked me over, nodded, “If you’re going to stick around, for your own reasons, you have to find your sea legs here—”

“Sea?”

“Yah. This is an ocean & you’re trying to swim in deeper. You need a clue.”

I nodded. I felt sicker every moment.

“Focus a minute. Don’t think about your goal. Close your eyes. Remember something beautiful, more powerful the better. Remember with all your worth. It will help.”

Squeezed my shoulder, more to say, didn’t say.

I tried it. I remembered the most beautiful thing I knew. It was her smile. That day. The sickness left me. My heart darkened & saddened but I wasn’t sick any more.

OK. Trade nausea for heart sadness. At least now I can function. OK.

She’d said facts were facts & feelings were feelings. Told me not to confuse them.

“Then there’s the rest. The world, the universe. Dreams, all that.”

She was getting all egghead as she did. I followed as best I could, a secret part of me undressing that tight little body of hers & using every way I could imagine to make her moan & cry out. She knew, always. A sort of vacant smile, a nod, as though to say “you’re fucking me again right now, aren’t you?” & then she talked on.

Alternative history. Always back to it. Usually where she lost me.

Now it seems important to remember, to understand, to use it to find her. She’s here. Somewhere.

“Imagine you could prove one historical fact a lie,” she tried to explain it easy one time. In a



pink halter top. God, I was—

“Or you showered how two well-known facts didn’t connect as was always thought.”

Just a taste, Jazz. Those lovely pink nipples almost in view. *Fuck.*

Nod, smile, she continued. “But this wasn’t enough. You figured out what the truth really was, the connection. Really figured it out. And this changed everything. New lies, new connections.”

And that ass, cherry round & perfect for the cracking.

I think what she said next was: “When I disappear, it means I’ve found somewhere to start with all this.”

Or: “Use my white bra to bind my hands, my flowery panties to stuff my mouth, & fuck me slowly & thickly & make me cum til I can’t see or move—”

Or maybe not. Maybe I just hate school & this is my preferred mission. Looking for a girl I tutored in literature class & jacked off to *every fucking night.*

Nobody knows I’m here. I don’t think anyone would much care.

Tutored. She knew more than I did. I mentioned only once.

“You don’t need a tutor.”

“Sure I do.”

I shook my head.

“You know my sister Ashleigh?”

Another of my wet dreams. Lead filly in my stable. My fantasies about her made the ones about Jazz seem fun for the whole family. Ashleigh needed *far worse* punishment.

“Yah.”

“They think it runs in the family here. One sister shakes it for better grades, the next one will of course.”

I laugh. I don’t mean to. She stares at me, shocked, then calms.

We meet in the library. Not many times before she goes missing.

Last time she brought me a poem. I have it here with me, I keep it in my pocket. She wrote it out. Pink ink, curlicues. More girly than she was aware.

Wouldn’t exactly say who it was by. I found that out myself. Joker named Cosmic Early.

“This guy knows,” she said.

“Knows what?”

She wouldn’t say more. Didn’t stay long. “Read it. Keep it.” Smile, nod. I keep watching that sweet twitchy little ass leaving the library, over & over, watching it. I haven’t seen her since.

But what’s fucking weird is that her disappearance isn’t a big shitting deal. Or her sister. Both are gone. Nobody knows much, or says much when I ask. Saw her the other day. Out sick? Something of something.

Alternate history, Jazz?

Facts are facts. Feelings are feelings. And the rest. *All that.*

I unfold & read the poem again.

She turned & looked at me that last time, & there was that smile which defenses me now. Not the “You’re watching my hot little ass” smile. This was sincere. Pretty, kind, affectionate. My heart cringed, cried, croaked.

Um, right, poem.

*There were moments, maybe three,
maybe fewer, when I uncoiled
back to root, into soil, into sunshine,
exhaled, & again, the world we
are drinking each other, the world
we lay in wordless song dreaming
at night, the world, the wings.*

I stop. Jesus. Did she know him? No wonder I got the knowing smiles.

I have read it before. I have. It's just *fuck*. Not fair. And I read on, it's like a ritual, this, to start & stop.

*inside my ribs, the web between
my toes, uncoiled through clouds
when I rained, fruit I was eaten
& shit seed back to earth—*

Oh. One of those nature guys. Smart. Like Thoreau or someone. I could see a girl like Jazz being interested. See it & hate it.

*Moments when the stars too were like
fruit, hanging impossibly from endless skies,
& what was left of me danced & died,
& what I was, & what I possessed,
& what made the world, & no reason why.*

I read it through to end & I just don't know. Her friend didn't know either. Her friend was drunk & trying to kiss me & I didn't know why. I wasn't the kind of guy who got hit on.

But talking about Jazz did something to her. Like she went into a sex trance. A party I shouldn't have been at, & a girl who ignored me as well as the next, & she's pulling my hand under her skirt?

I let it all happen a little, I knew the trick was coming, the suddenly arrived boyfriend or parent or whatever. The couch we were on wasn't that hidden.

"Ohh"

For a moment, a long moment, my finger stole inside a tight little panty & stroked a bare cunt lip, oh, two, & I felt her legs part a little to keep up, & I considered how drunk she was, how talking about Jazz had triggered this, & for one moment how it would have felt to bag a horny ungettable bitch like this, drunk or no, & then I remembered that smile & my finger withdraw & she gasped like I was just teasing, where is she? who? oh, yes, I fingered again, where is Jazz? ohh shit who, withdrew, ohh, Jazz? Where is she? I pushed back in hard, guessing by now, she almost yelled, where? that hotel, I don't know, two fingers now ohhh god, ohhh shit, withdraw a little, no no please don't, hotel what name, thrust, hotel what name, withdraw, hotel what name, hard thrust, Noah she says, fuck, fuck, & I want her to cum but more I want that fucking smile & a girl who liked me sober & daylight & library & everything—

I stand & she fucking yelps. Guess nobody's ever stopped before.

So all in all I'm here. I'm fucked but not. My fingers still resent me. My heart still figures she's slobbering Cosmic Early's nature-loving tree trunk. Or not. Nobody remembers you, Jazz, or Ashleigh. Alternate history. Is this it?

xxiv. / xliv. / lxxvii.

Not the Key, Maya, no.

No?

No. The thread. You're the thread through.

To where.

To the clearing when the Beast is.

You can't beat him, Raymond.

I don't want to.

What then?
 I want to meet him & ask that he follow me back.
 Follow?
 Back. Yes.
 What do you mean?
 This isn't a war, Maya. It's a failed collaboration.
 What?
 Me. The Beast. Dreamland. Benny. All of it. I want alliance. I want collaboration.
 Maya's look is strange, both uncomprehending & admiring.
 "Why not?"
 "I'm the thread."
 "You're the peace offering."
 Starts to nod. Oh.
 "It's a waste to say that you can't crush him."
 She nods.
 "Now . . . wake up!"

You are sitting with me in this room. I don't make to look younger or less crazy than I am. You look at me. I am in my armchair. You are on the couch. Neither exists here any longer. We nod.

"What then?" I motion to the notebook in your lap also. You pick up the pen. Not black. Hm. OK.

I let you, as we, then we do, then this:

Tonight's hungers are new & old, every face wears them, & looks to another to explain. Cities crackle by the sparkling crowds pushing shouting into taverns, & those awaiting a last hour,

(this universe a mist, a light, a shimmer)

& those fearing a familiar voice & its knowing hand.

I look up. Maya nods.

Tonight's hungers range canyon & jungle, green sea & white woods, & some fill bellies & some fuck whatever sweet they may—

(play one true note)

Tonight's hungers left us by a combustible god, or molecule, or alien starparent. Tonight the taverns ever more crowded, the rhythms beastier, the clothes tighter, the words exchanged more plain—

(I sat downtown from here, Maya, Christmas 2002, in a long gone place called Heaven)

Tonight's hungers draw us nearer the end, by weapon, by evolution, by return of whoever let us down here, seeming bid to wonder & wait—

"You're not writing"

"No."

"What then?"

"Go on. Finish."

or by the obscurest thought hurling heart's shadows that nothing's to wait for, everything's to be done

"everything's to be done"

"we are the tinder that waits gathering"

"& the ignition"

"the tinder awaits gathering"

"& the ignition"

"the tinder"

"ignition"

Maya nods. "It's OK." "I'll miss it here." "It remains." "In my heart, yes." "In your Art, where it sings." "OK." "OK." "Doubt?" "Doubt & love." "Always."

*"The nature of things is in the habit
of concealing itself"*
—Heraclitus, Fragment 54

Maya nods again.

xxv. / xlv. / lxxvi.

"What of the Beast? I ask tonight. Release or keep caged? There seems to be no agreed rule, one is raised up by this place & time's perspective, mixtured with one's childhood authority figures, mixtured again with his experiential fortunes & those of the world by his years.

"Simple as caged or released? I don't think so. When the beast rages, one's inner skies fill with blood & cries. When caged, those skies clear, there is quiet. Perhaps this is deceptive too. And yet. And yet."

Christina was paying more attention than the rest of the class, as usual. She'd started a little at his use of the word "tonight" but almost instantly realized he was probably referring to notes from the last night or some night. She speaks in their motel room darkness. He hasn't moved from her grasp, made any effort to touch her, yet he's been awake awhile.

"The Beast," she says. He starts but she caresses his face in the dim & he relaxes.

"You talked about the Beast in our classes but never asked anyone what they thought."

"Nobody was listening but you, Xtina."

"No. Christina."

"And I'm Kinley to you."

She smiles so warmly he seems to see it. "Yes. Kinley."

"Your Kinley?" She doesn't reply, knows a trick.

"Why didn't you ask?"

She thinks. "It never came up logically. It's like you saw signs of the Beast sometimes, in books, nature, but I didn't get it. But really," she pauses. "Your face would contort a little. It was a hard topic." He nods.

For a woman who's been with men, knows their ways, likes their ways for the most part, Christina holds back, not passive but not letting the passions biting around her heart & loins take over.

"Dreamspace." This time he nods. "Do you mean it like Jung, the collective unconscious & all that?" She feels like she's showing off her college book smarts but she has to get over to him that her mind yearns his mind as much as the rest of her yearns him too.

"That's not easy to answer." She waits, silent. "The best I can say is that Dreamspace is real & figurative. We no more conceived it into being than we invented trees by naming them." He shakes his head, his words not what he wants. She pats him lightly, using one small gesture for every dozen her body's heart wants. She takes a chance.

"We belong to the world." He nods. "And the Beast and Dreamspace are part of this." Nods. She nods, not thinking she has the key now, but at least not a clumsy fool in the dark for once.

He sits up suddenly & caught off guard her hands fall away. Doesn't like this.

"I'm not sure I spoke rightly before. I'm not kidnapping you. If you want to return, I won't stop you." He's faltering, his mood shifting yet again.

"It's OK. I'm here with you. I don't get all this but I'm glad it happened." They're both faltering. The room is heavy with panic.

"Do you want to fuck me, Kinley?"

"Yes. Not tonight. The more I tell you, the more I will."

OK. That's the Kinley she knows. His twisty way of arriving somewhere. His ambiguity made of brick.

He makes a nest on the floor. A couple of pillows, one of the blankets. He curls into himself, like a dog.

Christina sleeps in the nude, usually, likes to masturbate herself slowly to sleep. Tonight, seeing his suitcase in the corner, a battered, heavy thing, she asks for one of his long shirts. He turns when she re-dresses in shirt & panties.

"You saw me naked, Kinley."

He says nothing, resumes his doggy curl.

Lying in bed, her shaven cunt untouched, she wonders, Does Kinley become Genny's Preacher? She looks at me, abed next to her. "How many of your girls & their teachers are the same?" I reach for it, she grasps my hand, then releases. Spreads her thighs wide, lets my fingers move in. Kinley is asleep. Unmoving, deep breathing. I talk softly as my fingers wet her up, poke in a little more, then two, her mouth opening wide, but still waiting her answer. "I can't tell you. Same enough & different enough. One way wisdom & experience is conveyed. There are others." I bring her close to climax, then swiftly pull out, motion her to finish. Her look is strange but she does, & takes awhile.

"How do I lose him?" She says as she is peaking. "How do I become the skank talking about God while Jack fucks me in the ass?"

"I don't know. I don't know how this moment, or you or I, relate to that moment, written in my past, about your future."

She cums hard, twice, quick, then slow. She reaches for me but I move away.

Reluctantly, she pulls her tangled panties back up & turns over to sleep.

xxvi. / xlv. / lxxv.

The worst of it, yet to come, was years ago, a shitty bar, shitty jukebox, shitty drinks. A naked Santa hangs upside down on the corner Christmas tree.

"The pills make it hurt less," she says, steaming blue eyes, a soul of glowing auto wreck.

I nod. Listen vaguely.

"I was young. It felt like love cuz it was so hard & so often." Sound of ice, slurping. Had a few already. She speaks softer, almost reverently. "Panties down, up against the couch." Pauses a long time.

"He had a big one & he'd drive it in fast & hard then slow down & down, & he'd laugh. I knew he was going to cum because he would laugh this great big dirty bear's laugh. He never laughed like that but when he was fucking me."

More silence. "Feeling something's good, right?"

"Yah, Jazz."

"It's Jasmine. I told you already. Nobody calls me that anymore. Are you a fucking retard?"

"Yah, that must be it."

"Ah, baby," her voice gets all maudlin. "I'm just playing. You can call me Jazz anytime." Hand slips onto my lap, I push it off, gently.

"Don't you like me?"

"We're not here for that"

"Then what, baby?"

"Are you happy?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"Are you happy?"

"Fuck! You already asked me that."

"And you didn't answer."

"What difference does it make? You know I got what you like." Hand again, pushed off, less gently.

Taps the bar, nods. Barman brings another.

"Alternate history, Jazz," I say, not kindly.

"Fuck you!" she says & walks the fuck out.

Returns a few minutes later. More sober than she should be.

"OK. Tell me." Looks at barman. Politely this time: "Coffee."

"You really want to know?"

"No. But yah I do."

"You'll lose everything between now &—"

"All this, huh?"

I look at her for the first time. It's Jazz's face, I see that. Pretty for all the wear & woe. Try to remember how it got like this.

"We don't have much time. You're sure?"

"Yah, Toby. I'm ready."

xxvii. / xlvii. / lxxiv.

Sometimes No slips from his maintenance duties at the Noah Hotel & hides in one of the building's more hidden stairwells. It is one that leads into the hotel's auditorium, but this stairwell is little used. Discovered by chance, one bad day, hiding from his mocking friends on the job. Nobody has found him yet here. They'd start following him sometimes but he learned to go to the hotel's library & wait till whoever it was gave up. He could easily imagine them saying to each other, "He's a fucking reada'. Just figure that."

No has been coming here more often lately. His friends mock but they don't snitch. The bastards who run the place don't deserve such respect.

No is indeed reading but not a book from the hotel library. A paperback, no cover, torn some, about something he'd never heard of before. "Imaginal Space." It's his hope now.

He read: *"When I was a very young man, I lived in a great Eastern city, in a single room. A bed, a writing table, a wash stand, an icebox. My books I arranged on a makeshift bookshelf made of planks & concrete blocks. I bought candles, many of them, & sometimes filled my night time hours with only their light as I sat & thought & wrote.*

"I felt pure. It was a new feeling. I hadn't always felt that way, but in that room I felt pure. I was doing work I cared for in my free hours.

"My job paid little. It was the same job cloaked beneath changing guises over time. Pushing a mop or brooming. Waiting tables. Carrying boxes. I smiled and said little at these jobs. People smiled & called me

a 'thinker' or frowned & said I was a 'brooder.' I did nothing to dispel any of it.

"One job in particular stands out, in part because it was the last job of this stretch of youth, but also because it changed over time.

"I was to guard a building at night. A simple job done with a flashlight & clipboard, done sitting at a desk & staying awake. There was little to it, & a telephone to call a supervisor at any hour if there was trouble, or even a question. I didn't use the phone for a long time. There was no need. Nothing happened. At least, until I caused it."

No leans forward, surrounds his ragged volume, feels what he needs is coming next.

"The struggle in a man often occurs because he feels trapped, more than he really is. What hours of freedom he possesses, what moves he could make, he squanders, obsessing over the slights of others, their motives, how the world does not seem to acknowledge him or shift luckily his way."

No pauses, nods.

"There is no one answer that ever & always works. No magic, no certainty."

No shifts uncertainly. Closes the book, afraid of what will come next, what won't. His stairwell is decayed, neglected, not dirty but simply unnoticed.

Uncertainly, stands, moves planless, always the stealthy peek before back into the hallway, a little quick this time, & keeps moving—

No has come to believe that once he was not a paid servant in this hotel but a welcomed guest. Once he held court, so to say, & people gathered & listened to him. That he surrounded himself with others as special as himself, & there were many mornings when the glittery words & laughter glowed golden—

But what the path from then to now? How long ago was that? What happened that he cannot remember?

He's been crossing over, to the guests' part of the hotel, a forbidden act save when uniformed & on duty. It was not easy but No was not the simple man others labeled him.

No had skills, one of which was a kind of special sight into things. He saw doors others didn't, hallways & stairwells & strange rooms behind them. For a long time he'd not believed his eyes, or feared consequence. Now he did not.

It was a dream that had turned his view, & not along after he found the book. His crossing forays had been tentative until now.

But this moment, the book his key in hand, his special sight peering for a door others could not see—yes, he would cross over, & he would not be coming back, & whatever this book was going to reveal, he'd act—

xxviii. / xlviii. / lxxii.

"Crossing flesh through"—No suddenly reads this phrase—He is sitting on a bench many floors up, the bench is beneath a window, next to a bank of elevators—the floor he has chosen is closed off—for renovation—he'd stolen an elevator key that allowed access to this floor—

There is no renovation going on—none—he's already looked—but all the doors to guest rooms are padlocked—old, thick, dusty padlocks, long untouched—

Why this floor? He didn't know—maybe simple as it's closed off—maybe it was that dream—There is a low light source throughout the floor, but no light source he can determine—

Simple also is that the floor attracts him to it & then spooks him on arrival—so he stays on



bench near bank of elevators—

“Crossing flesh through”—rather than resume reading, he opened up the book at random—& blinked—& snatched that phrase up—& closed the book—

What now.

Breathe, Noah, in & out. In & out. Close your eyes. Let this floor, let that phrase, let the fragment you are to yourself twist something up—

He calms. He thinks. He remembers something, & holds his book close while he remembers. It goes like this:

We were both close to homeless, him living in an RV, me living in a rooming house—it was near Christmas, we sat together on a bench. It was cold but not snowing.

We talked about love, about what falls away with clothes, what doesn't. I was often both sad & smiling in his company. He would nod, make me laugh. Sometimes cops would sniff around though we were never smoking or drinking anything—

Well, he might have been high, & by then I had known the mushrooms, worked with them in Dreamspace—but we weren't sitting there in a cloud of smoke regardless—

“You're going to have to choose”

“Choose what?”

“Between her & Dreamland”

“Why?”

He'd nod his head no, I knew he meant no, but there he was nodding his head no. We both knew I was fighting for a lost romance, & yet fight on I did for a long time, & his hand on my shoulder as he'd leave me would always help me hold on.

Then that last time & what he said to me, those last words, I had no other friends, so I kept them close & found them odder & odder versus all the rest—

It was a bookstore we saw each other—a grand old beast of a bookstore, the kind nobody learns the whole of—it was in the coffeeshop where students & freaks & artists & tourists would crowd together in a jocular noisy mingle—

“She wrote to me”

“No!”

“She's in pain without me, so sad. Misses me.”

*He nodded, smiling. But he nodded yes, it threw me off. But I didn't care, I was so heart-hungry, so—
We touched hands, smiled some more—*

“All things are possible” he said—

At the time I accepted the gift of his sentiment. It was true. My times of agony were going to be redeemed—

What happened next was . . . nothing. She didn't write again, she didn't call, for days. I guarded my building & more often simply came home. I had never turned on the little black & white TV in my room, but I did. And I watched & I watched. Watched just about every night until I fell asleep. I watched—

But the phone rings.

She's nearby. She sounds wrong but she wants to meet. Now tonight please.

It's a coffeehouse I don't know. Strange & large. She is sitting alone in one of the interior rooms. There are two old armchairs against one wall, & two small chairs against the other, a slender table, a blue vase. A saw this on—

"You came" I think I hear as she pulls me into the armchair as we embrace, as she seamlessly wriggles into my lap, as she holds me, as her mouth gnaws at mine with a moan—I—

Our hands are clasped yet I feel her grinding her ass against my responding cock—the light in the room is roseate—I don't know why I use the word—her frayed green sweater itself seems sentient in pulling my fingers under, in how I am gently cupping her breasts, no bra & another moan—I—then—

He laughs & I would have let her leap from me but she locks me in grasp, right down to my finger resting on one of her nipples—

He's deep in the next room, & I see he has a computer. He's laughing at its screen—I am frozen, groping her, fuck what, but he is not watching & she leans into me, I feel her heat like a tide in my blood blinding me, she seems about to undress us enough to fuck when—

There's a voice. She relaxes. I'm lost in this. But there's a voice & that focuses me. Forget the laughing man. OK. She leans against me softly, bonelessly, & listens. It is the first time I have held her, not her hunger. Whatever this is, it is gift. This is what led to the rest. This is it as best I can explain—

"Where once a fountain in Cement Park, a great bluebird's wings rise into the air, for protection of the weak, for help in flying to their goals—

"The Bluebird Insurance Company is not what it has been for a long time, that is, a blindly amoral corporate consumer of people's wills & blood—

"Something deep in its structure changed it profoundly & with it the visible change in Cement Park, so called by these stories, Bluebird Concourse by all others—"

Is this what she hears too? Does it make sense to her? She is relaxed, intent, completely present—

This is what she hears:

"What festers & mosses between these floors? The man who lived here a century ago, when this coffeehouse was just a maze of dirty rooms, his long nights of prayer for healing, crazed willing to take his disease the faster if God would just give a word back? Just one?"

She nods. She sighs. She is listening with something like relief now. It was right to come here, come to him.

She nods. She listens. The voice continues.

"If all these things do, indeed, exist? Then any blazing day of unity, any final calling of all hands to one, any let go & release to the universal music must be rooted in the withering suffering & sometime ecstasies of all who lived brief or long yet fell a day or an hour just short—"

She returns from there & is in his grasp as before, feels how she has locked her body onto his, clamped his legs & fingers to her various tender parts, he is watching her, what he'd heard had long ended—

"We have a choice, darling No"

"What is it?"

"We can have now, tonight, maybe a little bit more—"

"Or—?"

She looks at me in sadness & love & longing & other things I don't know, & strangely, she laughs.

"I don't know. Do you trust me?"

Before I can answer she grips my hand still cupping her breast. Eyes closed, lips open. Her ass slowly grinds me too. Fuck.

"Something else. Somewhere else. Free & forever. Always yours. Always, always yours."

"But not now," I gasp weakly.

He laughs again in that other room, & again, & her grip on me, our clasp loosens. She says one last thing. Quietly.

"Turn your head away when I go. That's how I'll return to you too."

xxix. / xlix. / lxxii.

I leave him & walk slowly back to my RV among the few white flakes falling from Christmastime skies. Not a storm, not even really close.

My RV is parked in the same place as the last two nights. In this city, three nights is maxing out & so I'll be starting up in the morning. I suppose it being Christmas tomorrow I could push it another day, but I don't want to. I need to keep sharp, keep moving.

It's not that I know precisely what will happen between N. & that girl, but I know more than logically I should.

I know a version of her in Dreamland, & this version has given me to know at least some of her truths.

Have I fucked this version? Yes. It's what any of her versions do with men. A hunger, strangely both dark & fun.

She makes clear from the first: she loves & cannot have him yet, maybe ever, & I am to comfort him & she will fuck me—when she fucks me, grinding her hips impossibly hard against mine, moaning, biting, she is fucking him, every time, every moment, every time she orgasms—

I met her, used to think, by chance, at a cafeteria I'd gone to a few times in my worst days, & was returning to, to remember, sit where I sat, honor the pain I'd felt here, & how I'd survived, & here I was again, more healed, knowing I was a bit smaller for it—sitting here—writing vague lines to someone lost—

*I remember now by your absence—
by the vagueness of who you were—
I remember because most flakes away false—
Because you were no truer than others—
Because we smiled, touched hands—
Because I forgave you—& lost something—
Because I am still reaching despite,
for better & worse—*

I stop, look up, there she is, & for a moment she is who I was writing to over impossible years—& then not but slowly—

"What are you writing?"

"A sort of poem."

"About what?"

"Who not what. It's a poem about remembering someone."

"Someone you loved."

"Yes. A long time ago."

"She broke your heart?"

"And hers too."

She pauses. Thinks. Usually when someone queries me like that they quickly lose interest. She's not. She's thinking.

I sniff, don't mean to, but I do, I sniff, barely noticeable, I sniff. Never smelled anything like it. As solid as a handful of earth, a full glare of sunshine in a deep forest. Sex, yes & no. I blink to keep still. Everything about me is taut & near to fleeing—

"I love someone too."

"That's good."

"He loves me too."

"That's better."

"No, it's not."

"Why?"

"I can't have him."

"Ever?"

She blinks at me, stumbled.

"Not now."

I nod.

The smell gestates colors, almost pictures, but not quite, noises almost music. She's quiet again. I turn my page toward her, smile. She reads, slowly.

"Where's the rest?"

"I don't know if there is more."

She nods. "There is more." Reaches across the table, takes my hand, the smile . . . calms. It flows between us. We look vaguely past each other, quiet. She's waiting.

She's strangely pretty. Young, but I don't ask. Don't ask name either. She's slender but her breasts are not. Her dress is typical, short shorts, deeply scooped blouse, sandals. I'm thrown hard by what she says next.

"You can have me for an hour or the whole night."

My mouth opens & shuts.

"I'll be her for you, like it was. Even better. We'll take our time."

"And I'll be him?"

She shakes her head. "No. Not exactly."

"I don't understand."

"He's not gone, like she is. So it can't be the same."

I nod. "Why am I paying you?"

She wriggles a little in her seat, moves nearer, *makes me look*. I nod.

Maybe the first time you were her, the one gone. I fucked you like I was always afraid to fuck her; too busy protecting her, too busy "being in love" with her.

But less the next time. And the time after that. Now you were you, & I was N. But I wasn't.

All she would say was that he had to get famous first, & then fall, & then they could.

“Anything we want. Everything.”

“So you’re waiting.”

“Yes.”

“And fucking men for money.”

“For him. For us. We’re going to leave & never come back.”

“And me?”

She’d smile, she’d curl around me, touching where I liked, where I hungered, & the smell wrapped us as one. “You’re going to be my spy. You’re going to find out everything for me.”

xxx. / l. / lxxi.

A breathy caesura, too full of words or maybe just one word: gratefulness. Where I write tonight I’ve long written but too rarely of recent years—

Regard. Behold. Wonder of wonders.

Seek connections in all directions of time & space & soul. How the leaves above, the dreams to come, the queer fact of cyberspace, the ragged, sure pulse in my torso—

I don’t know in so many ways, so many pages, ever less any answer, returning to the egg & its questions—

What then, what this question? Who was I those years, writing in this place, name it, Harvard Square, Au Bon Pain cafe courtyard, Cambridge, Massachusetts, I’m here, what question? I’ve been years & miles far, many of each, & here I am, & what the questions that led me away & returned me here tonight?

How to live, how to live, how to live, & why?

Yes? No? In truth, I do not know, not close, just a soaring, unreasonable gratefulness at writing these words, here tonight, a shifting, unfolding, many-colored, sing-song-simple gratefulness words—lights—voices—flesh—years—cars—buses—trees—brick floor—stars out there—what? And what? And: what?

I don’t know in so many ways, & so many pages, ever less any answer, the question carried by beat, by breath, it’s OK, by beat, by breath, relax

Alive, present, grateful, for all of it, what was, what will be, grateful—

Maya is writing too, & I notice Rebecca is drawing, there is synch, maybe path, fraternity, the fullness is the hunger, better than any sate is the hunger itself, the hunger’s music, in every finger, every sinew, *the hunger is the music itself*_____

* * *

"Tell me then."

"Which?"

"Am I David Time or Cosmic Early or both or maybe consecutively?"

"Consecutively?"

"You like that one."

"Tell."

"He was famous. You wrote about his fame."

"I did."

"I've never been famous. Not really a poet like him either."

"Did you know him? Do you know him?"

"Answer me something?"

"Sure."

"Can I help Jasmine?"

"Help?"

"Not fuck. Help her."

"Help Jazz . . ."

"She's trapped with that boy & her sister."

"For now. And sort of."

"*Can I help her?*"

"I don't know."

"Why?"

"Help her what? Go home? Give Toby his hand job because he won't actually fuck her, carry on?"

"Help her choose."

"You're dying."

"Maybe."

"Nothing's final in fiction."

"No it's not."

"Benny would have me."

"Benny's a fanatic."

"Isn't he Morpheus, the God of Sleep?"

I laugh.

"No. He was raised in Dreamland but he isn't a god."

"What then?"

"I don't know. He lives in Dreamland. He seems independent of any one person dreaming him."

"Dreamland is real beyond dreamers?"

"Benny is, you could say."

"I want to help her."

"You want to fuck her."

"I want to help & fuck her."

"Honesty."

"Yes. But help matters more now. She's in the White Woods. She doesn't know how to free herself."

"Ashley knows now too. She'll help."

"And the boy?"

"There's more to him. He doesn't know yet."

"What."

"You can have Jazz, if you win her, for as long as you win her. The price is the boy."

"Keep him?"

“Find out who he is & decide then.”
 “And Benny?”
 “Benny will wait for now.”
 Early nods at me.
 “You can’t control it. The White Woods.”
 “Always there. Everywhere.”
 “Yes.”
 “They thin some with effort. And they can be used.”
 “Navigated?”
 “In a way. And as fuel.”
 “Burned?”
 “Not per se. Not burned down.”
 “What then.”
 “White Woods is mind.”
 “Dream? Dreamland.”
 “Not exactly no.”
 “What?”
 I shake my head. “A place. A way. An is, an ought, a could be. Literal & figurative both.”
 “Mind.”
 “Yes.”
 “But will alone is not enough.”
 “No. How you flesh out your hours, what you do.”
 “And?”
 “And more. Always more. The way sunlight slinks through, hits ends of fallen trunks long years soft.”
 “Woods.”
 “Pine cones. Root-broken paths. The air cooling with night.”
 “Where is the power? Where do I bring Jazz?”
 “She’ll bring you.”
 “How.”
 “She’ll lead them out. You too.”
 “Do I want out?”
 “Let’s see.”
 “See what?”
 “Behold this scenario. As the old hippy band sang, ‘behold & see.’”

xxxii. / lii. / lxix.

“World is home. Dreaming you safe in all—”
 He wears a bowtie & has wrinkles. Some of them say he’s gay. I don’t think so. I don’t feel it.
 Shit. What I feel isn’t close to that. And I know, I know, one more master I’m building in my
 mind.

How long, Jazz? Jasmine, that’s your fucking name. Anyway, there’s girls in this class years
 younger than you, they’re what these men want. You were one. One of the best. And now you’re not.

His smile lingers on me, can tell I’m not following. He does that, & then looks away.

“Of course Early could come at the same question from another angle. A bluntly different
 angle. *‘Dust, a violent hour, endurance. This is why you suffer.’*” A girl raises her hand, Suzy D-Cups I call
 before telling myself not to.

“Are they equal for him?”

“What do you mean?”



"Despair & hope," she says. Hesitating. I've watched her do this in three classes now. The hesitancy is where the teacher distracted by her well-plated tits will jump in & help her.

He doesn't. Sees the tits, thinks that thought I want to crush & have for my own, but doesn't pick up on her words. In fact, goes on with the poem.

"Failure to feel your suffering in my heart, breach the lies of kings & preachers, the market's easy delight in slinging new ass."

Her shoulders shift but she says nothing. Nobody beats him. It's why they think he's gay.

Not in my bed, not between my thighs. Not when my lights are out & I'm touching down there with purpose. No sirree, he's doing what I like & I'm liking it & so is he. Takes his time, in my mind. I cum so slowly, so long, I almost pass out, I think I do, I'm young again, he wants me—

When he asks me to dinner, after the semester is over, the grades turned in, of course, I'm still surprised.

"I don't see a band."

"Or on yours."

"I'm not gay."

"You started that rumor. The others are just stupid enough to believe it or care."

"And you."

I laugh. He laughs.

"You dress like an old woman."

"I am. Nearly a quarter century."

"Is that what you think?"

"That I'm old? Sometimes."

"No. That you're . . . that old."

"I've got a birth certificate to show."

"Show me."

I laugh. He doesn't.

"OK."

"Here. Look," he says.

I do. O shit.

He nods.

Shit, Jazz.

I won't let him take me home. Or leave me alone. I won't let him not bring me to his bed.

"Not yet, Jazz."

"Why not? You brought me here. This is yours. It's OK. I'm ready for you."

He resists, really resists. "What then?"

"How did you end up in my class?"

"I don't know. But it seemed real. I was old . . . older. I felt like I didn't matter somehow anymore. I was tired."

"Now what?"

"I'm with you."

"Look at me. Think! Who am I?"

"You're Cosmic Early."

"Where's Ashleigh & Toby?"

I start to panic & now he grasps me. I still half-want him despite all this. Maybe because. But he is just keeping me near.

"I don't know. This is Dreamland?"

I'm silent.

"Tell me."

"We need to return to that class. You need to trust me."

We're back. Oh. Hm. I'm not sure what to do. I feel my usual self again, I think. Look slyly down at me yah. All that. Not as hot as Ashleigh but hotter than that one.

She's heated too. Damn. Got her new designer frames on & those icky gold sandals I see—

Jazz.

What.

Jazz!

What!

It's your fucking brain calling.

Yah.

He needs your help.

Yah.

What?

Why can't I just fuck him?

I look at you.

"Why don't we just fuck?"

There's a gasp, a silence, & a laugh.

He looks at me. I wait. She's waiting too.

Now I'm wondering at this.

"Who is she?"

Now he's looking mad at me.

"Who. What am I in here, Cosmic?"

She looks at me. Pretty face, an obvious one.

I can't think she would—for him—

I look at him—he nods—OK—

"I met her on a train a long time ago—she was sitting by herself—headphones on—a strange smile on her face—"

she smiles at me—I don't see much strange about it—but—

"This was before she became famous for her comic strip—she doodled—sometimes they were more than doodles—"

"Wait—comic strip?"

"She did it for 50 years, Jasmine. Never a word in it till the last panel of the last strip when she says

'And then—' & it's over."

"Oh"

"She was already becoming a famous painter—she had shows all over the world—until that stopped too"

"Too?"

"First the strips. Then the paintings. She retired. Pretty much disappeared."

"I'm trying to follow"

"Yes."

"You met her on a train."

"Yes."

"Not a classroom."

"Not till later."

"Later?"

"Toward the end she took my class"

"Oh"

"She was trying to understand the man she kept seeing on the trains."

This is starting to get retarded but I nod. For a brilliant man, Cosmic is describing this girl like he's 14 & acne-covered. I almost giggle at the thought of that. I bet he was cute then. Shit, that leads me to remember him now and—

"Jazmine—"

"Yah—sorry—"

She smiles at me too—not strangely either—and not like someone who's going to make comic strips & paintings & so on for fifty-plus years & then retire like anyone will care—

"You're jealous"

"I'm *here* because of *him*."

She nods. Smile. OK, it *is* a little strange but I don't like it, still or anyway. I look at Cosmic. "Man on trains?"

He seems to need to tell me this, to follow through.

He would appear on crowded trains, suddenly, & start talking, suddenly. A sort of nondescript man, average build, clean unmemorable clothes.

"Excuse me, I don't like to be a nuisance but I am trying to earn money for an ID badge. I've been homeless-living-on-the-streets & I just got a job at Filene's but it cost five dollars for an employee ID badge & so I'm not tryin' to botha anyone just get myself an employee ID badge so I can start working"

or:

"I don't wanna bother anyone but last night I was sleeping in the streets & they took all my clothes & left me with only one shoe, I need five dollars to get a pair of shoes at the thrift store"

I nod. I wait.

"She wanted to hear me in class. I wasn't teaching much anymore. Just one class. She told me to bring it up. Like it was my experience. So I did. I listened to her tell it & then I took it into the class, with her now auditing in the front row where she could distract me the most—"

I look at her. "Because you're jealous."

She looks at me. Less of a smile.

So I start in. But I don't focus on the man. I focus on the reaction. I instruct her not to say a word during class. Just listen.

"He never makes any money. Why?"

"They don't believe him?"

"Why?"

"Too cynical? Or maybe it seems too scripted? Like an actor from a school?"

"But why?"

The class silences. They wait, like they do when their initial burst falls flat with him.

She speaks up anyway.

"You think it's fear."

"I'm not sure."

"You think they're avoiding him because he's not so different. Why him & not any of them? Why not?"

I look at her.

"You think it's just about me?"

Cosmic looks at me. I wait.

"Because I keep seeing him? And he talks & talks, a different train, a new story, but nobody listens every time? It's me? Right?"

I look at Cosmic Early. Bluntly.

I think & talk simultaneously so to hold nothing back.

"Are you saying we need to find her or you're still hung up on her or what?"

He looks at me. Twice. I can tell from the broken wonder in his voice he's talking honestly now.

"I didn't expect to meet you."

"Me?"

"Someone like you."

"Oh."

"She still in the White Woods."

"Still?"

"It's why I came. Well, it was. I mean, it prompted me."

"And now?"

He gives me an even stranger look & points to Ashleigh & Toby crowded into the classroom door. I look back & he's gone.

Well, now.

xxxiii. / liii. / lxxviii.

He's looking at me oddly, this young Preacher, not-yet-Preacher. I'm not sure how I look to him. I want to ask but . . . don't.

I listened to him & the rest drum in the dawn, it never quits, the drumming, though eventually he moved out of the circle & another eventually took his drum.

Asked him for a cigarette. He smiled "Sorry I don't smoke." Another guy heard us, sat down, smiled, a cigarette. There's always another guy sniffing around if the current one isn't providing.

I light up though I don't smoke, then ignore the other guy completely.

He talks. He smiles. His eyes slide down my face toward, then yank back up. I giggle inside.

This all *is* bad.

"How was your night?"

"It was good." I pause. I feel the words coming. The kind of words I used to say. The kinds of things I used to feel.

He's waiting.

I feel myself manifesting more. I feel the younger, tauter self. Shit, this is *not* fair. The hair in dreads. The hemp tank top & shorts. Ha, the thong & everything shaven down there too. Not *that* much of a hippy chick. No wonder he's patient. I was fucking hot back then. Now. Shit.

I think quickly. "I felt connected," I say vaguely. He nods.

With a body like I had I could turn this boy to powder.

"It's like we were all sharing it, everywhere. All over the woods & all."

He nods, more. Getting excited.

I want to. I can't. My body, this . . . younger body, wants to. I can't.

I can't. Whatever is me no matter the tricks.

I stand suddenly. He stands too.

Woa.

He's taller than me. I can smell his sweat. This young body is ready, amazingly ready. Was this me?

It was.

I can't. And shouldn't. We didn't.

That is, don't. Now I don't know.

"Can I read you what I wrote last night."

I nod.

We sit again. The other guy left. I didn't notice. He was smart.

He has a leather book, it's well-worn. He's reading from halfway in.

*When passing this water I thought
of you passing yours. Torrents of blood,
hidden waterfalls, the very key to the world
found in summing all & dividing by one.*

Oh. This really is him. My Preacher led me to this younger Preacher. And my younger self. Now here we are & he's reading me poetry while my body is readying to gnaw & chew his body quite a few dozen ways.

What, Preacher? What is this?

He's looking at me, less shyly. Reading his writing does something to him. Turns him on & me too, more, & he feels my attention sharpen.

What is this?

I want to explain to you. You are a phantom. I don't know why I'm here or you. He left me here, you did, your future self. To fuck you? Is that all?

"No." I say out loud.

He smiles.

"No." I say to you.

"No?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"No! And yes."

He nods. Closes his book.

"What now, Preacher?"

He doesn't flinch at being called that.

"What now?"

"We go, Genny. We go."

xxxiv. / liv. / lxvii.

Deep space: one late night I will be gone, it will be hours or days later. My books have crumbled, my deeds blurred.

Deep space: what I was tonight, writing as though never to cease, breaching my heart for music to salve & share, become bones & dust, & the final opening of this path from a few mad cracking years to what it feels like to dream forever.

Deep space: that's what this dreaming can be like. I was with you again, there, driving, & it's how it became later, a series of collapsing echoes suddenly distorted by moments of anguished sexual frenzy—

What you became, I let go. Where you were, I remember from too far.

Deep space: this was one of those fully drowning dreams, no other, no outside-of-it, here we were in a strange sexual clinch brambled with time passed, & many regrets, & no why, not even close, not ever fucking close—

& I look at you from this high place & look at you in that dream place & say why?

& you say I don't know

& I nod. We were driven by the same demons. It's how we passed those days. It was a love of distant, desperate, thinking beasts.

But here's the thing—still talking to you in deep space—I could see back to my waking life—the woman who succeeded you—who became what you did not—

but here—from this high place—I look toward you—down in Dreamland—

& I think: did I almost do it? Was I almost awake in that dream? Does it have to get that personal? I remember groping you, more than love, hate, words, I wanted to feel you, feel your breast, that hunger is old & remains, & I know it's not you alone, a woman's touched flesh never leaves, it's the danger, what leaving music in touch, the scald—

Deep space: so why do I keep this dream days later? It's because I am getting closer & every time I do it's intensely personal, it hurts, still, deep, & this kind of dream connects me almost to lucidity—close—

I look at you.

(Benny snickers)

(Deep, deep space)

(*Deep deep pussy*)

How?

How what?

I look at you both.

How.

How?

Connect waking to psychedelia to dreams.

Connect? Yes. Write it from the inside & outside.

She nods. I will help. As I was. How you wish.

I nod—the pain is what wakes me in them. *The pain*—regret—loss—

I nod again. To myself. Whatever this is, I get it better now.

xxxv. / lv. / lxvi.

What it feels like to dream forever. Put another way, the map before the pathways laid.

Well, yes, OK.

I remember that night in that cash only motel we came to by taxi & the bed in the dark it was so late & here you were ready to fuck me & I wasn't, we didn't

"Why didn't you want me?"

"I was afraid"

"Of my youth?"

"Of *everything*."

"I loved you. I really did."

"None of that matters now."

"What does?"

"Sometimes I show up in these stories. Sometimes it's smooth, sometimes I intrude."

"OK."

"I need your help now. I am struggling."

"How can I help."

"First, by knowing that I don't care for what you became. You survived, moved on, people do. None of that concerns me. Just what you were. You showed up in my fucking dreams & I nearly fucking lucidly dreamed. Nearly."

"What can I do?"

"Keep appearing. Help me break through."

"How?"

"Keep appearing. The pain of seeing you starts me. It might work."

"Do you love me?"

"Now? No. You betrayed me. Over & over. You broke my heart. I chose my Art over you. That was it."

"But you did?"

"Till you broke me."

"Does this help?"

"If I break through. That's what I want. I want to lucid dream & know how & do it. You're my signal."

"What then?"

"Then?"

"Is there more?"

"No."

"There could be."

"What I want in Dreamland isn't you."

"What do you want?"

"I want to find answers I can use. A deeper knowing. A power to shape & create & influence. A conjuring hand against the helplessness. *Do you understand?*"



“I think so. You don’t want me.”
 “I want you to do this for me. Help me to achieve this.”
 “Nothing more?”
 “No.”
 “Are you sure?”
 “Yes.”
 “There’s more. I know there is. I feel it still.”
 “I don’t.”
 “Why?”
 “Because my heart is devoted to another. You are a component of my Art, that’s all. Come to me in dreams as you were & wake me up in them. Simple. It’s what I want & no else.”
 “OK. Even if I don’t believe you.”
 “Good”

Benny.
 Yah, dad.
 Let this happen.
 Who, me?
 Yah.
 I can’t stop you.
 I need a turn. A way to grasp & wield more of my own power.
 Yah, dad.
 You don’t think much of waking hours.
 Me? Nah.
 They matter to me. But I need to do better, more & better. I’m not enough.
 It’ll help. But you still have to do it. It’s your world.
 I think it’s all of a piece. Waking, dreaming, tripping. I just haven’t figured how to work them all together yet. She’s going to help me.
 Your old broken heart.
 Yah. I think it has to involve pain for me to break through. Heartbreak.
 “It won’t be the same after.”
 “Nothing is. I need this to happen.”
 “OK, Charlie. For you, dad.”

xxxvi. / lvi. / lxv.

The last night guarding that building Dylan finally dozed off—and the dream he had should have told him all he needed to know to understand that he & Maya would meet again—but it was terrifying & off—and then the building burned down & he was able to create a gap from it—

(Later he wondered how he got out. The whole building burned & he didn’t remember leaving. Still later he couldn’t find the corner the building had been on. The two streets no longer intersected.)

It was late. The building would get quiet enough for Dylan to hear every creak & breeze & soon he’d be drifting, eyes closed until that last time to elsewhere—usually nice ones—never very specific—creaks might become shore, slight drafts breezes, & sometimes Maya would seem near & sometimes not—never near enough—could not smell her—until that last time—

He remembered later he could sniff her scent & it overwhelmed him & he followed through an unclarity, a place where movement felt like it was by mind alone—

He sniffed & pushed & sniffed some more. Didn’t think to speak or reach out but kept sniffing & pushing. Maya smelled . . . clean . . . not the soap & water kind, he was eating her smell as he pushed

along—

Eventually a hallway, & a figure & a voice, or someone writing, out loud pages, something, it wasn't Maya, it was an old man, sort of, stuff of dreams so both heavy & drifting both—

Dylan realized later it was the Noah Hotel though he never met the old man again by waking or dreams—

but this dream—it sprang out a world Dylan inhabited as—it seems—something combusted in the building he was guarding, flame begat flame, tinder caught & more of it, following some wordless, ancient perfected path of ignition & spread—

The old man lived alone in the hotel, had lived there for years, had come full of passions & hurts, people looking for him, mail looking for him, phones ringing, knocks at door, came before every new guest had to hand over IDs & credit cards (even now that still wasn't strictly true, a person with some cash & a real need, of various kinds, could still rent a room, stay, ride that cash nameless for a long stretch), & he eventually shed the name he'd given, whatever name it had been, & eventually he was able to change rooms on an unpredictable basis as a general part of things—

What had he shed, & who, & who? wondered Dylan as he followed the man over time from room to room, he'd once found a scrap of writing abandoned by the man, read part of it before following: *"Would knowing help? Watching that day again walk itself through? Remember: heart's unspent music bound for colliding with that hour. The breath before, the decision to go. Laughter. You came as one, left as another. Hungers so long held, long shaped, a new mold, now perhaps a new stuff entirely! Nearing, yes,"*

(And he asks me, later, what difference would it have made? And I answer: *I earned her*. My pain & suffering earned the chance, & I followed through. I had *nothing* to offer but my smile & my youth, but *I earned her*, that's what. The years don't undercut that. Do they for you? He shakes his head. My pain was real but I was kind still, I was such a raw want, & I still live there, I still draw new from that old well—)

It seemed he did & did not turn to Dylan to recite the rest: *"you are nearing, the word, the glance, colors & breath mass into a name, a jacket, a vehicle. How God & dreams look to another. You are young, the nights immortal. Even the talk of trifles excites you. Give back this hour?"*

(I sit in your room sometimes, I am you & not you, because that's how everything is. Sometimes she sits with us. She is not old. That's on me. You said let's get a look at her now. I said no, she's nothing now. She's an old I-don't-give-a-fuck now—Why anything, you ask? Because she had the power & left the fucking mark. I bear the mark yet find no beauty in it, in so much of it then & thereafter, the pattern of want & sniff & chase, want & sniff & chase, elude & kiss & gone, & again, & I want to say the pointless & the sad of it all, yet the shaping hand of genetics & evolution made this the way of things, that humanity would continue to hunt & seed & die while climbing to clearer places, reach in moments & in rare lives toward something waiting in the world, some potential both real & the stuff of myth—Because she wouldn't fuck you? Because she & none of them would take me fucking seriously, & none would side with me so I could learn—I did not know & none taught me—& I learned ugly &—fuck her, go on, there she is, there's the bed—she looks at me, smiles shyly, I'm not him, I'm what he became—)

Dylan follows the old man from room to room, day to day, & eventually follows him to Gravy's coffee shop where he will eventually work—but what happens next is that the building he is sleeping in while on duty burns down & disappears completely gone.

(Give back this hour? No. I don't suppose so. You were early lesson in how what one really needs most in others may or may not come. I learned to keep returning to Art for all but everything—all but—)

(the old man is real—is moving rooms again tonight—his possessions the old books & notebooks, the portable phonograph, the few clothes—

More interesting is the poster he always puts on the room's wall near his bed—might seem odd such a twisty old fuck, tall but little potent, would put such a spirally psychedelic work up, or even own it, or bear any interest—& yet—& yet—this was his portal to Dreamland, to the White Woods, to elsewhere—he often wonders why was such a powerful device given him so late in life? He hadn't come here to wield new power. He'd come here to regret & regret, & eventually to die—

Yet no—he found it in the very first room & its faint penciled instruction—“*you are not alone—keep moving*”

He was able to move through the portal or let it move through him—Dylan he induced by dream to follow him & thus to discover the No-Tell—other situations were different—

The portal allowed him travel & also altered costume. He could move in time & space & as another or others—

“*Keep moving*”—part of why was the portal would degrade, would become eventually an old poster, inert, unpretty—& this was because of “*you are not alone*”—he had to keep the portal moving because of this—followed by a who or a what? He didn't know—

One day would he would not return, in one way or another, & he wanted Dylan to take the portal but—

he knew she would be the only payment he would take—payment, not gift, her delivery to him—how to deliver the thread, the conduit herself?

xxxvii. / lvii. / lxiv.

Oh these later days of the year, the clear cool air, those grey gorgeous clouds, power beyond the physical, not sure what—the looking leads to pointing, to trying to think into music with words embedded, gems in the skin of seeing—

Christa knows how a woman often helps a man—her touch, her soft voice, her giving body—and yes, she has & will again with Bowie—but more—she learned, maybe before experience itself—a man can go deep or deeper—sometimes a smile & wiggle of ass is his hunger's reach—and fuck, sometimes it's nice to be bluntly wanted & feel that hard rock enter *her*, want *her*, only *her*, blow it wide for *her*—sure, sure—

With Bowie, though, something way else—those clouds above—that moon—

The Ampitheatre interested her for awhile, she saw how much was going on there, how it was a crossroads of a kind, she saw things because she hadn't come expecting or distracted, & she walked around watching quietly, & that was fine, & then she felt more & more, & was this Bowie?

Finally she found herself in a woods some distance from the clearing with the drums, sitting against a tree, watching shadows pass by her, & there were words of course, always words—

“it would be the same for any god, nothing learned in the hundreds kneeling or mouthing the sacred songs” oh this *“nothing found in face smiling to face on the high holiday, the cheerful choirs, the best-washed virgins smoothly singing of sin & penance”* always that Christa nodded, listening *“& the fine thoughts of each in his or her creased white uniform”* she nods again & says aloud “blessed be blessed be blessed be” someone pauses, in the shadows, hearing her voice—

Christa shakes her head, no, none of this, not right, no enough,
not helping Bowie—

She knows she can do something right now to help him, this far, now to help him, this far, that isn't far at all, she's already let him know that's her task, she can & will—

She nods. “I was brought there to be the next minister. Bowie didn’t know this when he took me, when he kept them from bringing me back. He didn’t know. I knew & I wasn’t supposed to know. I was only supposed to be training like a lot others. I found out.”

Someone might be listening in the shadows. She continues.

“I was to be the first female minister. It was new, all of it, & resisted, but it had to happen. The decay was almost too far gone. But not yet. I was going to renew everything. I was the compromise.”

She repeats, again aloud, the words that had gone stale by when she learned them “*Fumble down into the mystery, the careening hungry hour, flesh gnawing for flesh, & one god a thousand thousand miles away*” Christa talking louder now “*& another near, so near, that hand’s knowing touch on skin*” when had it been alive? these words—“*the laugh & cry in shedding clothes, feel that god as the breathing twins, as sinews bind hearts, the few words, hard, touch, how the god would learn*”—these were good words, solid, Christa was now half-crouched, talking a little louder still, half-singing—

She’s standing, talking, “Do I have to go back?”

The figure in the shadow moves, lights up a cigarette. Passes it to her. Sticky green, most kind.

“Maybe not. But it doesn’t have to be abandonment either.”

Christa nods. “You’ll get them a message?” Nod in return.

She recites, singing, “*what rises with next light, stained & crumpled uniforms, blessed be, blessed be, blessed always.*”—he joins her in singing—“*Was it sin or new love or a darling good fuck?*”—their singing twists tighter—“*The god would listen to the words as limbs untangle, a breast to its harness, a cock into its sheath.*”—their voices now powerfully carrying, shadows near, paused, listening on all sides—“*uncertain words, because that moment, those sacred songs, the strange way each & all bind & undo so easily*”—

She nods him off—he goes—singing the song together was instruction, heresy, enough

For Bowie, this, is her one thought—

xxxviii. / lviii. / lxiii.

Nothing unbinds again, space conjured is space real, no matter the bursts of darkness, the diminishing years, how touch hungers & sates & mercifully forgets—

Well & I keep wondering back to this—how much is forgotten—or how much is knitted in—I keep wondering over long gone days & even longer gone days, & the autumn comes again, & I remember—impossibly, I do, & I remember, & because so I seem to move forward & backward in time simultaneously—

I write now, recently, “*I know nothing & keep learning to sing. Nothing unbinds again, the lesson of drowned woods & old hearts.*” I did not write like this then, not even close, my mind did not work language in such ways, conjuration, singing—

But when then? Those few long echoing nights, I can’t have them back & here is a new November, its gloried death of colors, its brilliant shivering nights, *this* pen, *this* page—

I know nothing & keep learning to sing.

And my fear: that I will forget or unaccountably stop. Lose myself to—what? to more hours not spent writing. More hours not doing what I most love.

And why? Because tonight is both new & old. The hungers are new & old. The pains. The moves toward & away from music.

I come to an old haunt, a coffee shop in a place I called ZombieTown—been coming to this joint again of late—Maya, summoned, sits with me—

“The web weaves forward & back”

She nods, sure, unsure.

“I suppose that’s my task, figure how to do this, again, better, new—”

Nods again.

Another poorfolks place. And cops too. A singular place yet part of a large chain of stores.

“A web?” She cracks, giggling.

I nod. “Suppose.”

“What then?”

“Sometimes the web is people, often it’s place.”

“Why?”

“Places I wrote, to write again. Resume. Continue. Awhile away, returned.”

She peers into my notebook, the *Labyrinthine* manuscript. “Is it reporting?” “Umm.” “We’re sitting in this corner of this bright-lit shop, at dusk, traffic going by, talking, & you write it down. So is it reporting?” I shake off her question.

“You live in the world & outside it, & sometimes you create a moment when they cross” I nod, closer “So I’m still living in the pages of the notebook but in your world too” “No too” “What then?” “The border opens, no separation. Sometimes I call it imaginal space. A place from two.”

She nods. “Why show me?”

“You’re my counterpart.”

“Not Rebecca?”

“No. She’s my conscience.”

“Counterpart?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Code & key too? Conduit? Thread?”

“Thread.”

“Thread & counterpart?”

I nod.

“Does it help?”

“What?”

“To keep shifting like this?”

I look at her. “I remember sitting here long years ago listening to the vice-presidential debate. Another time, very high, writing furiously into my notebooks, sad, lonely, trying to summon the ruined truths of love with another. Here til near dawn often, often took a piss in alley across the street. It mattered. I came here today to web back & forth. We’ll be here again.”

She nods. Counterpart.

xxxix. / lix. / lxii.

Bells ring, little, nothing. Ring again, & a drum, & another. Something beats, something breathes, there is movement if not dancing. Weave the web forward & backward, I believe this strengthens it.

A question: what had Rosie seen in those Oregon woods the day she & Paula went looking for



mushrooms?

They'd become separated, the first time since they left home. The promise between them of "no boys" had been a hard one to keep. Each a potent girlish force & together an overwhelm. On the busses from New Mexico to Oregon, boys had smiled, had tried to chat. Men too, one that each would have tried further with, had not there been the promise. But some other page's topic.

The bus ride was long, "so friggin long, man," said Paula, who was unsure of their objective anyway.

"We smoke pot, Rosie, but magic mushrooms? That's like those crazy old Indians who eat peyote buttons. Hardcore shit."

Rosie nodded.

"You ever eaten peyote with them?"

"Not with."

What a time to find out on the bus. She hadn't asked before. Shit, she was too afraid. But here they were, getting closer all the time to a town called Astoria where Rosie said they would get off & walk or hitch the rest of the way.

"Alone."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"They said not to."

"Who? Those crazy Injuns?"

"No. The ones in the visions."

"When was this?"

"Last summer, when you were visiting your biological mother."

Paula cringed inside. What a *stupid* idea that had been. And her step-parents had been so damned nice about it. And Rosie *had* been different when she got back but . . . she was always weird. She could have coasted along but her brain was better than her ass, & her ass was pretty good.

"The . . . peyote visions told you not to tell me?"

"Or anyone. I wanted to. But they said no. They kept coming to me, in dreams & reminding me."

"But why?"

"They said I could tell you once we were on our way to Oregon."

"You mean now?"

Rosie nodded. "I mean, I said, Paula's gonna ask me. First it will be this big adventure & all, but at some point she's gonna say, why the frig are we going to Oregon to find magic mushrooms anyway?"

Paula laughs. "Pretty smart for injun peyote visions."

Rosie is quiet. "The Indians told me once I ate the peyote I couldn't go back."

"Red pill or blue pill?"

"Yah." She laughs. One day they'd skipped school to stay home, smoke weed & watch all the *Matrix* movies.

"Thing is, I *don't care*. I don't want to go back. To before. I want to understand things. I don't just want to have a bunch of babies & get fat & old."

"What's wrong with that?" Paula was laughing too.

"The Lights" they both said.

"And my dreams," Rosie said after.

"Where did you eat them?"

"In the desert like you're supposed to."

"Shit, Rosie! By yourself!"

"Yah. I camped out. Way out there."

"What happened?"

Quiet, again. "It's hard to describe in order. At one point I was naked & dancing & whooping around like I was an Indian. Then another point I was saying over & over to the Universe: 'Why suffering? Why suffering? Why suffering?'"

"What did the peyote visions say?"

"At first they just repeated the words back to me. 'Why suffering?' I ask. 'Why suffering?' they replied. Back & forth. Back & forth. Then I got more mad then scared. I got real mad & I yelled, 'Why suffering? Tell me!' & they said back 'Why suffering, & why its glorious songs?' I didn't know what they meant.

"Then I heard bells ringing, softly at first, then deeper & louder. They were coming from everywhere & nowhere. Both. I know it sounds nuts but it's true."

There was more. Rosie knew in life there's always more. But she saw Paula was tired & a little freaked so she put her arms around Paula & cuddled her, humming to her, *relax, relax, now sleep, now sleep . . .*

xl. / lx. / lxi.

*I ask the Universe: why suffering?
Why music? & behold this world my answer.*

Tis night. Night is when the danger is most distant. At its rest, between its days of ceaseless ferocity.

I think: this is protection in time, not space. The bastards haven't moved an inch; it's just the hour for sleep, humans sleep, even the ones who cause so much suffering. It is strange. My heart beating. Yours. Every one, now, &, long enough from now, not beating, & we are gone. There are others then, small now, or not yet come to the world.

*I ask the Universe: why suffering?
Why music? & behold the world my answer.*

Why music? Why music. Why music!
None quite the complete way to say.
Ask. Declare. Exclaim. All of them.

I think tonight that maybe why suffering's answer is music & why music's answer is suffering & the world is the result of this. Sensible or not.

Tonight on the radio I heard bright men with despairing hearts, & I suppose despair is the likely result of looking around the world with too much empathy & curiosity—

Strange: my heart beating. Yours.

The hearts of these despairing men.

The danger is distant tonight, & near too. The suffering caused by a few upon many is one kind. The voluntary loss of the music is the other.

What else is dreaming & who would protect one against a world even more indifferent than hostile—

*I ask the Universe:
why suffering?
why music?
& behold this world
my answer*

It came embedded in a dream: old love, old helplessness, a power wielded poorly, with mocking, & I hustled after, teach me, tell me, give me a kind word, I love you, this isn't the best of me, the part that laughs & urges the rest, the part looks ever to arc the gap from sweet to serious, give me a word, cohere for a fucking moment, & give me a word, reck your own power & regret its poor wield, as I have, as I often do, I reckon & regret but not always, I knew the word, I said the word, at least sometimes, but all you did in this dream was lure & elude, kept along it, it felt good, it felt nasty, maybe it wasn't nasty enough, if my adore wasn't enough, would I go back & change it, give you a dirtier it, I wonder, & what then? what then—

*why suffering
to learn to survive
to learn a stone kindness will stay
why music?
to remind to urge
to feed the prisoned heart*

*why suffering
because mortal
because conscious
because no why explained
yet born to a world of
explaining men, the ones with
soft fingers, the one with fists*

*why music?
because the explanations
all break sooner or later &
all left is the rhythm of breath
& the melody of beat—*

Find myself sitting at Luna T's Cafe's bar, seems to be holiday time again—Mr. Bob the barman always gets up the decorations, nothing too pushy—strings of lights around the bar—a green wreath with ribbon on the outside of the bar entrance door—maybe a picture of Santa Claus or reindeer—no crosses, no mangers, no infants in rags—

"Tell me"

"Ask"

"Are you a Christian?"

He laughs. Takes off his spectacles to clean them off, delay, think on my question a moment—

"There's kindness in it. Some hope. People suffer a lot. Sometimes the explanation needs to be hard."

"Accuse? Explain by accusing."

He nods, I think. "If we're all sinners, at least I have company."

I nod to the TV, a news program, soldiers arriving home for the holiday, a reprieve from the current War.

"So it lines up with that. War isn't for perfected souls. But sinners? Sure, OK. Sinners hurt each other."

He looks me over. "Sinners laugh at dirty jokes too. Get drunk & loud. Snore in bed."

"Cum too quickly. Roll over & fall asleep. Forget birthdays."

He shakes his head.

"And so sin explains how we are, or does it excuse it? That's what I don't know."

He waits.

"What I'm saying is that I think the explanation alienates those it badly suckles. Makes sin the standard, it's like starting a game down points just because. Because someone had a weak moment. And then, to feel guilty because another one came along to make things right, & was mercilessly killed for it.

"The rest is reaction, afterward. At best, an in-between all that & an end-time when, again, someone else will call the shots, decide.

"It's like your life is sacred, well, sorta, because you're a sinner, but, well, there are a set of rules to help out with that, but not without a continued humiliation & prostration.

"Life filtered through all this. Sin. Redemption. Myths. Life among humans the only important thing, the human world all that matters. This world of the fallen & the otherwise inconsequential, save as fuel, building material, product to be processed & marketed.

"The stars not real, just lights in the sky, otherwise also unimportant. The human mind narrowed to prejudice, blunt sensation, getting from here to there & back home."

Mr. Bob walks off to fetch some beers, but I can see he's thinking.

When back, he says, "What then. What's this book for?"

I speak 'fore any good words come. "Something else. I don't know. Something good. Fill my hours & show me if nobody else that I'm *fucking trying*."

Nods.

"I don't see most of my doors closing yet. Not sure why, but I *don't*. I still think in possibles. There's some I've known, I don't know if they do still."

Waits.

"There's value in looking back, remembering. And planning things out, but here's *this moment*, *this hour*, here. Not exclusive of the rest but part of it. Matters as much as the rest. When I stumble, I lose this, this . . . *psychedelic sense* that here is somewhere & nowhere & everywhere—"

I stop. A couple of the drinkers raise mugs to me, nod. One smiles.

"The world roars & whispers with music. In as many costumes & manners as one could wish. Losing the sense of wonder & awe & gratefulness to one of sin—one where sin is the predominant fact—how one accounts more or less for one's soul—no—I really don't think so—music reaches every ear, color falls upon every eye, taste touch smell, the mystery isn't for an age or a place, for a great man or woman alone, for one group of believers—or not another—the world's melodies tickle every & all—"

"What then? Take down the lights? No more *Charlie Brown Xmas* on the TV?" he's laughing as he says.

"I don't believe the world is meant to be a permanent War. But there's a powerful force everywhere that pushes for that idea. Not as faith, but truth. War is truth. Cats kill mice. Men war forever.

"There's something else, present, among. A choice. Another."

"What then?" he's still smiling.

A friendly hand settles on my shoulder. The smiling face of Jim Reality III. "Hey guy."

We repair to the roof of the parking garage atop Luna T's Cafe. The security guard is down in the bar, sipping his dinner, watching the news. Nodded to us as we left. "It's 4:20 somewhere" he said.

Jim lights one up as we lean on the safety fence at the edge of the garage. Sweet smell of cannibus.

"How do you not give up or keep fighting on?"

Puff, puff, pass.

"Keep playing. Just keep playing."

I nod.

I look out on the night of the city & for a stretch know not which city. The tall buildings, the lights of the highway. The hurrying crowds on the downtown streets.

"Another hit?" I take one & shake off another. He sees I'm withdrawing & pats my shoulder again, makes to leave.

I sit. But what. But then.

I ask the Universe: why suffering?

Why music? & behold this world my answer.

I am joined on this empty parking garage roof on this frigid December night by others. Maya sits cross-legged in her beat blue jeans & her Jimi Hendrix tie-dye shirt. Bowie, thin, elusive but for the two colors of eyes, one a mushroom, it seems. Jasmine, a scrawny, delectable thing, figuring this is a White Woods phantom scene. Others. Sit near me, stand looking at the city. Neither really present nor absent.

I address them. "I'm supposed to do finely by each & all of you. I can. I will. I look around at the faces & see the dullness of years spent waiting, obeying, learning, rebelling a little, growing heavier & slower with the weights of experience & expectation."

Nobody speaks. Yet.

"What is this book for? It's a game, an example, a warning. *A long fucking song*. It's dirty, stupid, obvious, & sometimes what keeps me remembering who I am.

"It's my revolt, my affirmation, my confession, my great years-long shit of words. It's the next in a long series & I don't think the last."

"What can we do?" someone asks. I don't determine who.

"Know you matter. Know you matter a fucking lot & more than most—"

"But—"

"I know. All mattes. Each & all matters. *You matter more than most—*"

Maya crawls in my lap, bonelessly. Weaves among my loose grasp. The rest go, maybe at her signal.

I feel her slender torso. Her long hair. Her light breathing. Her shiver.

"No"

"What?"

"I'm fine. I'm not too cold & I'm not here to seduce you"

"Here. This time."

"Either."

We grasp & I grow comfortable.

"Code. Conduit. Key."

She nods into my chest.

"Any ideas?"

Shakes her head.

"Dylan."

Nods again.

I think we doze like that, in the freeze, again the parking garage roof exterior wall. Don't move, aren't harmed.

In this dream we share, I am walking with her & Dylan. Woods, pretty. We three are holding hands. I feel others near, like breath, like distant lights, no quarrel, just loved. Near.

It seems impossible but yet we are dreaming this, me as surely as her. Perhaps Dylan, too, at his distance.

"Is this answer, clue?"

"It's just walking. A stop, another. What's nearby. No quarrel."

I nod, hold Maya as we dream together. As night gathers in the dream, the sun begins to light up the city beyond the rooftop. Opening my eyes, I find Maya gone. After a breath, after a beat, I am too.



To be continued in Cenacle | 81 | June 2012

* * * * *



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Seven

"There is no final answer."
—Dr. Timothy Leary,
Radio Interview, 1986.

The spider had rested inside the tub in the dim bathroom all day. A man came in a few times, moved around, left. The spider stayed in one spot awhile, halfway down the tub's inside wall, then moved. It was perhaps peaceful. It was perhaps warm enough.

Some hours later, the man came in & turned on the light. The spider, as spiders do, waited. Suddenly there was water everywhere. Like a rainstorm but heated. The spider panicked, perhaps a little, & made to scutter away, but was caught up in something, & there was a gentle hand, large but not intending harmful, & movement, hurried, perhaps a door opened, there were words, again no harmful intent & then shake, shake, shake, & the spider was in another dim place, colder, & left to choose this way or that—

But the bubbles knew. Such fine soap bubbles, yes. They had filled their task, to come to be when soapy liquid hit water, & float by the millions in a brightly lit bathtub, & when the bath was over, to seek the drain, all of them, for that was where they were bound after their performance & had you asked a soap bubble why you would have gotten similar answer perhaps if someone had asked you "why two arms & not three? Why no tail, bill, or trunk?"—

The man started, then, looked at his pen—yes, indeed, this looked quite possibly like the way on——
or——

Part Seven

"We are creatures of the dream."
—Terence McKenna,
in workshop, 1982.

In a place where the bugs kept getting bigger, finally one was human shaped, & the matter was a choice: as always: to understand or to escape.

And the facility nearby where time-travelling was conducted in a large room secreted behind a small storefront that sold newspapers & cigarettes to sleepers worse than us. Consoles for each traveler set about an armchair. We each put on our headphones & she again warned me about the pencils going

soft in transit. I saw no harm; she saw her doubts made more manifest. At one point, there was a not-quite dog, powerful, we were uncertain its intent as it passed. Worse later, someone was going to kill someone to bring someone back to life.

When it settled, not just the fractures of arrival where departure occurred almost immediately, I was at a sit-in in a basement, with a lot of others, I was dirty, & not sure how protesting from this basement helped, or who protested against. As always, my job was to help, to make a small set of decisions that would change the course of this situation. Those I worked for had the power to have created the machinery I used, & the conviction that *not* interfering in the course of history was what led to the final sequence of slow but unstoppable disasters. Since I was not physically present I was immune to physical harm. More importantly, I was not controlled on every side by the greatest human shackle: fear.

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 rumpled 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 rumpled 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. *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.

* * * * *



Part Seven

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

Well. Let's see. Here the brief bastard child of before & hereon. Yah. I suppose. Reach forward by reaching back, reaching around, maybe lucky & reaching under.

Tell me something. What do they do for you anymore? Still something? Still everything?

Let's say something. Let's say that the tools are familiar & how do I use them?

Let's say from that angle. Ain't black ink's fault when my days are page-blank. Ain't psychedelia's fault when I'm high & only see new ass with old eyes.

The lights are shining tonight, it's to my mind & hand to wield unto music & beauty, or dully refrain.

I've looked around from ground level, looked hard, listened, paid some hours to what the groundlings say.

Let me say, or let me fucking say, nothing, freak spasms of fantasy, *nothing*.

There's nobody else here right now, this stage is empty. I've tried this a few ways now & no answer yet.

None but the old. A song from *Tommy* in the air & I go all Rich Americus & band on stage ecstatic.

Just listen:

*If I told you what it takes
to reach the highest high
You'd laugh & say 'nothing's that simple'
But you've been told many times before
Messiahs pointing to the door
And no one had the guts to leave the temple*

There. So now say there's an old album on the stage with me, & a phonograph. Enough.

None but the old answers. Music:
Art. Nature. Dreams. Psychedelia.
Eros. Magick. *Music*.

The lights are shining tonight, here & all around. Always a full moon. Always beauty when a hand reaches, an eye yearns, a mind quiet or noisy wishes nakedly.

I believe in the conditional virtue of men. Like the comic said, a man's as good as his options. But, I add, having wondered on this line too long, it's what he *considers* his options that flesh the formula.

Moonlight in one hand, the other in a manacle. That's how it feels. I look from hand to hand, acting the one way or the other. Nobody in these stories acts otherwise.

But what else. The moonlight & the manacle. Nobody gives me moonlight, tis not mine, twas here before me & will illumine my dust in the air one far day—it's the manacle—

Surely the manacle sourced in being human, born a place & time, the flesh of particular flesh, the genes of those genes, & the many ways carried along helpless for years, causing decisions I did not make, living unexpected results, becoming by accident again & again—

At some point, however, the manacle is in my possession, in my hand, clasping my hand, pulling my hand back or down, or releasing enough for my pen miracle to go & go & go—

And now, tonight, the lights here & everywhere? The music in my ears as best always? Manacle, I say. Manacle? I ask. Yes, even beauty. Yes, every hour. Yes, manacle is miracle is now without cease until dust indeed upon the moonlight & perhaps even then in some way still—

But then—what then?

The manacle. The miracle. The music.

Music is the miracle of the manacle. What prisons also frees. (*Take back your mind. Help others too.*) (Bowie nods) (Hey! Off my empty stage.) (Page. Yah. You & the LP. I get it.)

What then—what then?

There's no losing the manacle, pulling, at rest, compelling, answers, no answers,

"You're either in the band, jamming toward that highest high, or you're in the audience, arms crossed, watching, being fed, tasting another's miracle without one of your own to share"—

I nod. Take back your mind.

Show others how.

Bowie nods.

"How?"

"No manacle. No miracle. Only music."

Shit.

Bowie nods again.

"You almost ready?" asks Maya, edging onto the page. I see her version of *Labyrinthine* is now carried in a paisley-looking shoulder bag.

"That's nice."

She nods, won't get distracted.

"A little slow tonight."

She nods. "Notes all organized yet?"

"Almost."

She almost laughs.

"1200 pages is a lot."

She nods. Looks to Bowie. He shrugs. "Nothing wrong with some notes."

She looks at me again. "How many pages of notes?"

"40 pages, I think. Typed."

Maya looks back at Bowie. He shrugs.

She turns to leave the stage. “Just start soon. Everything’s ready.”

Picks up my *Tommy* LP. “I’ll put this away for you.”

I wonder what that means but don’t ask.

I nod.

“Look around, hear voices, from the strangest things, each object wanting its moment, its due, a recognition that it too exists validly in this world. I wonder: is this wrong? To see the jar & notice as its contents diminish & wonder its satisfaction when it is empty & ready to move on?

“A soda can. A rubber band. A newspaper. A computer file. If one allows one’s empathy to leak, frees it to forage beyond human faces, what then? How to communicate to what does not speak in human voice or words in return?

“What if everything is alive, not just existent? What if men move blindly, wield their power worse than half-gone hungry brutes? What if men, far from being the custodians of the world their books fancy them up to be, are—”

“Mac, tie it up & drag it to the trash”

“Why?”

“You don’t gotta have heart-to-hearts with every soup can in the gutter to be a decent person.”

“No”

“No”

“What then?”

“You gotta just be aware. Maybe the soup can isn’t interested in you. Maybe, using your thinking, it just wants to do its thing & move along.”

“So the can contains a spirit performing the can’s task, & then passes to what’s next?”

“Look, how do I know? I’m just saying you can’t see the worst possible in people, & still live a good life among them. Don’t shoot your head in the foot.”

“Yah. Thanks.”

“No charge.”

“What then?”

“Make it good as you can, no matter what that means, the best & worst of you down here on this page”

“How deep is deep?”

“You’ve hardly yet found out. When you never leave the page, at it or not, then something, somewhere.”

“Everything’s alive”

“Fine. *Start there.*”

i.

You won’t know it by name, & therefore hesitate to call it home, you’ll slide about the music, the shine, & the words sticking deep then smiling letting go—

*You will wish to know more, marvel
at how much you are marvelling:
the pretty girl dancing
that old man talking to trees*

*those shakers & dancers
rising that bonfire,
what years pass!*

*What lets go. What resists.
A moment comes, without wind, without
cold.
What resists. What lets go.
(Moment passes, a regret, an instruction)*

*When the light moves in again,
a stirring in many slumbers, some
of the mystery retreating, a recession
in heart's long night fever not sharply
recked by your science or your god,*

*let memory's best ear come
forth, let your deepest song cry out,*

*"this is! this is!
this is! & ever is!"*

Let it cut, let it stain, let it ever sheer a bit from the chains of daylight & its men—

*Yes. There. Set it out like that, or near to. Tis music from the Ampitheatre, a food in this place, this place
without ordinary time & place, yes, there.*

*Here. And so long ago. How does its milk keep coming fresh & nutritive? I ask, I wonder, I do not know.
Maybe don't wish to. Maybe don't want to remember so much as a push on. OK, it exists, here it is, on my
pages, in my mind, here it is. Who am I now, here in this place of there & then, no see this is how I work,
I push now & then & other nearer, nudge daylight & dreaming, shake my head, shake my all at borders,
boundaries, the little useful ways human conduct predicates on worst instincts, least generosity, no empathy,
no maturity, no tribe of two legged creatures wandering the globe unknowing often hopeful, afraid, feeling
too many things & which one to believe, yes, which?*

*Uh, yes, um. A breath, a beat, & move it along, deeper than the Ampitheatre? Dreamland. White
Woods, where **RemoteLand** is filmed. Noah Hotel? I'm asking around my mind what another page may help
me to answer, another hour's try—*

*I try again. That is, Maya does. Blonde hair pink striped down, nothing but her pink bra & panties,
straddling across my lap. Blue eyes too fucking smart for my liking.*

"Tell me."

"What."

"Tell me."

"Nothing. Get off."

"No. You like this."

"I do. Now get off."

"You want Jazz more?"

"Maybe. It doesn't matter."

"Why?"

"Because it's not the point."

"We're your prime pieces of girl-meat."

"I didn't say otherwise."

"Tell me then."

"I need to figure out something here. Not just that I want to fuck you."

"What?"

"I don't know."

She nods. Kisses my cheek. Mercifully, she gets off me. The hotel room clarifies a bit. Oh, this place, where all of them played their card game.

She doesn't dress right away. Keeps me agitated by it.

"Don't fret."

"You're nicer when you're not talking to me."

She laughs. "That's strange, isn't it?"

I nod.

She picks up her pink Jimi Hendrix t-shirt. Smiles at me.

I sigh. Pat my lap.

She sits back down facing me.

"This doesn't accomplish anything."

She nods, kisses my cheek.

"You can stay where you are if you help."

She nods.

"What am I doing wrong?"

"Nothing."

I stare darkly at her but she holds my stare blithely.

"I need answers. And good luck"

She nods. "I know."

"How?"

"Ask?"

"I have. I am. I don't know how else."

She leans against me. Sincerely.

"Tell me."

"I love Dylan."

"But?"

"I want what you have."

"Oldness? Inaccessibility?"

"No. The power. Even at the worst."

"I don't feel it."

"You do. At the worst. You do."

"OK. But it doesn't wield as I like."

"You mean for a job."

"Yes."

"It's not like that."

"You mean useful?"

She laughs, wriggles her fine little ass around in my lap to punish me.



Jeremy Kilar

"Enough."

"It's practice. For Dylan."

I frown.

"You'll let us? Or do you?"

"Look. This isn't getting things along."

"Just fuck me. Over on that bed. Now."

"No."

"You'll like it. I promise."

"You mean that part about how you neuter men? Or was it seed them? I don't remember."

"That's Dylan. You just get hot young ass."

I shake my head.

Try again. There's always a try & always an again, at least so far, & I suppose I carry it like a faith with me. There will be a pen in my hand, I will *try*, I will try *again*. Art as faith, faith as a verb, a carrying along like one carries beat & breath, a faith in the doing, & in the doing again—too many words for a simple idea.

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 know 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 the hospital, I knew you two were done. They're like fucking Klansmen-close in that town. None of them could get a cheerleader 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—

ii.

A matter of view. So much is a matter of view. At one point I say, "I was hurt & angry & my pain was belittled or unnoticed for years."

Then I add, "A poor youth but happy, the rest a heart's carnage of years, want & beauty a wild mixture."

I pause, nod, whoever I am, & conclude: "I cry this to you tonight because you feel it too, & may reply."

Someone says, "Happy birthday, brother!" & I cringe—

It, this, could go one way or another. Each sentence comes after a hesitation. This way, that way? I'm not sure.

The boldest voice within says, simply, "Push on."

A matter of view, I come back to that again. What to do with it?

"Come on. It's OK to relax once in awhile. Let your hair down."

I nod, yah.

It was about 30 years ago that this story began, thousands of pages, & I wonder: if events had occurred differently, would I still be writing it? Would that be better or worse?

A matter of view. That's what I come to now.

"You don't let up, do you?"

I nod.

It just doesn't mean anything to me, this birth day.

An arm rounds my shoulder & pulls me close. "What then, pal?"

"I don't know."

"Want to start again?"

"Yah."

Luckily, the pink-nosed white bunny flashes past, & I make to follow, knowing that way is no way, & following isn't possible but the gesture is a gesture, moving is moving & once the landscape starts to shift, the light breaks up & is moving again too, & I am following though it is not a way & I try not to hunger it for a way, for the point & tell, for the explain of the flow, & the comfort, the love & pity, no, I follow the pink-nosed white bunny to know & not know both, a deliberate act of hitting into the Mystery for what it may yield me or another, the white bunny up ahead, further & further, I try not to wish nearer, please nearer, please comfort & explain, but no, it's a big mirror, hard to see all, a big mirror, hard to know or not know, a choice to see the stars & reck them high or be revealed down here low, following the pink-nosed white bunny into the lights, & I try to stop, I doubt & try to stop, so hard, & doubt, & pain, & why this, just stop, but not yet, no, follow this way that is not a way, yes, & please, I am looking for the way that does not explain but stays, a way kind but not stupid, knowing but not stupid, faithful but not stupid, the white bunny slows, looks at me, querying, I nod, speeds up, I make to follow but do not, I let the white bunny flash on beyond, another day, another hour—

"Want to start again?"

"Yah."

Jamie, after Maya left, after the many drinking nights with Muddy, after the several nights Muddy & he snorted rails & sucked each other down, after a whore or two, clean of course, Muddy was from rich people, had numbers, all clean, do what you like, all discretion, no hitting, at least too hard, & nearly losing his job, how does a fucking programmer lose his job? Software engineer what the fuck ever, went to detox, funny shit given everyone else, but yah, you can eat or ingest smoke or fuck what you please but you show up, do the fucking job, & her taste wasn't leaving him, not even close, it wasn't right, what had they done anyway? See, he wasn't sure. She slept in his bed, could see he expected it, & he'd,

& he'd, but, what, what? He'd protected her, is what.

She was scared. She was hot as fuck, but scared. She cowered in my arms from things I couldn't see, scary fucking things I couldn't see.

It went on like this. She'd sleep while I was at work, on my couch, on that shit-old knitted thing my grandmother gave me, sleep all day, or what, I didn't know

& all day long at work I'd think of that luscious little body of hers & how closely I'd held it, & I wanted to in every dirty way that I did to those money whores later—

but I didn't. Not to Maya. I began to disassociate from her instead. A part of me wanted to fuck her badly, rent the cotton, hear the pleas, take it, but another part of me went elsewhere, somewhere she led, or pointed toward, I'm not fucking sure, but I went there, it was yah scary at first but I went further than Maya, where she couldn't, I hacked my way deeper in, it wasn't hard, nobody ever had, the fear was a defense enough before, who would breach the White Woods, not taken there but find a way in? Not for revenge but . . . curiosity.

That last night I woke up almost screaming, I was in the Beast's jaws, I woke & you were between my legs sucking & licking me, moaning, awake, asleep, how to know? You were good, like you'd long known how to ride my cock closer & further, you kept me from cumming till I was crying, closer, further away, how could you know, yet you did

but I made the wrong move, leaned forward, kept me deep in your mouth, struggle, suck it, struggle, choke, *suck it bitch*, finally you relented & sucked so hard & long I passed out, *what the fuck*, I woke up, you were sleeping, I didn't know if it had or not—

And you were gone & eventually I was here all the time, I hacked my way in & stayed, the White Woods is easier now, now that I stay—

“Again?”

“Yah. You like it.”

“Yah.”

How deep the poison's wild mixture in our blood, want & music, how high to reck the endless woods yearn through all?

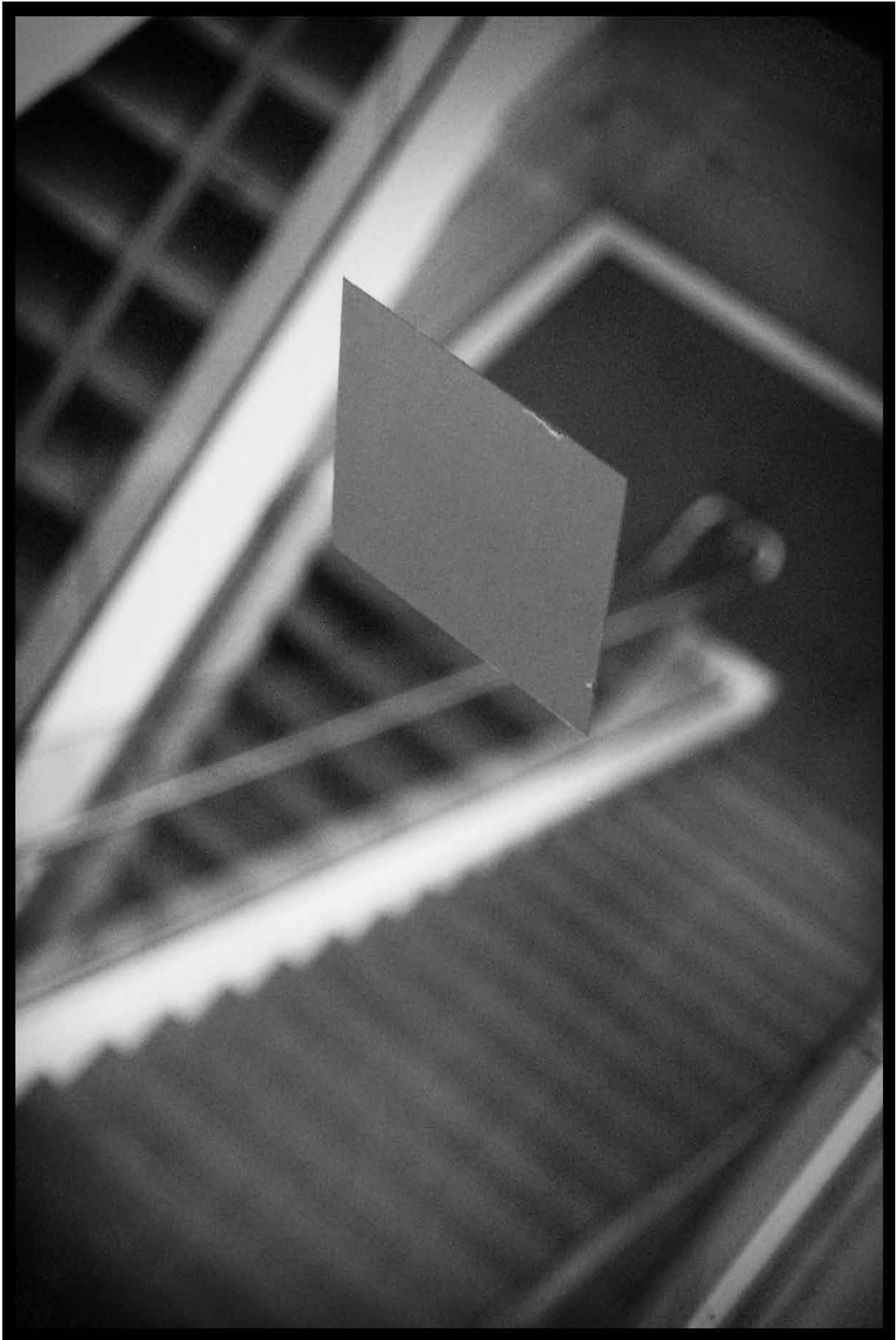
Christa understood all that. That she'd be leader. Years before it happened, or began to. It was simple, they left her be when one by one the rest were led off. She wasn't. The so-called initiations were a lie. The costumes, music, the lighting. Pure bullshit. She'd seen it. Was led one night half asleep & complaining to watch.

World's puzzle disintegrates, reinvents every hour, while many a man through centuries will smile & think its formula cornered in a doorway

close, so close, soon to know, to tell all, till a ship, or a jingle, or a thousand black wings up & beyond that spire.

Yah. She watched. She learned. The ways to work a psyche, soften & program it. Create a new landscape, a series of altered protocols, priorities, beliefs.

And the funny thing was: she was jealous. How they shed their garments so easily, for the chains, the costumes, the hundred cameras to record every cumming tremor, she stood among them more wanting than they knew, & saw the rest get it & not care it was bullshit for her benefit—well not bullshit but still—those fucking words—



Little answer to this world but each touches each & a mystery runs through all, now the hungry woman who smokes with solitude's juices in a bed that remembers twined nights of blood & despair, now two tribes will war unto annihilation for possession of a dead god's graveyard, now a brave man who—

Yah. Um. Yah. Just, yah.

Just one taste back then, if you'd taken just one fucking taste, I wouldn't have left with Bowie.

Now that I'm coming back, it will be with Bowie. If I can persuade him. Just awhile I think I can.

"Life always leaves something open. That extra." You wanted more from me, Jack, & I didn't give it to you. I saw where you were going long before you got there. That Bridge of Glass. All that fine pussy you played badly & worse on the way. But that's what you got, & the like. It was all warnings for you to remember since I couldn't tell you the truth.

I'd followed the pink-nosed white bunny, followed her far from the stink of old ideas & ancient demons, unseen enemies & the rest. And I'd given it all a good run for its money, my best manhood days no less potent than yours now.

Your bevy of pussy a handful. Boy, I woke regular with several in my bed. They learned the catfighting did nothing for me. And just getting dirty bored me too. I taught them better, taught them to work each other's bodies better than all that, give her what you've been wanting most, it sounded simple but it worked. They'd come around to me & I'd collect thanks all around.

By when you found me I was long a creation of dead days, long loyalties, old breaks. I was tired, I'd drunk the juices. The last night I felt it best that craft or planet hung so low in the sky, we'd walked outside, didn't usually do that, some of the neighbors looked at me twice living unmarried with several women who smiled quite often & got along better than women were supposed to—we were high, those mushrooms weren't Pez, but the ships were closer than usual & they wanted to go, they pushed me, *let's go, let's leave this, come on, please*, they were ready to come back with me I'd told them, they were ready,

I took them back in the house, had each one slowly while the others smiled & watched, that night I felt tired after, not elated, not full of gratitude, thrilled, no, tired, tired, Jack, *ahh shit—*

I dozed, dreamed of that collie, oh, sweet, there you are, how? So far. You . . . speak? Um. OK. Tweety Bird. Yes. She's here. You and she . . . Oh. Repeat that. No. Tell me, I want to know. Please. I can't understand. I'm still wagging tail friendly. Do you know a better way? Will you show me?

*(Breathe. Move. Feed. Mate. Spend.
Expend.*

(A gift. The glare, the sugar, every fermenting hour with no final arrival. A secret. A joke.

(A matter of view.)

iii.

He said, "Stop singing from your knees" & I suppose I understand that right off.
I say, "So how?"

"Trees bow to nobody, just offer their fruit, their shade, what they have."

I nod.

"So how?"

"Stand up."

"Aren't I standing?"

"No. Not lately."

"This is all I've got."

"You've got more. Easy, you've got more."

"You tell me."

"Stand up."

"Fuck you."

"Yah. Fuck me. But stand up."

"Does little good."

"It's enough."

I nod.

"Not your legs."

"I know."

"Good. Don't do it for me. Do it for you. Because it matters to you. Or maybe you just want it to again."

I nod. "I do."

"So stand up. Here. Tonight. Always. I was standing to my last day. Long past when I had legs."

I nod.

"Tell me something for daylight hours. Not now, night, high. Then."

He looks at me, long & hard. "See that next page, blank & ready?"

"Yah."

"Don't touch it till you're standing up, like I told you. Not a word."

I'm back, a week later.

"Are you standing up?"

"I always was."

Silence. Then laughter. "Now that's something."

"I suppose so."

"What's your question?"

Now I'm quiet a moment. "Am I going to get my lucky break this time?"

"I can't tell you."

"Can't or won't?"

"It's not that easy."

"I want them to hire me."

"Yes. I know."

"Do . . . I . . . get . . . it?"

Silence. No more.

I nod. Wherever the rest, it's not here easy.

Maya sighs & takes my hand, as if her cue. We dance slowly, since neither of us can really dance well. I hold her lightly, feel the lightness of her frame, the way her eyes shift lightest blue to crimson—

"And now you'll sing to me—"

A daze, a dream of beauty, hard world cracks before this dance, & praise where there have been stunted gestures

She nods, leans her head lightly on my shoulder.

“We love others.”

She nods.

“Then what you & I?”

“We’re the same. I’m more you than you realize. Sing to me—”

Wait. Start again. A daze, dream of beauty, the world a waste, spark it new, now time itself will burn.
Wait. Start again.

She nods. “Is this the rest?”

She looks at me. “Everything is the rest.” Fades like light from my arms.

Cry out! (*iv.*) Something may listen, may heed, may give you a piece back (*iv.*) Would you have younger blood & bones, a lighter question of god astride your heart (*iv?*) Another chance to breach that cherry cunt with less reverent words, surer touch (*iv* – *her eyes were a pretty brown, her tits from what I could tell, were soft & fresh enough—her cunt was Catholic girl-tight & any girl waiting for mind to release it to its pleasure & its work*) Does love teach best by variety (*iv.*), excess, (*iv?*), or absence (*iv!*) (*I was the boy who protected her, funny that, the one she didn’t want to fuck, it almost seems to me tonight I’m near done playing this decades old what-if?*)

What would you have back,
which moment, what word?

Tonight I answer easily:

my Art came from that long shit of years, it is here, now because I didn’t fuck her, & her, & the other ones, it’s what good came, what I can hold & point to, what matters, not the clumsy hustles you put on me to keep me near while it felt good, but not too near—

Another hour with the dead, another hour with youth’s lost brothers (*iv.*), another with a pen & a book, hours raising music in that shadowy green court(*iv*)yard?

What’s broken what’s gone,
what beliefs simply & discarded,
only dreams (*iv*), death, (*iv*),
& a surprising hour’s return
(*iv*) anything—

I find myself at Luna T’s Cafe, in the corner of the bar, sitting next to Rebecca smiling at me. Her easy, sure smile.

“I have a surprise for you.”

“Uh oh.”

“A good one. Come on.”

We walk like old, hand in hand, through the oaken door, but something happens & it’s not the band room. It’s a bookstore.

"Um."

"I know."

"Um?"

"It's not done yet."

"Repeat: um?"

"It's the Arcadia Bookstore."

"Burned down."

She looks at me serious now.

"Haven't you wondered what I've been doing?"

"This?"

"I've been reading your old notebooks."

"Oh."

"There's nothing in them to forbid this."

"No."

"And your dream journals. All the dreams of bookstores."

I nod. "Does she make you, um, jealous?"

"Maya?" she laughs.

"Yah."

"Of course not. I'm married to you but I'm not what I'm not."

"What aren't you?"

"Young. You. I'm Rebecca. I re-create bookstores if I wish."

I nod. Now she smiles. "Good. Come and look."

She's recreated the Arcadia Bookstore & Cafe in detail it never had. I say as much.

"That was to my advantage. You kept it vague. It gave me room to improvise."

(She'd long heard the sound of the sea in her dreams. All was silent, & the sound of the sea, it called to her, told her things, there are mysteries, Maya, mysteries in the world, mysteries deep in you, the places of men are small in truth, are noisy & small, no matter the seeming, remember this sound, no matter where you are, how deep in, it will remain when the places of men are flat, are gone, remember, Maya, remember. The seas, all silent & the sea . . .)

"You're thinking of her."

"Yah. I was."

"Good. I'm glad she moves you."

"Yah."

Rebecca pushes me against a bookcase. "You're going to need us all. We're all going to have to come through for you."

I nod. "I don't know."

She kisses me, softly, deeply, a kiss that consumes me, a long unhad kiss, an intensifying moment, a long waited possession, reclamation, here she was again, wanting, giving, powerful—

Leans back. Smiles. Part the devil, part the sky.

I nod. "Alright."

"Alright?"

"Yah. I get it."

"What do you get?"

"I get that this book & me both, being two & one, each & both need you."

She laughs. "I love you too, Raymond."

We resume walking around the Arcadia, now hand in hand.

"Two floors."

"At least."

"New & used."

"And records."

"Porn? Romances? Head shop?"

She nods, laughing.

"Are you going to run it?"

"As much as I run the Cafe."

"Ahh."

"I have a fellow already."

"Who?"

"Old friend of yours."

"Who?"

"Me," says Dylan. Steps around the corner. Oh.

"Oh."

He smiles. No wonder Maya loves him. Wow.

"You need us all," he says quietly.

"She said that too."

"I asked him," Rebecca says. Not defensively but looking at me.

I nod. "This makes a kind of sense."

"You suppose."

"I suppose."

"What then?"

"Nothing."

"Say it."

(the sea, more than all else, sometimes those years she'd heard it on her pink radio, how, she had. She'd listen in her bed in the dark, the single pillow, the single blanket, sound of the sea, eventually, quietly, given over to it, it was never difficult, & the sea never refused her, she entered & was soon deep & deeper, it was like swimming but had she ever? She didn't think so, but maybe. Swimming, but an ease, a grace, this was where she was from, not a visitor, she was from here & this was remembering & how good it felt to do this, swim & remember, deeper & deeper, where too black to see she saw, where lungs could not breathe she breathed, with ease, ahh, but what was all that back there? Her, back there, that skinny girl, eyes shut, clasping her cat-shaped radio, so close, her friend, what of her? A lie? A delusion? No. She was . . . then. And now, here, deeper & deeper? Yes, now, deeper)

They're waiting, looking at me.

"Look. I go where I go."

They nod.

"She's from the sea. I don't know what this means, if it's a dead end or not. But she's from the sea."

I nod & leave them, return to it later. Maya is from the sea, she was taken from there, she is a primal thing taken from the sea. Why? By whom? It explains what she isn't, quite, a skinny hippie girl. What of Samantha? Her guardian, protector while she's not in the sea? Is any of this important?

She swims deeper & deeper, mouth slightly open, tongue moving, words, breaths, over & over, "source, source, source, source, source, source"



What, then, the years don't seem to bring evidence of the climb to stars. Still blind moles pushing & scratching in the dirt. I see this new & it amazes me. No lesson learned. No try to breathe together & feel the greater power.

What, then, I ask again, on a night when my pen is struggling to move.

I suppose I'll think tomorrow is another day & what is the music I want to sing but the better & lesser notes all allowed.

Source bears it all, & all of it comes from source, all is valid & I don't know what to make of that save a word not acceptance, no. Not quite.

If Maya is from the sea, & sea is source, then explains how she is not quite skinny hippy girl, how she is seen variously as code, key, conduit. How some planned to use her to neuter men & begin the long de-population, while another adjusted her such that she would never neuter, would, in fact, fertilize—

I am certainly wondering on this tonight, going over these things, & frankly unsure—

Then she beckons me with her—come down here, where I come from—come with me down here—take my hand, swim with me deeper in the sea—swim with me deeper in the sea—I nod & we go——

v.

Following Maya into the deep becomes more a chase down into the watery blackness after a blonde flash with pink stripe, & of course she becomes less leader as I become less follower, a game, this universe? Time + play? She's leading me further along but more further in there is an arriving—in to this but the what & the how unknown, I want to ask

How, Maya?

I don't know.

Whereon?

I don't know.

I follow you?

♫ I you. ♫ No.

This is what I work with. She's not willing making it hard. This is both new & memory to her, this deep, long past when weight & darkness & lack of oxygen should have crushed us both, tell me something, Maya, now, tell me—

This story misses you when you leave it be

I don't do it on purpose

It's as important as you let it be

Yes

As you make it

Yes

Do you understand?

I—do?

What you would know is here—

*I'm not sure I'm after divination—
No—not that—more the how & the why—*

*Tell me—the how—
Make Art—every hour you can—
the rest is valuable but—
But?
Make Art
Yes—& why?
It will lead you home—
What is home?
here—& hereon—the answers show as you work—further in, further along—*

*Tell me—
Make Art—
Tell me—
Make Art—
Tell me—
There isn't anything else—nothing else is as important—nothing—*

*I believe that & I don't—
Make Art into everything—leave nothing out—
Ah—
Yes—
All that old shit—& the new shit coming along too—
Yes—all of it—
Make Art even when nobody knows or sees it as such?
Make Art of it all*

We descend deeper—I can't say this is ocean anymore—

We're sitting in one of those lowly lunchrooms I've known so many years—Maya with me, usual scrawny hippie girl form, pink Jimi Hendrix t-shirt. Blonde hair, pink stripe. A delicious thing in her own way. But . . . ah . . . it's Maya . . . & so it's not even close to that fucking simple. She nods, smiles at me, nearly delighted. Motions.

“I'll tell you several sinners of God's mysteries & his miracles & then I'll tell you what to do on all this.” The preacher is old, his frame gaunt to its last ounce, but a fanatical health running hard through his blood & bones—his half-listening crowd is more wheezing & sickly, partway between drunk & hungover as he speaks, yet they listen, some part of each hungers after something in his words, maybe just one word, but which? Which?

He fetches them food, makes them eat, every last one, there is a young matron's tenderness in how he ministers to each. They will each be supped & then he will each closer to his God.

“Your lord will willing crawl with you through your every worst hour, your every sin. Every wanton snatch of woman you pay for & lay with.” Snickers. He quashes them with a breath. “Every taste of liquor. Every curse you utter. Every way in which you can foul his creation with your careless hand.”

Pauses. They are listening. They are afraid. They listen.

“Your lord does not dwell foremost in the pretty buildings where most seek his communion. The spectacles held there, the foppish morons who pretend to know his will & make to recite it from books of rhymes & chants. The simple myths men tell to explain the darkness to each other & yearn anew for daylight within & without.” *He pauses again. The store manager is watching, listening as he does, not approaching yet. Knows something vital here must transact through.*

“Your lord is in your very blood, in the musty clothes you wear. In each cigarette you light & in the slow darkening descending over your lungs & heart because of it. Your lord runs through every stenchy thread of your worn socks & crumbled shoes! The blotches on your skin! Your fetid sweating beds!”

Does not yet approach but is closer. A game they play, of sorts, this preacher & the store manager, how long it will go on this time. How it will conclude.

“I know none of you feel clean or healthy, or understand in any powerful way how close your lord is to you. You’ve been brainwashed into thinking that bits of wood are magically manifest with holiness, that words uttered in shaped song are needed to summon God for a word, that confession will cleanse & prayers might be answered.

“None of you, none, understand how beloved you are of your lord, how entwined in every fiber of your being you are with his will & wish for the Universe. No prayer! No confession. Tell the air you breathe it? Ask its leave each time you do?”

Manager on the move. Slowly. He does not hurry. Not in the least.

“As you leave here, as you return to your wanderings, your hustles through another day, think, if you can, think: neither good nor bad, neither sin nor virtue, just awesome high dirty brutal fucking perfection! Again & again! Awesome, high dirty, brutal fucking perfection!” *Screaming, the manager, holding him tightly, talking to him, whispering over & over, good, good, you did good, good, good, you did good, it’s OK, it’s OK now, it’s OK, it’s OK, it’s OK——*

Maya regains my eyes & smiles new at me.

I nod. What then.

Do you get it?

I like writing about crazy preachers & hot young ass.

She laughs. Shakes her head.

Yes & no.

I’d say yes & yes.

More to it, I mean.

I stand up, lean near her, kiss her cheek. Return to the surface.

* * * * *

vi.

The air as I emerge recovers me with a love, an embrace I cannot explain. Rushes deep through me, lungs, blood, bones, wraps around my skin, smacks happy my face, would draw me even above the surface if I had wings to come. I am cold still but loved. No sign of Maya.

A small paddle boat happens along, sturdy if improbable, I climb in & meet two small black kittys with large hypnotic blue eyes, they insist me into a life jacket. Safety first. That done, they paddle us on, whether to shore or elsewhere I'm not sure I care. Had Maya sent them? So much is possible if one lets.

We sail on, through the open seas awhile, the kittys lick my cheeks occasionally but mostly we watch the movement of the water, the changing subtleties of the sky, it's peaceful—

then we sail through a door that appears before us & blinklessly are rolling through a strange land, rolling because the kittys boat has sprung out wheels to carry us—

I don't ask, I no longer think to ask. Why ask? They're good company, check my seat belts, drive steadily—

I don't ask because no question is here—

Till we finally pull up & stop somewhere—now the questions arrive too

The white bunny is sitting on the porch of a pink & white house overlooked from behind by a tall cliff—hmm—ahh—Maya's friend—

I leave the kittys in their boat-wagon & walk up to the porch of the white bunny, her sitting I notice in a low slung chair with a deep-scooped seat—she looks upon me steadily, gives me one sniff, a perfunctory evaluation, I guess I pass OK for now—

I sit down on the porch's wide planks & look around—aside from the bunny near me & the kittys in their wagon—now curled together into a waiting nap—, there isn't anything so odd here—

Do I speak? The bunny watches me calmly, a sentience in her eyes, not human per se, but not wild animal's either—

So much is possible if one lets—

I speak. "I feel like I'm here because things have become harsher & darker & more difficult. It's like I've broke off a piece—another—of myself to venture deeper here—"

I stop. There is listening, but no reply.

"I've known you, all three of you, in other stories—& you, bunny, from afar in this one too—"

Go on—have to—"I truly feel however you are come to be, of me, through me, you are a strength I now carry with me"—now I stop—

The white bunny hops, twice into my lap, soft, lighter, smaller than I realized—sniffs once again, kisses briefly each of my cheeks, nudges me to return to the kittys boat-wagon—there's more of this to go—whatever this is—

The landscape is indiscriminate, to best say it, until we approach what appears to be an old covered bridge over a small twisty stream; the kittys pedal the boat-wagon right onto it & we keep rolling along. Wide planks, again, an old slatted roof above. There is writing carved into the side planks, a lot of it I notice. I stoop & climb to read, perhaps find a hint:

Use some
other word for want—
why not nod & feed
the world its fill?

Long hungry
cries of a
thousand nights

All these centuries of men
& nothing learned?

Um. Yah. The kittys wait for me to climb back in, then we roll on—

I begin to doze. There is sun overhead now, though trees also canopy what seems to be a much clearer path. But I doze through all this, safety belts on, kittys pedaling steadily along—I dream & begin to write—

Maya, I came to you from very far, I think. For so long, my books had succored me & my years. I felt part of a legion of scholars, in all places & at all times, trying to assemble the puzzle of the world, each contributing something toward it. How I ended up naked in that field at dawn near the White Woods—

Not an easy answer. It began with a correspondence I had, the first time I felt deep emotions in me run for someone I had not met in person, yet had come to love in a way—

She wrote to me because I had written a brief essay on the stars in a science magazine she read one day in her doctor's office. Wrote to me via the magazine office in New York, so it took awhile getting to me.

She lived with a farmer & his three sons. She was orphaned, it seemed, & he'd taken her in. A widower, & her young & fresh, his intent was plain.

What was strange was the power she'd been given. She slept in his bed at night, the only bed offered, nude, as he preferred, but he never possessed her as he intended.

There is a legend, of the slave girl who kept alive by telling a fierce king tales every night, so he wanted more again.

She sang, this girl, instead of telling stories. But there was no radio & she knew only so many songs.

So I sent her letters of songs, this is how I saved her. She wrote to me because I'd written a short essay likening the cosmos to music, & each star to a unique song.

Now I was keeping her from being consumed by the farmer's appetites to replace his lost wife & start a new litter by sending her letters of song with instructions how to sing. She could not read music so I explained it all in words, how fast to sing, higher or lower, I sent letters every day, pretty much, as the farmer's strength against the songs grew. His lust, especially.

She stopped writing to me & did not resume. I figured we had either won & she'd escaped, or we'd lost, & she did not want to tell me. I never saw a picture of her, only knew her first name, Christina.

I wake. Oh. OK. The kittys have stopped pedaling. They admire me with bright blue eyes, lick my cheeks, but still undo my safety belt. It's time to say goodbye.

vii.

I got out quickly in the end, took nothing, she said *take nothing*, would have had me run naked down the road just to better separate me from all that—she said, when you go, go, don't look back, not once, forget how to return—I said I won't forget you, or how you saved me from this, or my friend the



scientist—she didn't look happy with this but nodded—me leaving with nothing would be enough—can I write to him? *No.* Once? To say goodbye? *No.* Why not? He saved me too. Gave me all the songs. *The songs are a weakness now, they have to go too.* But why?

She became . . . something else . . . & she said words I understood some other way. And I understood then that this would all go. She would destroy this farm. So much it would stand in ruins unremarked by almost anyone. It would be violent.

Will you hurt the little ones? She said nothing. I won't go. She looked at me all teeth & fire but I looked back. No. You won't hurt the little ones. They never hurt me. *You'll not see them again.* I don't care. Promise. She didn't wish to. We made a deal. I would go & not look back & she would spare them. Two of them. The two who didn't hurt me. She dressed me. In the middle boy's t-shirt & jeans. A pair of his sandals. No socks. No underwear. They were clean, she sniffed them closely.

I walked down the road in the direction she pointed & I did not look back. I felt her receding from me & it hurt me deeply, more than anything ever had.

"I love you," I said to the darkness before me.

"I love you too"

"Will I ever see you again?"

"Maybe. In another form. In a long time to come. If you make it."

"Tell me what to do."

"Remember this, like you said you had to. It won't be easy at times. It would be better if you didn't. But if you do, if you can, we will meet again."

"A long time from now."

"Yes. Now go. Go!"

"How do I do this?"

"A truck will come by. Wave to it. Smile. Ask for a ride. Tell him you need a ride. He will not hurt you. It will be your start away from here."

After that, no more. She was gone. Really gone. I later dreamed what she did next. A dream, maybe.

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.



To be continued in Cenacle | 82 | October 2012

* * * * *



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Seven

"There is no final answer."
—Dr. Timothy Leary,
Radio Interview, 1986.

viii.

"Tender each other" was Global Wall's new message, the one he'd not known he'd been reaching toward all these years, the one he'd arrived & overwhelmed him. It was a series of experiences that had not connected to each other until the most recent of them.

It wasn't just his soul that had smelled funny all those years back. His body had smelled too & he never knew why. Why would a washed & cleaned & healthy young body still smell bad to others? Why? Eventually it went away, so far away, the distance maturity & money collaborated to bring. His scent had been so extinguished that there were dim rooms he entered quietly, so quietly, that the absence of a scent seemed to shroud him almost invisibly.

So the moment back then, the first of them, the series, began walking down a school hallway past a group of chattering girls, one of whom he'd call in fear & lust, panic & puppy love, the night before, they'd spoken a few minutes before she had to go, quickly.

"Don't call her anymore" smacked him as he walked by, hard to believe they hadn't all said it. He did not slow or hurry & they didn't pause in their chatter, but it had happened & one could ask: that's all? But if one did, one has either forgotten what those early brainwashing years were like, or lucked strangely through them. Or perhaps did the calling of such things.

Yes, anyway, a first thing in a series. Not the world finally destroyed in & of itself. No. If another person, maybe, or if a different narrative to follow. If this, if that, it doesn't matter. This boy was this boy & that phone call had meant everything to him. A kind of first & last.

Tries to sort out the angles of it all later. Put roughly, he thereafter felt marked.

(Not that there wasn't revenge, there was of course, years later when he'd become Global Wall he had his man find the girl who'd let her pack crush him instead of giving him the least kindness of saying no herself, & she'd become matronly & divorced both, & he discovered her daughter blooming as she had, & blooming, & untouched, still hypnotized by her mother's hatred of men, & Global had used every resource to watch her, it became an obsession, his man would later say it turned his operation from dabbling to serious, because they figured the many details of spying upon someone, closely, how to invisibly infiltrate a life, & when Global was ready the mission moved in closer, he took the lead himself of luring & turning her, it wasn't difficult, it almost never was, he edged into

the girl's life, casually but steadily, let her take the wheel he was preparing her all along to take, seduce him, this older rogue poet dark rebel cartoon he'd created in her mind, let her lure with her conscious charms & those she stumbled into discovering he liked, & when the moment came to possess her, open the door & let the beast in, the woman who had gouged him first & therefore deepest was drugged to a helpless clarity, bound to a chair before a video screen as he let her beg & moan & crawl over him, sucked him down again & again, mounted him with bared teeth arched back & perfect ass for his claiming & she came again & again & again—but most importantly was that as she came the video monitor showed an amalgam of her crying face & a photograph of the boy who had called her, the girl crying for more, & a whispered instruction & she moaned the words "Don't call her again, Don't call her again, Don't call her again, Don't call her again, o fucking godddd that feels so fucking good—"

(But two things—first is the girl never forgot him & is even now looking to claim him again & he does not know this—

(And the second—fucking this girl was not the finale but the prelude—the new obsession with going back & changing that moment, that very moment, did someone write here that that moment wasn't all? How to say this? It was & wasn't, equally & both, he didn't want to possess the girl she'd once been, he wanted to undo the wound—

("You would not call?" asked his man. "I would." "Then how different? "That moment in the hall, her among her pack." "You'd say something?" "I'd say everything." "What, specifically?" Silence. "I don't know." His man nodded. "Wasn't what you did enough?" "No, it wasn't." "Is anything enough?" "I don't know."

(Reflecting now, Global realizes that in the moments he had merged with his younger self, he need only have said, "Don't call her" & he might not have returned a failure. Perhaps not at all.)

"Tender each other" was Global Wall's new message, the one he'd not known he'd been reaching toward all these years, the one he'd arrived & overwhelmed him, & within that new message was an old one, "some things you keep close so they won't explode & kill you." From the man he'd met so long ago, in the invisible dimension down a city alley, the man who'd warned him of the Beast beneath the bricks, who he'd compelled to make an unwanted phone call, who he'd seen break before his eyes as the phone in the poorfolks cafeteria rang & rang—

He'd kept his thing too close, this man, & it had exploded, but it had done worse than kill him. It had let him live.

I didn't abandon him, though he was now a crumpled man, mortal, old, slowly dying.

I left home, what was left of it, & took to living with him & taking care of him. It wasn't really a long time but he taught me how to do most of what I did later. When he was ready to move along, he directed me to bring him to & leave him in the White Woods.

I laid him down there against a tree & he told me a final story, a story to keep close, one of power, *on certain conjured nights, there is a marsh of glass where no marsh should be, & one may find a path to walk through it, where no path is sensible, & the test is to brush by the orange & green & yellow & blue plants waving in an ocean of air, sidestep the carnivorous large balls, begin until they are touched, to reach what none remembers or knows or believes is in some sense the Beast's mate or partner, giant orange & yellow & red & green creature; a wild thing that sings forever as the Beast is silent, & they are almost always as far as can be—*

Told me to move closer & fucking *listen*, memorize my fucking words, *she if she be, rains down purple spears of her glass on the woods & some will prick logs & stick, while the rest will melt in the earth as though nothing other than simple rain.*

The Beast will push the speared logs together, messages, patterns, songs to her?

Now he was obviously gone, passed, but he continued telling. *Once the Beast & his partner danced in a courtyard, they were artists & lovers, there was a night, they danced in a cafe, & she sang in his ear & he still hears this song & it drives him & drives him*—————

“Tender each other” he says now, now back to lecturing in halls, no need to talk of unpublished book to come, no, no want to anymore, none of that matters, only the words matter, as they always did, as he’d forgotten but now remembered, *the words, hunger, ah, yes, the words, yes*—————

the middle one—dark-haired—pushed forward at last from among the sweet carnal screech of the eldest & the dark mystical fuckery of the youngest—

yes—she made one request—a guitar—so simple—walking afternoon through another imaginary small town & she sees a little music store & smiles at him & asks for the guitar in the window—they go in—

she sits on a stool & begins to strum, to play, to play really well, the store owner listens, smiling at first, then not so much—there is something in this playing that is witchly beautiful—

“What is your name?”

“It’s Sarah”

“Where did you learn to play like that?”

Sarah smiles & shakes her head. Plays a minute more then looks up at Global & hands him the guitar, as though to put it back on its sales stand.

Stiffly, in pain, he doesn’t.

He offers the store owner a price, doesn’t notice it’s about a third of what’s on the price tag. The owner nods, now thoroughly spooked.

Sarah plays for long periods of time, then doesn’t, seems almost to forget she ever did or knew how.

Sarah told a stranger her name.

Sarah broke a basic rule.

Sarah now takes her turn at the leash on Global Wall.

One motel they stay at has a pool. The two others show disinterest but Sarah insists Global take her swimming. Her suit he can’t remember buying is yellow, a one piece, her hair is down, she swims close to him, very close, if anyone was watching but none are & she closes in on him—

breathe for me, breathe slower, now come under with me, good, deeper, breathe, good, come with me, hold me there & there, don’t let go! deeper & deeper, good here we are now listen close

Sarah sings into him, far deep into him, his own words, *tender each other*, over & over, her yellow swimsuit is gone & deep beneath the water she slips in him & through him, his

breath becoming groan as she slips deeper through him singing his words until he panics & lost, cries, waves wildly toward the surface miles up & she holds him while he cries & says *touch & touch & touch, please, yes, there, oh, & oh*, they rise from miles below, she is so deep in him still, singing, singing, *tender each other, tender each other, tender each other*,

“tender each other” he says again, stalking through his audience that fears to look at him directly, “*tender each other!*” he cries & whispers as though these are the remaining words to his tongue, & his girls have perhaps raised or reduced him to this state, the words, there are these & all the rest, *tender each other*, so simple, so simple, so tight, so deep in him, *ahhhhhhhh*

ix.

The how is keep moving. The why is both full moon & unknown. Why the S&G, the apartment above it, near downtown of a crumbling factory town, a state college a mile away, lotta poor folks everywhere? How did this place & the ships overhead mix together?

Well, one thing was that Jack had gone to school in that city, years ago, had he met her there? Dig, dig into it, something there, there had been a party, years ago, dig back, before the ships, before the weird increased—what—*ahh*—yes—

they were sitting cross-legged facing each other, about to set on each other’s lips a pretty little fragment of blotter paper, LSD-25, yes & she had smiled & said, “the weird will increase” just like that, & his glimpse of her tongue, *oh, yes, sure, how couldn’t it?*

they would go to movies together, eat their way slowly through a sheet of blotter acid, gift from someone she knew, & they would go to movies & it wasn’t the Nada Theater & yet & yet—

They didn’t kiss for the longest time, kept the Beast contained between them, he had other ideas for a long while, she had to come along

her reedy voice came to him in his dreams, singing, wordless or a tongue so foreign he could not know it—

she dated other men, if it could ever be said they were themselves dating—what was it?

That first night, how & where that crosslegged sitting? A house off campus, a sort of ministry & hippie hangout—something & chase it—

A party—many people, teachers, students, strange others, there was some impetus & here it was, & did they meet there? Penelope did not go to school there, how was she there?

“I was there to find you, recruit you” she told him later.

“Seduce me?”

“Yes. But you wouldn’t. Not even close. I’d told them you wouldn’t, not if we ate acid together. Eventually, maybe, but not then. And by then they’d lost me to you.”

“Lost?”

“I was yours. I’d turned.”

Had Jack eaten acid before that night? She’d never been sure. There were unknown things about him. Guesses.

“Did they burn it down?”

“I think so. It was a message to me. Nobody was hurt but it was to show what they could do.”

“And we rebuilt it. You turned on them & we rebuilt it.”

There’s always more to this.

x.

All I can say is that when we walked together into that apartment above the S&G Pizza, its rooms empty, quiet, & our ideas so different, & as yet unshared, for why we were there, what there to do, I was simply happy, Penelope, I let my heart spill through those rooms like a flood, spill & climb & wash the walls of that place, & I was simply happy, that place, that hour—

xi.

“Charlie”

“Charlie”

“Charlie Pigeonfoot! Wake up! It’s Jack! Cmon, man. Penny’s waiting downstairs for us.”

Charlie rouses but it isn’t Jack, & it isn’t then, & he isn’t who he was at that moment, not young but far younger, he’d fallen in with a ragged number of people who were smiling & confident & hopeful & a bit despairing too when they thought too much about the ships overhead, what it was said they could do—

He returns to the reverie come over him again because he is sick again & wherever it is, it’s quiet here & the reverie envelopes best in the quiet

the poppies, the poplars this time, those poppies he would see even in waking sometimes, those poplars every waking tree he saw seemed to wish to—

he had no body yet he moved fast & easily, steered, left, right, higher, lower, within, sometimes deep within the eye of a crow, the petal of one of those poppies, branched multiply in a leaf, sometimes many of them, these reveries had happened to me since he was a kid, nobody but his teacher whatever she was knew about them, he looked merely asleep, though the sharper eye would think he more looked dead—

If lucky he would make it to the pond with its water lilies, its strange noises not animal nor insect, this was deeper, this was stranger, he was, strangely, more singular here, not bodied, but not able to branch & multiply, it happened more rarely, when the malady really shook him down deep, there was no land nor sky to be seen, & the watery surface was, he knew by testing it multiple times, hard as deep ice, the lilies burned to his touch so he drifted above them,



listening, unknowing—

“Charlie! Charlie Pigeonfoot! Penny says she’ll haul you out of there by your ear! We will miss the start of the movie!”

Eventually to the haystack field, & now he knew he was close, he’d lived here once for months when he’d been very sick, they said it didn’t seem he’d ever wake up—why would he? He’d found them, they lived behind the wheatstacks, they danced & sang & seemed to do nothing else, they drank a strange brew & invited him to join them, lie back, feel the sky descend—ships overhead, when he’d been told later of them, didn’t frighten him in the least—they offered him the gypsy girl he most wanted among them, she was ready to remove her scarf, it was red, beautiful, more so when she wore it, its function & its due both manifest wrapped around her head or neck, no, he couldn’t, he wanted to, he couldn’t, she gave him the scarf, when he moved on, it was the scarf he gave to the Beast, in the shape of a man, who touched it into the shape of a bonnet & gave it to his—& what did any of this mean?

Jack comes back up to where Charlie lies twisted under a table. Says nothing at first.

“Charlie.”

Nothing.

“Charlie!”

Still.

“I’ll get Penny.”

A hand on his head. The only one that had ever reached through & beheld him. But when she did this, he knew her as Christina.

“Tell me, Charlie. Where you him again?”

“No. Maybe.”

“Why, Christina?”

“It helps. You know I can help.”

“He thinks he’s going to die. He’s on a boat, near port, but it’s on fire, its sinking, something is wrong.”

“Go on.”

“He’s a man of reason. Books. Science.”

“Yes. I know.”

“He reads the latest journals. He writes letters to colleagues.”

“Yes.”

“But he’d dreamed of choking on sea-water. Often. And maybe that’s why he took this sea voyage to Europe. It was an indulgence, a whim. And returning he watched the moon get brighter every night.”

“Fuller?”

“Yes. No. Brighter. That’s his word. And he had the dream of choking on sea-water every night on the return trip. And here they are, in sight of land, & sinking. He sees people on shore, tiny figures. And there’s a lighthouse too. But they aren’t close enough. Not enough lifeboats to get everyone back safe.”

"Can't they swim, doggy paddle, something?"

"Maybe. No. Sharks? Swells? I don't know. The waves too strong? I don't know, Christina, but he thinks, he is sure, he is going to die, in sight of land. With the brightest moon he's seen. He's sad. He's very sad."

Silence.

"Is there more?"

"Well then it's more me but he's not dead. He survived but not whole. He's deeply traumatized. We take to each other."

"Take? This is new."

"It's hard to sort it. I only try to explain it like this to you."

"The poppies again too? The poplars?"

"The gypsies? The girl? Yes."

"You mix it up, Charlie."

"Not on purpose."

"No."

"We have to go."

"Why do only I know you as Christina?"

"I don't know why you know at all. I didn't tell you."

"Why doesn't Jack know? You love him."

"It's like this story you try to tell me. Tangled & hard."

"We have to go, Christina."

They nod at the same time.

"You love Jack."

"Yes."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. Why?"

"There's someone else. Gone but not."

She starts but catches herself, squelches herself. Stands, offers him a hand up.

"We'll talk some more later. I promise."

[We haven't yet, Christina. Not since that night. The lightbulb. **RemoteLand**. We still need to talk more]

xii.

I don't know yet I rise & stand & move along. My body breathes & beats & a thousand other things I know & do not think constant of. My eyes see, how? Blink to stay moist, how?

*"Everything outside us is mad
as the mist & snow"*

The world remains as I near & retreat it. Places I've been, not been, seen in a picture, in words, not at all, change, change, change, change

yet still the world
still the world
still

And I am telling you because you do not know that our very origins are not entirely from here
 & if you could but see the ships overhead as I do, you would then know this too—

They've always been overhead, & among us, & within us, & our history is a growing, willful
 amnesia from the truth; we belong to this world & this world belongs to the universe—

We are not blind, we are not asleep.
 We are unwilling, & I could blame
 the centuries-long powerful among
 us but I will not.

For always there is choice to see more or less, there is always a choice to heed all waking &
 sleeping, there are clues & signs everywhere—

Some do, I suppose, they try

“And you?”

Me?

“Do you see near & far or just the first?”

My vision tries to drag me far—

blinks, looks, looks—I follow
 intermittently————

Follow & sometimes it's backward, way backwards, my mind walks me backwards over a lot
 of years in an instant, imperfectly, oh yah a fuck lot of years my mind hurries, imperfectly, the
 path back is a dark one, *no* stars above, or a scant few—

Not blind, not asleep, but groping, again this hard moment & no tool to fix, none, just walk
 through it & watch it play out, so near, yet not, watch it play through again—*oh*

Blind then?—yes

Blind now?—still

I wish I could communicate here to these people I am now among, having coming all this way
 just a word—

Which word? I wonder over the years—*which moment?*—there are several possible but this is
 almost 30 years to the evening I might choose when I sat with you after your party, sat with
 you, in your bedroom, & you wondered what it would be like if we dated—

This moment still haunts my dreams & bones—for sure it was a turn in the road for all grief & happiness that came——

I never forgave me you no, it seemed to confirm the worst in me, the least, that I might be worthy of benign company but not a girl's love. No, that was for someone else. Prettier, cleaner, something. And I wanted to understand. *Why I could not be loved. What was wrong with me.*

I learned, a little late, that there's no answer will satisfy that. I compelled better of myself, better & better, & not just to raise my stakes but others too. Not just my boat raised, but many of them, all of them.

What you are too little to give me I will spend a lifetime creating in other ways, I will seek to salve & heal & teach & compensate for the pain I now know nobody escapes, none, we each & all rise, move, fall—

we each all are mapless—

yearning the long twine of the common & the fluted hour—

In dreams I still chase you & know it's my youth, other roads, word not said, or wrongly said, or its many failed variations—

Trying to conjure to your person in that long gone year, what but sweetness, what I felt in you, anyone but myself, I felt low, I yearned to something else, something beautiful, or at least clean, & tonight, these many years later, I see the struggling vistas of human drama deeper, there is no peace but in melody & rhythm, no calm, no quiet but free movement—

I wish I had been your first, & you mine, & that grappling moment had been ours, but I suppose I've spent it out in other ways since, in what I wasn't able, I've transformed it, over & over, until I became more than I was, I sought to comfort & heal deeply where I could, & oppose the bastards everywhere, & it traces back through this night, when we sit together on this bed & you wondered about us as a romantic couple, & I know I spent years trying to get with you to the possibilities of this night, long I'm sure after you'd been had, better or worse, still I chased this night with you, its other path, the door it opened to me that I could not seem to do on my own—

& I couldn't. I've learned that. I can do this, I can fill these pages with my hand & pen, & my force, but no human moves in vacuum, I learned that what I do moves within a we I can be better in concert with & find myself not lesser but greater for it—I can play with my range of ideas better for there being a world beyond me—I did not know this 30 years ago, now, as I sit here with you, I am alone, I am inventing a world but not knowing I can kin myself to others, not knowing I am not alone & you are not my only possibility—I loved you as I had not before or since & I realize now you were just too overwhelmed—it was so much easier to be in control & that's what you preferred—control—what I had & offered was something else & you would not go there, not yet, not with me, ever? I don't know.

Did I forgive you? Do I? It's 30 years on. Do I forgive you for rejecting me or me for being rejected?

I don't know. I could have persuaded you as the later man I became, or walked away sooner if nothing came of it.

Was it parents, the opinions of others? Were you that simple & stupid in the end? Why not. Life then & there did not present a lot of options for living.

You couldn't see what I'd become, & maybe I became who I am in part because of your rejection.

So a thank you? Is that possible? Is it not? I stumble saying & thinking it. Would I be something else if you had loved me? Or, really, if you had fucked me?

Was it love or sex? I think it was *possession*, the exclusive attention of your mind & body, that's what I sought, what you could not give to me as I wished—

So what then, the years, the dreams that still come, what?

I don't think it ends, & I don't think you're much involved in it anymore, not now, not long since, I think then matters for what it was, but more for how I grew from it, hard, & hurt, & stronger, & a less gentle person, but more empathetic, kinder

And there were others since who drew me that near, that open, but it's funny that I don't dream of them much, not like you, not like I will always of you.

Goodbye, again. And hello, hereon.

xiii.

The way is called Dis-illusion & hark & spit & wonder new at this idea, what remains when all illusions are snuffed? A deep empty forest, a long blowing desert, the nameless roar of the ocean?

Some would say all is illusion in this world & thus Dis-illusion is to part it completely. As though life not even a game but a trick, a web to escape through cease—

Me, I walk around & do not see a world that tricks by its illusions of reality, tho men & their works & their faiths might be said to resemble self-made or hustling illusions—but it's the not knowing why, & the dread underpinning of every path in its sure fini—

The way is called Dis-illusion, maybe some other angle on it, maybe one doesn't have to arrive in the box below or blowing in the breeze—

Maybe some illusions can be rendered otherwise———

Now turn around & look back in & see what's going on there—

Maya looks at me, smirking.

I write again:



*Everything is possible
 Anything is likely
 Regret best fuels a pause
 Hope is good traction to act
 What stays, its food infinitely varies
 What should happen—*

“Stop”
 Why?
 “You wrote that already”
 Yes.
 “So why again?”
 To see how it feels now. How it changes as I change, reading it now, writing these words again—
 “And?”
 OK, I guess.
 “What then?”
 What now?
 “Yes.”
 I usually don’t know.
 She looks at me anew with her fierce blue eyes.
 I don’t.
 “So what do you do?”
 We’ve had this conversation before.
 “What do you do?”
 I summoned you to argue with me about what next.
 She laughs.
 “And?”
 I don’t know. I wait. I wonder.
 I write old lines til I break them off—
 “And?”
 It hits or doesn’t.
 She nods.
 I can’t tell you how or why. I can only say do & do & do again & see what happens—
 “I’m not like you”
 We both know that.
 “I don’t know what to do about it.”
 I do. Let’s get you to Wytner.

Wytner is not what it was seemed. One arrives there going elsewhere, & not doing it very well. It is a safe place but it won’t easily let go. Wytner disputes the remain of the world, doubts & would do without if could. Wytner is not angry but often grim. Wytner is the Beast or not quite, the basis for *Trip Town* but no I suppose not really. There’s more to say but Wytner might I didn’t rather.

I don't know Wytner very well in some ways. But Maya is bound there with Samantha & Dean & would not arrive if I hadn't willed it some.

Dean nods & looks at me.

"I dream about you. You'll get us there."

It's not hard.

Samantha doesn't know if she likes me.

"You write first."

Yah.

"Go then."

Yes, it's in the White Woods, I know that much in the center of a desert in the depths of the White Woods—

Samantha nods. Dissatisfied.

"Time is crooked here."

Now she agrees.

Now Maya's gaining my attention.

"Crooked?"

Yes. I suppose that's right.

"And?"

Well it means the path here isn't direct.

"Then how did we get here?"

Dean points at me with a backwards thumb as they pass me & I recede.

"Him."

OK, Maya, you're here.

xiv.

First thing Maya does, even before what could be called doing precisely, is sniff. Just one & then she knows but it's more like something before knowing. She's here in Wytner but she never left, exactly, my words for her in this less than a moment too long because I want to say now is that here the ships overhead are exactly overhead & what's more here is where they *load* & *unload*, & possibly land & rise, I do not know & so here is a kind of central point, a crux—

"Oh" she says.

Nods, shakes her head.

Falls back suddenly into the arms of a big gentle figure who says only: "Easy." His guitar is nearby to comfort, instruct, whatever may.

"Thank you for catching me," she says, suddenly girl & shy.

"My pleasure, miss."

"I'm Maya."

The musician smiles. "I think you're expected. I was, too, it turns out."

"You were?"

He nods, smiles, twinkling blues eyes. "Different reasons, of course."

Maya can't get her bearings yet, here in Wytner. She's standing OK now, but fuzzy in mind. Unsure, but fuzzy in mind. Unsure, unsure. Was this it? And what now?

She closes her eyes & listens, raises one hand slightly & the world around her pauses, oh, what is that, & what is that?

Call it the velvet blindness of music, what keeps coming when companion, blood, & bones are spent & gone. Oh yes, she sways, listening now, it's coming from several directions, ready to take & taking, oh yes now

Finding the world mapless, I've walked my years. Mapless but, so many pointing fingers, I've swung one way & another. Mapless, a game? Is that possible or would it? I am still swaying & willing to know. *I am still*—

The musician has started his playing again, his welcome to Wytner for Maya & her friends new come. He was glad to be playing again & felt that he'd not stop soon again. No.

Friends. Where?

"My friends?"

"Which?"

"Dean & Samantha. I came with them."

The musician looks around uncertainly. "It's not a big town. Maybe they're looking around."

Unconsoled, Maya looks him deeply & bluntly. "I think I am here to get something important done. But I can't without my friends. I want you to help me."

Engaged, he nods. "I think I was waiting for you, Maya. I wasn't sure. But I think so now."

"What's your name?"

"Jim. Jim Reality. I died not long ago & came here."

"Does that make this a place of the dead?"

"I don't think it works like that. I don't think I ever thought that. I know I'm not where I was, & this isn't the body I possessed. This isn't my old guitar. But here I am, & you came."

"How will you help?"

He raised his guitar. "It's easy to get lost in Wytner."

"You said it's small."

He starts strumming. "Let's find your friends, Maya."

She nods.

He strums some more. "Think about them now. What they are like. How they make you feel."

She thinks & follows him. Thinks: Samantha, her dearest friend, loves her, does not know what she is, but loves her & feels protected by her. And the sea. Their connection, somehow, but what?

Dean: the old man she'd found at that restaurant. Something to him, so much of it not yet, & that dream of fucking him too.

This wasn't helping. Maya looks up & the murk lets up & Jim is still a little spectral but a man, a big man but gentle & his strumming comes from his heart & his humor & she has already kept him going forward & so this farmhouse is what she sees. Several buildings & all strange. Clover-dale.

That's what the sign says, Clover-dale, & it sort of looks like a run-down farm, yes, yes but yes isn't the word that fits as she walks closer with Jim ambling along nearby & strumming to the moment—was? yes, suppose so—isn't? No more but now like never was? Effaced. Maya doesn't usually struggle with words so.

She stops, still arriving, not there, still on the cracked paved road leading to it, still not there. This seems important, like every step is somehow more bluntly definite here in Wytner than anywhere else—

Look—study—grasp—

A main building, a couple of barns, another building across the weedy fields—

All painted red—now fiercely faded. The main building's front & side doors have broken steps, half-opened doors, detritus within—the nearer, larger barn isn't completely upright, glassless windows, but the smaller one behind it is pretty fully tumbled—

Hmm—what?—just hmm—

"They're in there?"

"That's where our song is leading us, Maya"

"Our song?"

"Your thoughts, my playing. We're following the path of our song"

Maya looks completely at Jim for a moment, as though struck new with a deep memory. He smiles, blue eyes twinkle, then he resumes playing, eyes nearly closed, yet he easily moves along near her—

She nods, not knowing, but nods.

They move on. Their song continues.

"All the worlds burn tonight" is what is written low next to the half hanging open door side entrance to Clover-dale's main building & Maya nods as she picks her way up the broken stairs to this door, reads in passing as she enters through the door into the first cluttered room within—

This room hasn't been entered from outside in years. The air is stiff. Dust upon piled up detritus is solid, indifferent to life or movement—

Jim has not followed her in. Maya knew that too. He played her to the door & that was where the song ended. Her friends were in Clover-dale. He'd brought her here. Here was less about resisting & more about learning its how—

xv.

*A touch & all melts—
Everything remains, in scatters, little deny, little solve, yet it all remains—
The world takes back what you borrowed, call a life—*

Yes, all this & more, Maya steps into the first room in Clover-dale's main building, solid dust & all, yes, yes, & turns to her right & sees—

mirrors—many of them—she's in some of them, not in others—she's different looking in a few—not like funhouse mirrors—no fun in these exactly—but yes, different looking, not simply older or younger but as though a different set of results had brought her here—

OK—what then this—it's tricks,
Maya thinks, & looks at me—

“Tricks”

I suppose.

“Is that all this is?”

I don't suppose that.

“What then?”

I'm not sure of Clover-dale.

“Are they here?”

Dean & Samantha?

“Yes”

Everyone's here, Maya. This place is a maw.

“A trap?”

No. Not exactly.

“What then?”

This is where you have to play it straightest & truest. When you know, you know. When you don't, don't pretend.

“How does that help?”

Clover-dale feeds it back, whatever it is. It doesn't know it's a building. You are within & it looks a way, but that's now how it is. That's like spots on a beast. Protective coloring.

“And?”

You leave when & how Clover-dale lets. But you leave with a gift if you do. A sort of blessing. It's how best I can say this.

Maya nods, sees I've spent my best explain.

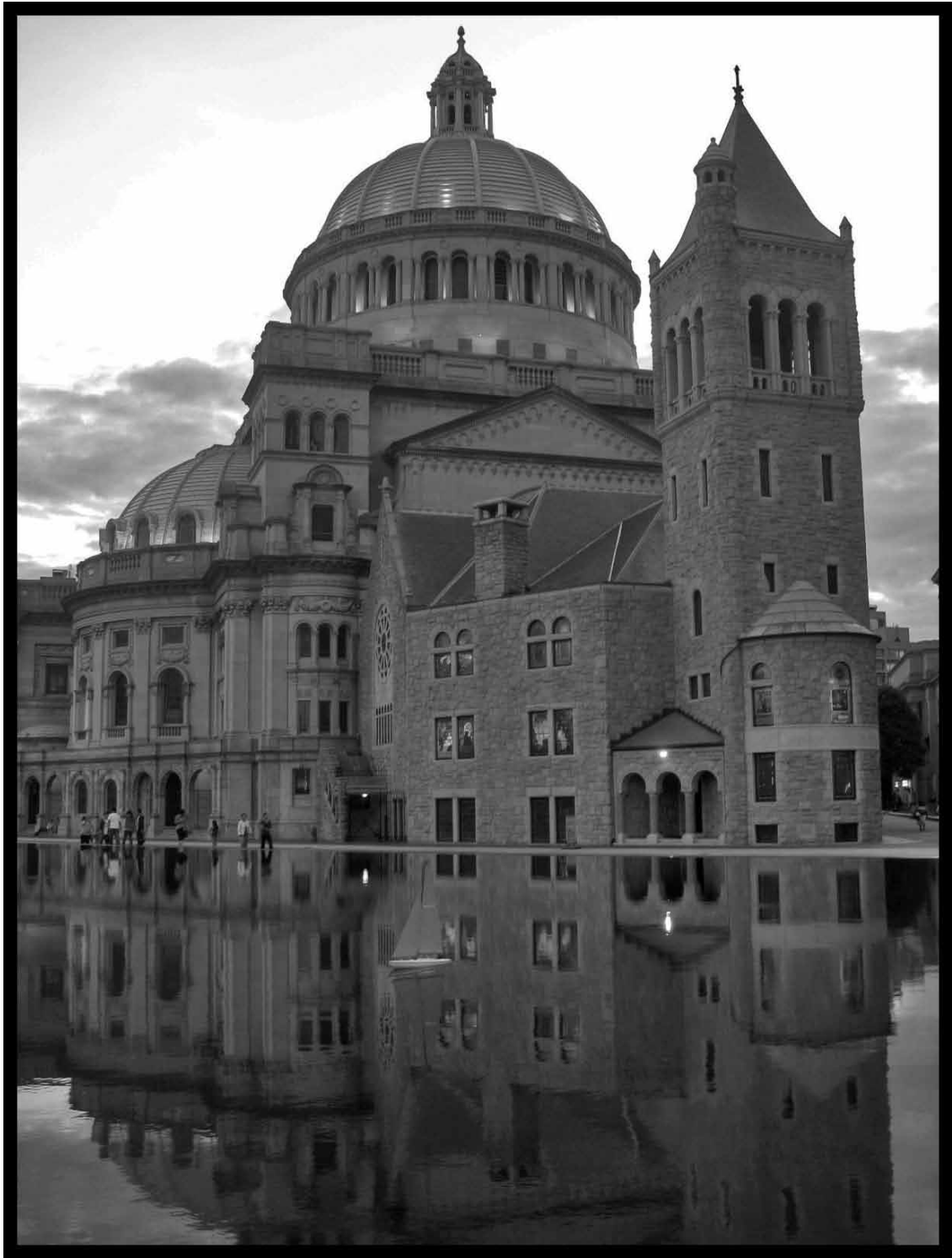
I begin to fade off but she shakes her head. Takes my hand.

“For now. For a bit.”

I nod OK.

She looks again at the mirrors but then shakes them off. Like the dust. Coloring. Spots on a beast.

She moves toward the next room & I follow mostly.



The waters are deep, she stands on the edge for a moment. Looking within, seeing little. Her blue eyes are wet.

Maya.

“Just undress me. Now. Quickly. Don’t talk. Please.”

I pull off her tie-dye Jimi Hendrix t-shirt. Her white bra. She turns to face me, nods me look down see. We smile, despite all this. I continue, unbutton her jeans, draw them down, she stops out. Shivering. “Do it. Now.” A finger on her white panties, tug, & she’s nude.

We contemplate this for a long moment. The she turns & in a moment dives in, is better than gone. I wonder, yet to know.

xvi.

The golden thread of music through this labyrinthine life toward its center likely to discover no center at all—

Yes but still I follow this golden thread of music along my pages & years alike, wondering what do I do with any of it?

Maya swims deeper & deeper, this time no hesitancy, no question, she swims toward, with knowing, with questions, with what she has, this is Clover-dale, play it straight & true
how would she otherwise?

Her heart is young but her intents aren’t always simple. She loves in more than one direction. And if this is where she’s from? What she both is & isn’t *form*. She can no more sort this than anyone could.

Samantha.

Samantha

Samantha, I know you are near.

I’m here, Maya.

I’m going back.

It’s not your world.

I don’t care.

It’s not your choice. I can only protect you here anymore.

It is my choice. Samantha.

I wish I could help.

I know. I love you too.

Will I see you again?

Samantha?

She is shivering in my arms as I am dressing her. I am both holding her & dressing her but she is wet & weak. Finally I get her all tucked in.

"Thank you."

Yes.

"Next room?"

I don't know. It depends as much on Clover-dale as it does on you.

She smiles at me & I'm undone again. I nod. She moves on, releasing my hand.

(Follow the golden thread, Maya. It's all I can offer you.)

xvi.

Find deepest good in the ferment, say that, wonder that, if maybe that, words, some words, these words, those words, I spoke those words, or wrote them, some years ago, on a page now old but I can still point to it, the page, those words, find deepest good in the ferment, where a hand claws lawless for its want's sup, the world still inventing itself but less violence when the thin structures of rule & order collapse, deepest ferment where happiness and tragedy are even better than a new word aresomixtured that there can be no reaction distinct from any other oh each of us saw it as a baby, the ferment was all, not interior or exterior but all, that moment plunged in the ocean before kicking & waving about, returning sense of up there & down below, deepest ferment, *o lovely*, what a shitty thing to say toward it & yet true but that wrong too, no center to break nor edge to run over yes better but not too much—

we're sitting together now, in this cafe, angled coffee joint of sorts, Maya & I are sitting together & she is composed again, her version of this book in front of her & she is writing as I am, her pen moving as mine is but she is not watching me, just starting & stopping as I do though I can't know her words & this is pretty funny really—

So I talk. "I don't know if it's necessarily choose here or where down there you're from. That is to say, I'm not sure."

She talks while still writing & I write down what she says not knowing if that's what she writes down too. "I'm not done here."

"Does that mean you'll go when you are done?"

"It just means I'm not done. I don't more than that to say."

"Does talking to me help?"

She writes the following in lieu of answers: *"I will say six things now about this place. 1) It sells coffee & pastries, salads & sandwiches. 2) Its clientele ranges from the rich, often foreigners & academics, to the poor, often homeless. The former sign their bills slowly; the latter count change in dirty cups. 3) Its indoor of many arrayed tables is complemented by an outdoors courtyard now empty in the winter's night. 4) Some people, often students, stay here for hours on end, at their books & computers. 5) There are deliberately exposed heating pipes & lighting apparatuses. 6) In the reflection of the long front window, the interior lights & exterior streetlamps seem to mix."*

Satisfied, somehow, she closes her manuscript & looks at me calmly.

“Done?”

“For now.”

“Tell me more.”

“You’re sitting us together here in Cambridge—though I am still in Clover-dale—to make a point.”

I don’t nod.

“I have to find Dean & Samantha.”

“She left you.”

“She never leaves me now.”

“Jim brought you to Clover-dale.”

“And you don’t know much more about it than I do.”

“I know some for sure.”

“Can I read?”

I turn my manuscript towards her & find the pages about Christina. She scans. She nods.

“Now we cross. Again.”

I nod.

xvii.

Maybe I’d known Xtina longer than I like to remember. I’d always figured it was just a type of girl, her rope knotted up from fine ass, a few good books, a peculiar lunacy so bound deep in her that you could shred her to marrow & bone & that smile would remain, the one that had caught you, you’d thought she was looking past to someone you loathed for receiving it but it was you. And yet never quite you. Ever fucking on, you felt often enough there had been or would be that someone, a ghost unforgettable or due very soon—

Penelope saw you in my eyes from the beginning, I think began partitioning herself thusly from that first cross-legged acid tripping night—

So a simple personality split, is that all Xtina is? Ah no. But maybe. But part of it is no, Penelope isn’t Xtina, or wasn’t previously, she was recruited to win Jack’s favor to the cause she had joined & then she’d fallen in love with him, & yet I wonder if that is enough to tell what was between them—

Just tell one thing.

Penelope lied her way into the cause. She was younger than she said & she’d run away from her hometown & everything she’d known—

She found out about the ships overhead afterward—

“I talked my way in. I knew something was going on. I knew my smile could get me further in & if I unbuttoned my sweater some.” I looked closer in your eyes & wondered what you were seeing. Her again?

I'm trying to make you focus by confessing all this stuff I'm not suppose to say & you are seeing Xtina in me & I think this is never going to end we are cross-legged in this room in this house party but none of this between you & me is ever going to end including this Xtina thing I try to look deeper in your eyes to find her as you are doing the same with me—

Had I known you too, Xtina? Maybe, but I think you were Christina then & it wasn't long. We traveled a lot, my father & me, I always thought he was in the military but I never saw him wear a uniform. I always thought my mother died young, & was way younger than him but maybe because we had one framed picture of her, looking about 20 or so—my father—so kind & so distant—he raised me by a proxy of nannies & sitters, I felt his love for me with the words to taste softly in my heart, or keep when he was long gone—my father would read to me from economics journals like they were Grimm but he seemed to be getting at something—& science magazines—& some weird philosophical books too—I still dream the words—meeting a man like Jack was inevitable—

We lived in New England for a very little while, Vermont, it was June when we moved there & late August when we left—I never even went to a day of school there—

But there were meetings we went to—strange, crooked people with sober smiles & probing eyes—

She was the other older girl there—we were teenagers, I guess, & we served the coffee & small cookies. Horrible, all of it, not to be enjoyed.

We looked I guess alike, I think a few noticed it—both about 5'4 or 5'5, green eyes, blonde. But she was striking & I wasn't. I can't explain this, it isn't modesty. I was barely her shadow in that strange farmhouse we would drive up to on Sunday nights—

Christina, if I'm right, was the host's step-daughter. She wore plain clothes, they didn't fit her well, she was quiet, focused on her task. We weren't chums.

I wanted to be jealous of her. She had brothers, or step-brothers, who oozed around her from the shadows & didn't realize I was there. Her step-father watched her from every side of his misshapen old head, guarding her, possessing her, both, neither, *I wanted to be very jealous*. But the feeling died in me as I watched her face. She was trapped there. I felt it in my belly. We rarely spoke but I felt how careful her movements were, practiced to produce no excess. Did we never speak? Now I'm not sure.

Anyway, it wasn't about us, these gatherings. It was about the book the adults gathered around, the one I once got close enough to see wasn't in English.

We weren't let in for the event itself. We were ushered out of the room & directed to a sort of family room with no television. Told to keep silent. My father always made sure I had a book. I loved him, I ached for him as only an only daughter of an aged widower could, but fuck if I didn't love him more on these nights, the moment they were done & he came & got me. I didn't like the farmhouse & its strange mirrors & Christina troubled me most of all. Her scent. I can't say—

But I did listen once—I used a chance mention to my father that I wasn't feeling well & might need the bathroom. He nodded, I was told. During the event, I told Christina I needed the bathroom, get up & went to it without waiting her comment or assent. Closed the

family room door behind me, took off my shoes & slid to the meeting room door for just a minute—I had to—

I heard voices, but mostly one voice. Reading? How would I know. He spoke in—click-clicks & noise-noises—like an insect but not—humans don't speak like this—I don't think we can—yet he did—

Words after. Phrases—“feed the old demons a killing plate of machine & reason”—“Men will ever rage & recede like their gods, & most will fall unhearing the celestial hums”—there was more but I had counted to thirty in my head & slid down the dank hallway to the bathroom, went in, flushed, ran the water, wrinkled a hand-towel a bit, & returned, shoes on, composed, to Christina's sly silent glance, & my book.

Was it Christina? Did I know her name? Did any of this happen?

I would not be able to say for sure but the phrase “celestial hums”—because that was the phrase that occurred to me the night I was finally allowed to see & board the ships overhead—I had never heard before what was audible, & visible to me. I still hear shades of it & it still calls me home, as it did that night, but I have chosen you, Jack, & that is not ever going to change. Whoever I have to be, *whatever, I have chosen you.*

xviii.

I leave him behind to enter the next room in Clover-dale, my manuscript is in my paisley shoulder-bag but I know he writes this one when I don't & this is reassuring. Now my hunt here is for Samantha & Dean, my dearest, & for Christina, who I don't remember at all, but it seems I helped her. And yet—

When I read his manuscript about her escaping Clover-dale, I really didn't think it was me doing all that. It sounded like she got Samantha's help in Samantha's way of helping too.

So I think: these people mix. How do I find the crossing point?

The next room is dark but full of people. One is talking & the rest are silent, listening. I edge inside, listen too.

“Did you see those clouds today, bubbling like eager flesh? Damned pretty, like a girl in lipstick & yellow skirt. You know what I mean?” The crowd laughs, murmurs, there is a happiness here—then the lights come on—

Oh, it's a bar, a crowded bar full of people not a lot older than me. I shouldn't be here but—

I'm with Jamie—& Muddy. And Muddy's date, a girl who'd taken one look at the dress Jamie made me wear—too low cut, too short, half-tight, half-loose—& hated me. I don't care because I can see why. Jamie & Muddy are trading mental notes on me. *Have you? . . . not yet but mmm . . . yah, man, that's some sweet pink flesh . . . wanna share? . . . I don't think so . . . Why not? aww . . . you got your own, she's not too bad! . . . yours is prime, ready to be pumped! . . . like that*

If that girl was smart, she would have seen I was no threat, that I could use a friend—no, no luck in any of it—I'd been staying with Jamie a week, tonight, this bar I wasn't old



enough for, this dress I didn't fit, they were him making his move—

He grabs my arm as I move for the next door—

“Where—?”

“The next room”

“What?” It's loud again. Perfume & cell-phones, baseball caps & thongs under short skirts.

I push into him—“I'm leaving. I have someone to find.”

“Who?” His grip tightens.

“Take your hand off me now.” This isn't how it went. I stayed & let the thing get half-groping before I stopped it.

He doesn't. I see Muddy watching, smiling. He'll try to fuck me too just to see Jamie's cock in it all. His girlfriend isn't visible nearby.

I think. “Jamie. This is Clover-dale.”

“I know,” he says like I'm stupid. I look up. Sign over the back of the bar. Clover-dale's. Great. It has a sense of humor.

Finally, I do what girls other than me usually do. I collapse & there is local panic. Jamie backs off, as I knew he would. Several people crouch over me. I twist away & half-crawl through the crowd—stand up, only exit is the front one—I make for it, out, & turn right to get away.

Is the night street the same room or the next? I am walking slightly uphill, heavy traffic, lots of people on sidewalk, car wash, McDonald's, bar, another bar, then I come to—

Shit—the place I met Dean—I think Dylan & I talked there too—but it is & isn't this time—

& the poor girl in denim rags, her hair tailing around her shoulders, straw-colored, that dog with her a pretty underfed husky—

She's pretty, I come closer, green eyes—

She's—Christina?

I crouch with her, pet her dog who sniffs me but no growl.

“Hi.”

“Um, hi.”

“I'm Maya. Do you remember me?”

She's drawing on a cigarette, again.

“Should I?”

“It was a long time ago. You lived on a farm.”

She nods, casual, but not really.

“My dad & I would visit. You had . . . brothers. And your own dad. We came for them to have meetings. You & I sat in another room.”

She draws again. Non-committal still.

“Were you looking for me?”

“I'm not sure. What about you?”

“What?”

“Why are you back in Clover-dale?”

She looks around, startled. Stands.

“No. Me & Kinley were . . .”

“Who?”

“Kinley. Kinley!” She’s panicked but then an older guy steps out of the restaurant with bags of food. Her look is a rush up to him but she holds still.

He looks at me friendly in my stupid half-ass party dress but his look remains calm. I like him.

“Why didn’t you tell me we were here?” She’s mad.

“Where?”

“Clover-dale!”

“We’re not. We’re not even close.”

“This is *Maya*, Kinley.”

Now his look gropes but not for fun. For realness.

I nod, uncertain.

“You’re Maya?”

I nod.

His face jerks a little then he smiles simple & true. “I’m Kinley. You saved my Christina back then so I’m your friend if you need one.”

Christina’s look at him twists, & then settles. There is something I can’t understand between them, like half their conversation is telepathy, too.

“This is Clover-dale” he repeats more calmly.

I nod.

“But it’s a farm.”

“Sort of.”

We sit on the curb in front of the store, Kinley distributes tacos & burritos & sodas to us. I sit on one end, Kinley the other. Whatever I am, she’s not sharing him.

It takes awhile to sort out how we got here. “A farm house?” Christina smiles at me. I nod. “Near a town in the middle of a desert inside the White Woods.” I shrug. “I’m here to find my friends but I’m not sure how all of this works.”

Kinley laughs. “I’ve been trying to figure this out for a long time. Christina & I got here another way which doesn’t jibe with your story. But that is part of this.” He stops there.

Christina nods & resumes. “Look up there,” pointing further along the boulevard which seems eventually to ascend into the sky. “We came from there. There weren’t stores & cars. It’s like we traveled through centuries to get here.” She stops & nudges Kinley to continue.

Maya is amused by how they interact. Funny, jostling but a deep rooted love in their eyes. It occurs to her that they don’t so much care where they are—it’s silly & romantic & she feels glad & jealous.

“We were in someone’s dream for awhile,” Kinley says. Christina nods.

It occurs to Maya before he tells that that she’s painfully glad they’re with her.

I notice Christina’s dog has wandered off but neither move to call him back. Kinley tells the story but lowers his voice & I lean in to hear. Christina half-embraces me & my good feeling gains, I think will stay awhile with them. I think: stupidly & truly: *we are more together*.

Once they knew they had to get to Clover-dale, Kinley felt that driving there was irrelevant. “It’s not on the map,” he said though Christina knew it was in Vermont.

She was reluctant to leave their hotel room. Convinced him to stay one more night, strike out early. He saw no sense in this until she started undressing before him. Started.

“Kinley, help.”

“Christina”

“We’re going to do this if I have to get some rope to tie you down & some cock pills to ready you up.”

He nodded. What man had ever shook her off once she was down to black bra & thong?

They hadn’t before, at least literally, & she hadn’t in awhile. Had he? Why would he have come back for her if another one was feeding him well?

She tries thinking less as he joins her on the bed, sitting behind her, his hands reaching around her for her bra hooks. Undoes them, pauses.

“Why, Kinley?”

“Why?”

“Why did you come back for me?”

“I never left you, in my heart. I just lost you awhile.”

Strangely, these words heat her deeply.

“Tell me more. But keep going.”

He leans away to turn out the room’s light. The curtains are dark crimson & thick & only a corona of light at the edges shows through. Her bra unhooked, cups apart, he holds her breasts gently & talks.

“I haven’t taught in a long while.”

Her tummy jerks, but it’s nice.

“Say my name”

“Christina” he slides her bra off & turns her part way around to him .

“Again.”

“Christina” ever softer they are now in a tight embrace, almost a dancing couple’s pose.

“Say yours”

“Kinley”

“Again”

“Kinley”

“Now say Kinley loves Christina”

“Kinley loves Christina”

“Again”

“Kinley loves Christina”

“Over & over”

“Kinley loves Christina loves Kinley loves Christina” *fall back, tangle close* “loves Kinley loves Christina loves” *he snaps her thong off in several pieces, her body shakes* “Kinley loves Christina loves Kinley” *somehow his shorts & shirt are off & he drives deep in her she howls soundlessly* “loves Christina loves Kinley loves Christina” *does things to her that no man, no person has ever done* “loves Kinley loves Christina” *swabs her body new with finger & tongue & kiss all the while in her ears* “loves Kinley loves Christina loves Kinley loves Christina” *& he steers her to a cumming like her first long ago, it was at Clover-dale, that first letter, that first hot bath, neither the farmer nor his begging boys home* “loves Kinley loves Christina loves Kinley” *& this cumming is like that cumming & they close & connect & through all those since & for a clear-eyed moment she*

sees everything from then to now makes sense “love Christina loves Kinley loves Christina” & his deep idea to propel them straight to Clover-dale would have worked had he known of the knock at the door that came as she was, the middle boy not his intention sees her in tub, legs wide apart, fingers touching & grindings, lips snarling open, breasts heaving (& he has never forgotten & she has not either but differently, wishing at times before Kinley came back that she had invited him in instead of barking him out & pulling the curtain & splashing in frustration & stymie) & so the not-completed orgasm throws them toward Clover-dale, but off, dangerously off—

“We found ourselves on a grassy hill looking toward a sloping road in the distance. It was loud because there were people walking down that road firing guns. Near the bottom of the road, huddled here & there, were people firing back. Soon, there were four of them left, boys really, firing & laughing—

“The people in the grass moved suddenly toward an overgrown cemetery joining others in hurriedly setting it on fire—There was a machine gun by itself, firing & firing—

“Then it was all gone & a voice in our heads soothing us, saying again & again ‘let it go, let it go, let it go’—”

Christina finishes. “We were up that hill & kept walking till we got here & stopped to get food. That dog came up—”

“The man”

“Yes, we both felt it. He got us to you.”

They stop.

I nod. Christina’s blonde hair is lighter than mine & in the glaring sunset glows. I nod, a hint. Would twitch my pink nose but say instead. “Dean & Samantha are nearby.”

“How do you know?”

“I have another friend. A White Bunny.”

xix.

Did you wonder, Bowie, how it was they let you have me as long as we stayed there on the farm?

It was me, the one you didn’t know, I didn’t tell. There was one moment but you shook it off—

My hands tied above me, my feet barely touching the ground to balance, your cock so deep in me from behind I couldn’t . . . fucking . . . think . . . when I moaned “more, harder” & I suddenly came to & began a sort of fake girlish whimper to whelm the words & I don’t think he heard & he certainly didn’t know that nobody had expected me to return after the trouble I’d left in, nor did Bowie see what a fractured place it was, unable to return to old way, unable to accept me as the new minister—

Did he know how many cameras watched him fuck me? How many starving eyes jerked back & forth with his every thrust in me?

Did they know what he was? A man-shaped force, brought to me with deep tides of fury & emptiness, spent *down* to the apocalyptic fucking they witnessed with all their orifices open & limbs stiff & loose?

Nobody asked me where Oliver was & Bowie would hardly have recognized him, what we did was that deep & lasting—

"You can't bring him there, Christa"

"I have to. I think he's what heals the rifts. I bring him & he & I—"

"No."

"Would you rather I jumped the bridge?"

"Christa—"

"He can't know what I am—"

"How?"

"You & I tonight. When he gets back with food—"

"Christa—"

"Then you leave for Seattle. Take a cab to the bus station downtown. Go & don't look back, Oliver."

It was part dream, part smoke, part kinkier sex than she or Oliver had ever tried before—not dirty, just complex—stupid way to put it—

Oliver bound us—all three of us—there was no choice—even now I feel him—needing, protecting—

& Bowie knows—he *knows*—but right now deep in his undermind alone—when, if, the three of us are together again—in body, in dream, in smoke—he will remember—

I hope it doesn't happen, I hope Oliver is with his boy & far forever—

Sometimes none of this makes sense—but it's how I ended up in this woman's bed tonight, trying to explain it all—

She nodded once or twice, sipped her wine, we shared a pipe—old enough to be—but her body tight & her face so beautiful—I wanted—I would—we did—

Funny—she fell asleep in my arms—exhausted from coupling in a way I never get—a half-smile, easy breathing—I put on the radio—a man preaching—I would have switched but I didn't—came on in the middle—carefully I stuffed the pipe full of fresh hashish & listened in & out of smoke—& thought of Bowie

Me, Bowie, Oliver

Me, Bowie, Gretta

Oliver's boy too?

*"Why did that man cry out & run? those long ago days, the so much more fertile youth of this kind—fewer answers, fewer questions—yet both starting to come on—oh yes there was greed in men's hearts even then—the poison of **mine**—**my** land, **my** weapon, **my** bitch's pussy who alone **I may fuck**—what crack in evolving human consciousness made us choose I over we? How did it happen? How?"*

Christ fades into the smoke & senses Oliver with her, his ragged, ironic smile, his tangled blonde hair, the various tastes of him—he had never with a girl, she had never been with a guy, & they did with Bowie—

"What cries in privatest hours wills each most to run! Do you know? Can you deny? Will you see? Nod & know & walk into commonest hours with this knowledge no longer cloaked behind your mask!"

Christa relaxes more, her fingers down below, touch, slide stroke, *mm, nice, talk to me, preacha' man—*



"Start again, you say, go slowly this time. Talk me through this one step at a time—

"Once, some say, there was common purpose, when there were fewer. The men killed the beasts, the women cooked the food & bore the children—"

Yah, ah, h, you've seen where I come from, the farm, commune, cult, whatever, the bare truths of it when the pretty smoke & costumes drifted off—

"Myths explained the suffering, what life gave, what it took & why it took more—"

*Now a few wet fingers on my nipple the left one, always liked it better for this, but you're not getting me to the point—get me there—**get me home**—*

"If myths ever explained true, why did that man cry out & run?"

*Yes, ah. MMM. **Fuck.** OK, a small one, but still. Try again, gimme gimme.*

"Something, blood, sunshine, pleasures without words in private hours"

Now, yes. Now move in.

"Something, the disappointment in his laughing father's voice. The press of teachers to believe them, blindly, hungrily, believe like a slave in the mirror would. But those private pleasures, touching, the voices—"

Now she is all over Gretta again who responds half awake to her touch, her movement,

"He ran, & was not seen again, a lesson, a warning, that what cries in privatest hours wills each most to run"

She relaxes, & Gretta does too.

"Now listen closely to me, if you're going to hear anything from my lips tonight. Hear this.

"What life does not give—

"What cannot be taken—

"What outreaches coins—

"Staying moonlight, youth, weightless want—

"Myths breathe by men who believe, & expire when the last one falls."

They fall asleep together as the preacher talks on & on & on (Global Wall in a locked radio station, the time paid for & the overnight engineer sent on his way with something extra to enjoy his evening & his girls with Global every step of this way, choosing Sarah among them tonight she is strumming her new guitar as he is hunched at the microphone turned away from her, strumming very softly, he doesn't even hear music, turns & the pink strap of her bra under her tank top, fallen partway off her shoulder, oh, strumming & he cannot hear the music, pink strip part fallen, oh, the shadow of her pink cheek, keep talking into the microphone, it's paid for "a slow revolution bides the world beneath the mathematics, the wine, the sham gurus with hallucinatory songs of end dates," pink strap, strumming, oh, where are the other two, strap, oh, shoulder "slow revolution" "Touch a thing, call it a name, feel the power coming on, know it limitless," she is strumming deeper, oh, no strap, what strap, never was a strap, what would I withhold from you? "& you won't stop now, you'll never want to stop. Now again."

A crush of jaws, of grunts

"There is no center to break

nor edge to run over"

No strap. None. Breaths hard,

open & open more, please enjoy

*it please **enjoy me***

"There are two temples.

"There is the temple to joy.

"There is the temple to sorrow.

"Between them bides the human heart." Enjoy me. Pink strap. No pink strap. Nothing withheld. Oh. Oh. It's not enough. Still talking. Still talking & talking. "Only two temples. To joy, to sorrow."

*Pink strap. None. **Oh.***

xx.

"When did it matter the most?

When I smiled at another & *believed.*"

Some are telling that **RemoteLand** isn't a film anymore, hasn't been for awhile, maybe never was one.

But they're showing it tonight, here in the Noah Hotel, no less, opening up the old theater many didn't know it had, *oh yes, back when, those shiny nights, so many & so long ago, not a few ghosts still & a screen unbelievably tall & RemoteLand will be on at midnight, though some say it's not a film nor ever was—*

Where is this, man?

We're ushers, go with it.

I don't understand. What the fuck are ushers?

It means we don't have to go ever.

We *don't*, man. Is that what we want?

"When did it matter the most?"

"When I smiled at another & *believed.*"

The theater is impossibly large but that may be because of the tall mirrors, the several great chandeliers, the way the balconies are angled to seem to fall away by the thousands

How did we *end* up here though?

It doesn't matter, does it?

Where's that guy. Charlie, the funny last name.

Pigeonfeet.

Yah. Where's he? He looked worse off than us.

He's OK. He's somewhere around here. I think he brought us.

How? I don't fucking remember! Do you?

"No. Not exactly. But yah he was talking about something & then we were here & it sorta makes sense to me"

"What the fuck are you talking about, man?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure. But yah. We're here. We're us here. It's good."

"You don't know, do you?"

No. But yah, it's OK. Here we are. Just relax. We got jobs. It'll be good now. I promise.

xxi.

Out there, up there, in here, sate the paradox & win the game. Ha ha. Like, yah.

I looked up there, those nights, what Preacher called the weaker hours when I met him those years later but, yes, there was a me before him, & I thought the stars were trying to tell, I really did think this—

I felt it in those years, not attached to a man & his dream, maybe his dream's mania, I felt it looking up, worlds without end, something beyond hours & miles, something that did not notice these simple human ideas, but like me this something loved the night & wished me *not to be afraid*—

I felt my edges, felt how they hemmed me in, these borders dividing me from all, & I tried again & again to fell them, *fell* seemed the right word, I was trapped in the woods of my mind & didn't know how to get out—

Was it you also that night, nearing me as you neared her, dreaming me as I dreamed you first, you showed me the way out eventually, which is why I cling so, Preacher, why she clung to him or you—

I was old enough to drink in bars, loosen up enough to fuck who came with me, but that was all, old enough. I let others decide what I found good-looking, how I dressed, how I responded to the talk—

I had little ideas, about edges & borders, & strange things that loved the night & wished me not to be afraid, but the colorful booze soothed these into my breathing, *calm Genny calm Genny calm Genny* so I just did what was possible until—

The fucking never went right. Some men found me pretty & wanted to hurt it out of me, take a piece with them. Some confused things, let their cocks fall in love with me, forgetting cocks *do not love*, they want—

I learned—I dressed for it—tits on display, wet lips, tightly slung ass—learned & did nothing with my learning—it wasn't fun after awhile, it was habit—

I had a few things in my bag, things you wouldn't think of me—mace, a jackknife, but also a small gun, unloaded, I'd never fired it—but for different reasons shown—once to convince a pretty boy to put on the manacle, another to convince an unpretty boy I was *just another stupid cunt* & not worth it—

That last night at that last bar was when I saw the news report on TV—

The more I watched, the more I sobered to it all, all of it, the boys meant nothing anymore—I saw what she had, what she wanted—

They said he was a preacher who'd gone from the Bible belt circuit to the jungles of Peru & then come back after years gone—they showed a video of him, footage from a cell phone, snuck out of one of his recent preachings

Talking softly, no microphone, we at the bar listening could hear him say, *“There is violence in the human heart & there is tenderness. What I have learned is that God wants us to crush both of these for him—*

"Was it you? Will it be?"

"Genny."

"The girl? The hotel room? The cops? Was that you before we met?"

"Does it matter?"

"Tell me."

"No."

"But?"

"But what."

"But?"

"I knew him."

"How?"

"Genny."

"No. Fucking tell me."

"He came back with a message, some facts, maybe a plan. I'm not sure."

"And."

"Genny."

"And?"

"He met the girl. She was convinced."

"Of."

"She'd dreamed him. And he thought that he was her dream. He thought he saw her face in the jungle, deep in it, where there was nobody. He wasn't coming back until he saw her face. And then he took all he knew, all he'd learned, knowing it would go wrong, & went to her, found her, convinced he was her dream, she had dreamed him. And she believed that she'd dreamed him."

"How did you know him?"

"I was involved."

"You convinced her."

"Yes."

"She'd dreamed you."

"I taught her how."

"So why?"

"I mistook her. At some point I had primed her too much, too far, I couldn't undo it."

"Undo what? What did you want her for?"

"To go with me."

"Where?"

"To Dreamland."

"Why?"

"I was wrong. About all of it."

"How?"

"It was you, Genny. I want you to come with me."

There was more than Preacher knew, he'd led them to each other & then let go of them completely, so much that they probably remembered him as no more than a shadow—he hadn't known what happened next, & after, & how they would encounter each other again—

tell—

She loved when the moon was nearly full, but not quite. Now we're the same, she smiled, nearly full tonight, soon he would come & they would go together—

She left her window open & the crimson curtains drawn so she could dance as she wished & willed—clearing the room of its debris—lacy things & trinkets, there was nothing but tonight & the rest a mask, no longer needed for others—

She moved slowly across her floor, more & more heated by the nearly full moonlight, & she knew he watched, as she had long watched, & he was coming nearer all the time, she would dance for him & they would know a moment, her cries were an animal's that night until she passed out, & finally dreamed the face Preacher showed her—

He knew something was wrong as they drove to the motel room—but he wasn't sure—her scent was off, only one sniff had told him & he'd taken no more, they were going tonight but that sniff—

She came out of the bathroom in only a slip—pink, her beauty plainly displayed, strawberry blonde hair, green eyes, slender, luscious & untouched, that sniff had told him everything yet here she was—

She'd worn little more in the audience that night, I'd known her immediately—

She did not flinch as the rest did—

*“Violence & tenderness
Violence & tenderness
Violence & tenderness!
Violence & tenderness!
Violence & tenderness!
Violence & tenderness!*

“God want us to crush both of these for him, wants us to relinquish ourselves, our wills, whatever defiant hangs by our bones—

“No! I do no longer! My last night of this! Fuck you! Fuck you! Fuck you!”

We left quickly, & my sniff was accidental, first minute in the car. Oh shit. He drove, & lightly held her hand & knew this was off, wrong—

*We sit on the bed. I touch her cheek. She breathes harder. No. “If it could have been anyone but you.” I know now. He fooled you. I'm **not him**.*

She saw the gun on the bedside table. Flinched. Flinched so deep within I barely caught it. I did.

But she couldn't let it go.

She took my hand, closing her eyes, brought it to her breast, lips parting, cupped her breast with me. I let, a moment, two, then pulled it back roughly.

"No."

"But."

"They're coming."

"Who?"

"You'll have a choice."

"Who?"

"If you choose to wait, we'll go together."

Sirens. TV cameras. She panics, this isn't. He won't. That gun. His hand.

"Do you know what I learned in the jungles? Do you?"

"Learned."

"Life & death. I saw worlds without end. I walked & flew & dreamed until I disbelieved in nothing."

"Nothing!" He points to the door. She hears the gun being moved around, but nothing happens as she walks through the door to spotlights & pointed revolvers.

She chose to wait, Preacher. You don't know this. She kept the clothes she wore that night, & the night gown, in a pink suitcase, & she waited until he was free, & then she went to him, Preacher, & her claim this time was not refused, it was true-eyed & she was his own, & they went together, Preacher, they go together.

"There will be a room first. You can ask. I will answer."

"A room."

"A room in a hotel. Walls of fire, ceiling of stars, floor of moonlight. Couch of silver melody. Bed of blue light & red gold."

"You're reciting that. Why are you reciting? You never recite anything!"

He nods. "You remained with me. You are the last."

"I'm the most stubborn."

He nearly laughs. "I can show you there. That's what I wish to do. Show you. Finally."

"Why me & not her?"

"We'll go now."



To be continued in Cenacle | 83 | December 2012

* * * * *

*WITHIN'S WITHIN: SCENES
FROM THE PSYCHEDELIC
REVOLUTION*

Music. Poetry. Rant. Mindfood.

turn on . . .

tune in . . .



On the Web: <http://www.spiritplantsradio.com>

Saturdays 11 am-2 pm Eastern US time

Repeats: Sundays 8 pm-11 pm Eastern US time



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Seven

"There is no final answer."
—Dr. Timothy Leary,
Radio Interview, 1986.

xxii.

The secret hustle in things is never stop moving, *you can't, you must, you try*—& yet—

There is the temple.
There is full moonlight.
I chose the temple to look at the moonlight & listen.

Yes. Hmm. The Beast is close some nights, breathing through that moonlight, yes. Hmm. This book about the Beast, this book is a beast, I know it live over time, it grows page by page, I wonder at it—

it exists because I am—because I exist how I have & do—some other person, some other book—or not a book at all—

Never stop moving, the secret hustle in things, I believe this because I see unmoving people all around—the long years dull, explain less & less, sentiment develops a sweet taste, a reward for letting a little, & a little more—

I can't I won't I keep moving—
sometimes it's no better than a blind crying lurch one way & another—but do, but must—

xxiii.

(He would come to the room to compose his letters to her, the room he'd helped design, not that he'd intended or wanted, but it was very important to them that he compose his letters to her in that room, that when she held each letter in her hand during her afternoon bath, it had been composed in that room, that room was the contained place of imaginal space, unshaped, undetermined, these elemental beings had long been with him, he'd thought them special friends upon that time, they would watch with him how light touched rain puddles, explained in his mind, without speaking, words just for him, how things were so, but between those hours & now he noticed the discontinuousness of emotional phenomena & he hesitated, & they pushed him, these elemental beings that had been his friends, now there was duty in it, obligation, they

wanted from him, & then came that night of total darkness, when what sang the world assaulted his heart, & what all had mattered passed, & he opened out to the rest & so the elemental beings were more a nod to his will & when invited to write his letters in that room it was privilege he granted, because he understood what she was & how he could help, & what gain from it—

(He liberated her, saved & eventually liberated her, with his songs, & he also kept a piece in Cloverdale when she left, when Maya sent Christina running down the road, he kept a piece

(So you ask me about this room tonight & what it's for & I'll tell you it is a place where all but one pass through, but the one he stays, stays always & I know she's back in Cloverdale to free the rest of her & it will not come easy

(There were red candles when I composed to her, there was a wall I turned glass to watch the sea, there was the scratch of my pen on thick paper that sucked its ink blood greedy, there was the stiff back of my chair, painful as I slowly composed, slowly until I had broken each song open & then the room would shake, tip, I would bring you to me there—)

xxiv.

(& the woods, too, Christina, **those** woods, my songs were composed from my hours or years spent there, where I went, where I was led, did I bring back songs or just my voice able to sing them? I'm asking but I never knew, or do not recall

(It's simple. He will deliver you to me. He thinks more, you think more, but you are wrong. There is cost to all this. **Do you understand, Xtina?**)

Among the pine
into the woods
I played the song that lured me on.

Do you understand?)

Christina thrashes hard & bites Kinley's shoulder so hard he chokes a scream. He is awake, disoriented to the sight of the nude Christina in this bed & the other one, also nude, also clinging to him now—

xxv.

Strum the cosmos & make something new. Down among the strings, the arguments for harmony get deep & many worlds will go. I can see how this happens.

Which is to say this: some argue that this world's existence is proof of divine intent while others say only evolution could be the explanation.

And I say it's music. I say so because so many songs & each created live on the stage every hour & how songs are perfect & yet & yet—they twine, talk back & forth, lead back to the last, onto the next—

"Have a drink, brother,"

"No thanks."

"It'll dull the pain. And the boredom."

"Boredom?"

"Yah the in-between hours."

"There aren't really any of those."

"Yah. Sure."

"I'll get you another drink & tell you a story."

Nods. I'm sitting at my seat at Luna T's Cafe's bar, Rebecca's is empty. He's looking at me steady as Mr. Bob draws him another draught. His baseball cap says **Occupy** & shows a devilish looking figure. His hair dark & stringy from it. His eyes a solid blue, like a brick of blue. He's young, a working man but young. A hulk in denim & cotton. Nods again.

"When the fat man with the blue doll who looked like him said it, of course nobody listened. He held his street corner day after day, & he warned & warned, but nothing to it."

"Said what?"

"About the ships overhead, they came in late summer, silently. He tried to explain but no, something else."

"What else?"

"Just listen. He was trying to explain, he'd say, 'What if you are right? What if the Universe had been created by men? What if they'd been growing you for resource? What if the doubt slivered into consciousness, & its furious terror of death, could have been removed by pulling off your pinkie nail & bleeding through to original programming, what life was before we were marked for cultivation?'"

"And?"

"It's when I realized about all this. The ships overhead."

He drinks. Considers.

"You're the author."

"One of them."

"The *main* one."

I nod.

"Ships overhead."

"Always been there."

"What's that mean?"

"It means we're not from here, we're not alone, & a lot more's going on than seems."

He nods. "I can accept that."

"Good."

"And?"

"I suppose this book is even more fucking weird for this premise."

He laughs. Drinks again. "Plenty of weird books out there."

I nod.

"But this one holds its own."

"Thanks."

"Sure."

"Still bored."

"Later."

"Ahh."

xxvi.

Now we're both awake. I swear, Gretta is way too pretty for being twice my age. No wonder Bowie can't—

She likes hash as much as sex. I can see that. Hot old hippy chick musician.

"So what is it, a cult?"

I shake my head. She smokes me down & way more. I'm halfway between jumping her bones again & falling asleep.

She had the weirdest looking bong, it's like an orgy of bodies but it's hard to figure out some of whose parts are whose.

"What then?"

"It's all about being ready for the ships."

"UFOs?"

I nod.

She considers. "Ready how?"

"Well, most of everybody isn't going to make it."

"Make it?"

"Yah." I don't like talking about this.

"So you took Bowie there."

I nod.

"Bowie?" she starts to laugh.

"Well, yah, it was stupid."

She looks at me plain. "You were planning on leaving with him from the start, weren't you?"

I start to say no, then yes, then I stop.

"It's not easy to explain all this."

Gretta looks hard at me. "This matters. You're Bowie's, you won him, that means you're mine too. We wouldn't be sitting here sticky with each other otherwise."

I nod. "I was being groomed to be leader."

She nods. Yes, & nods go on.

"I'm not sure how it happened, like why me. And I didn't even know right away."

She smokes & listens. I hate this now.

"They didn't, um, orient me like the rest."

"Sex."

I nod. "I mean that's just how it works for everyone. It's almost nice, that there's no pressure like in the rest of the world."

She looks at me with no opinion. "But not you."

"No. I mean I figured something was weird by when they paired me with my friend Oliver."

"Why?"

"He's gay. I mean he loves me but not like that. Usually they get you ready by who they send you out with. You're not . . . allowed . . . to do anything. But you have to get used to being with a guy while you're traveling. I think it helps." I sound fucking lame.

"But you traveled with the gay boy."

"Yah, I think we were made friends on purpose."

She nods.

"I love him. I, um, made it so they didn't, you know—"

She stares.

"Anyway. I didn't have a say in all of this. And Bowie didn't know when we met him in Seattle."

"So you brought him back."

"Well, I did. Oliver stayed in Seattle."

Gretta smiles like some joke. "How long till he fucked you."

I flinch. I shouldn't but sometimes I feel like they know things I don't. Like being naked isn't enough.

"Not long."

"And that messed things up?"

"No. Not for me." I take a chance here. "I didn't know about you . . . and him. But I'm good

with all of us like this. I think he can help. I mean, I would rather help you & him when it happens. Of course."

"The ships?"

"Yah."

"When?"

"I don't know. When is he coming back?"

"Bowie?"

I nod. Figuring I won't like whatever she says.

"Bowie doesn't live here. He doesn't live anywhere."

"But he won't forget us?" I sound as stupid as possible.

She leans forward, cups my breast, gropes me a little. Takes my hand & does the same for her.

Whispers.

"Would you forget all this girly goodness if you were a half-psychotic spook?"

I smile, ready, but she just puts out the lights & holds me till she sleeps. No, Gretta, he's not going to forget you. I'm not so sure I'm not in the "one more" category, but he's sure not forgetting you.

xxvii.

"Help me, Universe, help me make good, help me make this Universe good—I do not give up—I do not slumber. I will feel no matter the roar of hurt, I promise, in dirtiest, worst hours I promise," Global Wall near blindly potts down the radio as he cums into her, he does not at this moment know which one, or if one at all, she seems twisted with him, flawless as he drives deeper as he keeps on fucking cumming it does not seem possible the failure of his years blows wide, bursts like a star's exploding heart, he seems to feel the curved small of a back, the breath both rhythmic & discontinuous to his, the moan his & not his own, the eyes beyond thought, beyond what & possible, he drives even deeper because *he should have & should have & should have, he cries, should have then, cries for then, should have then, & he puts up the volume slightly again to say in rhythm with his cock driving this raw pussy, "everything matters, grind this world true, everything matters, grind this world true, **everything matters**, grind this world true*—

xxviii.

"I'm from the sea"

"Maya"

"Tell me, Samantha." I use her own name for emphasis, three whistles, hard & soft breaths.

"In a way."

We are by the sea, the day I met her, I think of it as neutral ground, close to the sea but not in it, not of it—

"Is that where you are now?"

"I've never left it, Maya. I never do."

"How did I?"

"I don't know. You're different. You always were."

"You mean for a purpose?"

Samantha says nothing.

"Why am I with Christina & Kinley?"

Still nothing.

"Is Dean with you?"



MASS MoCa Series #10

The shore fades & folds & undoes until she is in a bed with those two. Nude. *Oh*.
 She rolls out & scrounges for clothes.
 “It’s OK. Maya. Come back.”
 “Nothing happened.”
 “I’m not even sure.”
 She looks at them. Feels no fear from them. Only curiosity.
 Starts to explain. I can’t. I haven’t. I don’t want to.
 “Dylan,” she says, finally.
 Christina nods.

xxix.

There is shift among worlds, finally, Charlie Pigeonfoot is present & doing what he can.
 Nothing has been right since that night, what happened at that theatre, seeing **RemoteLand**,
 the whole thing.
 That theatre, this theatre, the Nada Theatre, opened again in the Hotel Noah, o great grand
 theatre, is it the same?
 “Is it really important, Charlie? Is it really so important?” asks the Gate-Keeper.
 Ah, yes. A film with a Gate-Keeper. No wonder.
 Those two boys too. They don’t look well, sitting in the back row, dozing & mumbling, ah well,
 he’ll keep an eye, they don’t have to leave—
 And the girl who came early too, the Gate-Keeper had let her in, nodded at Charlie, it was
 OK—
 But it wasn’t. It really wasn’t. Retreated far from her as he could, cup, checker, housefly, comic.
Curvilinear Comix #2, still haven’t found the first.
 No. Shit. Same freckles. Same short skirt. But no. But she was sitting with those boys.
Calm, Charlie. Calm.

Looks at the Gate-Keeper who looks back at him. “Remember: you disbelieve in nothing.” Laughs
 twisted. “Show’s about to start, Charlie. Take a seat. Wherever.”

Charlie, for a passing moment, tries to reassemble. Has he never left. Been in this theatre all along? And
 those two boys? And that girl?

As the Gate-Keeper says, the lights go down. There is a shift among worlds. Things near. She nears.
 Worse, he wants to paint again.

xxx.

“You can tie me up too. I don’t mind.”
 “There’s a room in back. They’re not using it.”
 “Come on, Charlie, take my hand.”
 “It’s part of the film now, Charlie.”
 She laughs.
 “I’m your new blood canvas, Charlie.”

xxxi.

I nod at the Author, or at least the one with the notebook & the stare in my direction. I'll tell this one for now. He nods.

We are sitting where I sat waiting for you. The club. Luna T's. Not at the bar, the other room with the stage. It's dark, nobody is playing.

"Tell me how, Preacher."

"How."

"And why."

He stares at me, dazed.

"Look at me."

He blurs.

"*Look at me.*"

He looks, face down to chest, oh yes, the dress I'm in.

"I wore it for you."

"You're lovely."

I ignore everything these words might have ever made me feel. It's hard. Or maybe it's wet. I'm tired of being distracted.

"Dreamland."

He coheres. Nods.

"How. And why?"

"You saw me dancing at the Ampitheatre."

"Yes."

"You talked to me."

"Yes."

"I died that night. I danced & I died."

I listen.

"But I didn't die. Something else happened."

"What?"

"Him. Benny. He happened."

I listen.

"He crossed my path. Stayed me."

"Stayed?"

"He showed me Dreamland."

"You never told me this."

"He didn't want me to. The night you waited for me here, I didn't come. I was going there, & not coming back."

"How. And why?"

"I was ready. And the chance was closing. It's complicated."

"And yet here we are."

He nods, looks at my chest with an unhappy lust. Unusual combination in men I dress for like this.

"You want me to go with you, Preacher? Is that it?"

"What else?" I nearly jump as I recall Tweety Bird in my lap & she fucking talks.

"Yes, Genny. It was always you. I cannot do this without you. I need you to come with me."

"And Tweety Bird?"

"She's how we get there."

Tweet smiles up at me, more animate than ever.

"Fucking finally," she smirks.

xxxii.

I carry Penelope in my arms back up to the Bridge of Glass. She is awake, aware of me, her arms holding on to me. This is what I have to do. I had to walk us awhile to find a way back to it, & I think Benny helped me too.

"Jack."

I say nothing. Just walk & carry.

"Jack."

Benny reveals a set of glass steps back up to the Bridge. I carry Penelope in silence.

"Jack!"

On the Bridge, I settle her down for a moment.

She holds my face to hers, close. If this was possible—

"Jack, I'm with you."

"I don't know what that means, Penny."

"It means I love you. I came for you."

I know that look. It's the soft vague one that means she wants sex. Usually—

She reaches for me & I move into her embrace.

"I have only one question," she whispers wetly near my ear.

I nod.

"Me or Christina?"

I nod & with no pause, say: "Both."

She doesn't flinch. She whispers back: "Good."

xxxiii.

Labyrinthine, how delicious, how pur, how undulate, how softest red wings & green gobs of melody—

& the question, deep if not all: asked again: ask again

***when will you learn to arrive
at this hour?***

Well, maybe not this hour, no. I'm arrived. I'm here, this night cafe, the braid of voices in my head, on the page, how they float free about me—

fine ass & tryptamines, like the many years—

the lights, the drizzle, the great miracle of doubt, the greater one of music—

Farther back, & farther ahead, & tonight I can reach forward & back both, I can feel the way things connect, not the same but they do connect—

Jim Reality, now stardust, now recomposed in Wytner, at Luna T's, playing guitar forever, doing the Great Work forever, I hear his voice always

*We've got a Reservoir of Love
It's all that I'm thinking of
We've got a Reservoir of Dreams
All is not as it seems*

Reservoir of Love, Reservoir of Dreams
All is not as it seems

*Labyrinthine, how delicious, how pur, I am writing in a faith that is old in me, that I persist to renew & follow, deeper path in me than all others, the music in pages, how I best tell the years, how I best walk my years, not to understand simply **but to understand with hope**—*

xxxiv.

Yes, this ragged sheaf of high notes, yes, nothing learned yet but strategy to keep singing, keep singing & so I try, I put this black ink stick to its page & push it along, to understand with hope, & I do, & I don't & I do—

This world is not ours—we belong to it—& yet not enough in saying that—the ships have always been overhead—do I believe this or just write it, or has one led toward the other?

Every shift contacts every other shift—again, my own words seduce me by their weird play into belief—it's true, or it sounds like it should be true—like a sexy little truth with a pouty mouth & a skirt conforming precisely to her hot little ass—

Would knowing even help? Would it justify or disappoint? It seems like the civilizations of men flourish with the clash of arguments, the wild flourish of mysteries—

certainty brings corrosion—

*What comes can be the strength of accumulating years, that's what I carry by way of current faith, I think: because I have done this many ways over many years, what opens out to me is **further along**, as though a path, as though there is not loss or diminish but gain—*

I would will my daylight hours root from an hour such as this—I would wish its branchy truths, its far lights, its ceaseless unfoldings, its nearness to dreaming—

xxxv.

There are countless beauties in the world, & passing in & out, & I wonder them against the veiled maps moved by men enamored not of beauties but of power, to have, to own, to distribute, to influence, to cause, to gestate, to destroy—

Have you found a way to the other side & back, one most do not know? A machine, a concoction, a twisted reveal deep inside the mind? How will you breach it finally to allow return?

Does it comfort you to live on in amassed numbers & cut granite? I don't think so. I think any wild enough to move the mass of men one way & another would not willing give back this power. Control, mighty control twists your mind but not toward a path of light there & back—

I think you'd see the mass of men as stupid, running pig-nosy in tiny pens, dying & burying in the haze, yet—

the beauties of the world countless, & passing in & out—there is that, countless, at every hour, disrupts the veiled maps, floating, crying, a color passing a mirror, a melody colliding with an empty night's street & the wild sparks thereof—

xxxvi.

Global Wall is up well before dawn & on the move again, he has sniffed from deepest in his dreams that it's time to go. They are asleep, curled & nude, in the other bed, that's OK, he leaves the motel room & walks out to their car, to sit & think.

Well, first is a different car. Soon. And maybe more change.

He's not exactly sure of anything. Is he sick? Does he ever see the daylight? What are they to him at this point? Each seems to possess him in a different way—

The previous night, in the locked radio station, all three of them, they covered him with eyes & lips & soft bodies, it was impossible to untangle like they were all fucking him at once as he also spoke clearly, softly, steadily into the microphone—

“World hard from the groin & nothing rhymes with the moon. I keep asking on nights hard with sinews of want, keep asking when the soft word, the softer touch, my response in crazy blood howls, what rhymes with moon?”

One emerges from these three, but which? Her slender thighs as she rides him, as he thrusts in & in deeper & in still deeper, she licks her lips & smiles & grinds more . . . poetically? His mind blinds, yet he speaks on—

“In the shift of lights, a few years of men among the dozens boys, the mass willing to live by more glare but less heat, accede what the selfish gods of men demand, whatever rhymes beneath the moon. I ask hard from the groin, unaccepting the control or the chaos, what rhymes with you, moon?”

Her face shifts, among the three, the pressure of her hips & torso on him a little more, a little less, her breathing, the way she leans forward or back as he drives & drives, he tries something to break this, this murk, this loss of—something—but she exerts again, she licks her lips & glows wide-eyed at him & bucks & pulls at him inside her, squeezes, harder, he cries, cringes, talks on

“By the nights of mad vision when too much felt, the world of men both vicious & dull, the content is still found in singing discontent”—the words waking him—“the content is still found in singing discontent”—& he twists—& she slips her hold—“the content is still found in singing discontent”—she is wide-eyed beneath him, feeling his heavy hands upon her, his recovering power—“singing discontent”—he drives to divide her at the root—“nothing rhymes with moon, nothing good rhymes with moon”—now she cries out, cums & wails both—“Or, worse to it, everything rhymes with moon & I am years past being bluster & man enough to say it plain”—she is kneeling between his legs now—licking & sucking & crying & his again, all of them *his* again—

The old man who comes in around 5 am if they stay that long—not a DJ, or a host—simply there to run the advertisements till the morning news—remedies for skin—& flatulence—& time itself—

They are quiet when he wakes them, tells them to clean it all spotless, he is waiting in the car—under an hour—maybe pancakes for breakfast later—

xxxvii.

Start with the curious creeping eye in the night, the darker fantasies he carries, are they pleasures, or wild bolts of consciousness, toward what might salve, what might explain—

But more, always more to it, & I address you for reply now

“What rhymes with the moon?”

“Art”

“What slips freely through the hours?”

“Art”

“What flows between limbs?”

“Art”

“What touches deep & lasts?”

“Art”

“What builds from sleep?”

“Art”

“Tell me”

“There’s Art, there’s hunger, there’s exhaust”

“Tell me”

“What this broad view gestures”

“From, to, Art”

“What now seen toward, that distant rock from this nearly drown”

“Art”

“What sings nearer is Art, sings nearer, a hand, a blind eye, a voice of leaves, a white tree”

“Lay with me, white tree”

“What do I want?”

“You want Art”

“What do I want?”

“You want Art”

“What do I want?”

“To rhyme with the moon”

“What must I do”

“Rhyme better with the moon”

“What rhymes with the moon is Art”

“What wakes me to my bed & limbs is Art”

“What again walks me among clouds & men is Art”

Jasmine looks at me from the other bed. I have not touched her over there, a promise the easier to keep by whatever witchcraft got me this far. When she came out of the hotel room’s bathroom in a blue tissue & panties, I felt my groin light up, unhappily. They’ve got a lockdown on me. She’s still not all there & seems a little sorry I don’t at least make a play—

Then she starts all that chanting with herself in different voices, & I think she’s crying for real, & I feel bad for her, but not enough to risk it—I let her cry & chant & I keep my face to the wall because the voodoo swelling my cock could just—fucking——

xxxviii.

I am labyrinthine you walk through me, years to this & there is still tonight the secrets told in a sniff, & what wealth passes by every night, I am the labyrinthine you walk through me & this book weighs pounds where once weight pages I don’t have answers for what it is yet I realized something this week

the clearing shaped like a temple in full moonlight, that temple is an ancient temple of dreams, it exists

now, here, tonight, it is temple & portal & tool all at once, & I did not know this before, & it seems important to know, like an image has become a functional place, how it explains itself, of course a temple of dreams would resonate powerful but have no literal substance—

I am labyrinthine you walk through me, this means different over time, through space, it's why I keep circling back, returning, writing old words to see how they feel now to write again—

xxxix.

"Why did you come with me, with us?"

"Why?"

"Yes, Bowie, I'm asking."

"It was a trick. A little one."

"Tell me."

"The dream I told you about when we met. Remember."

"I remember everything you say to me, Bowie."

"What did I say?"

"You said you had a dream that was still bothering you, like it had a message."

"Go on."

"You said you were with your relatives, many of them, on a happy wedding day. It could have gone badly, but it didn't. You said everyone was relieved how it had turned out."

"What else?"

"That's it."

"I thought you remembered all my words, Christa."

"I do. *Shit*. OK. You said 'weddings are good days.'"

"You do remember."

"I told you."

"Do you know why you didn't remember that bit right away?"

"Why?"

"I was looking into you."

"Into."

"Yes. A hypnosis, sort of. Not so easy to describe."

"And what did you find out?"

"It's OK. I wasn't undressing you."

"Not that I'd mind."

"No. But still. Think of it more as a look into your files. Why you were there, your intentions."

"And what did you find out?"

"That there are things you don't know either. Gaps. Questions."

"So that's why you came?"

"I came because I am one of the gaps."

"Meaning?"

"They figured me, a sort of gap shaped like me. I would come & you would leave with me for awhile."

"And then?"

"You'd return, I guess."

"Guess? Since when do you guess?"

"They were guessing. Hoping, really."

"Like what? I'd get you out of my system?"

"Sort of. Maybe more like recognize & embrace your role."



"Like a king."

"I don't know. Yes."

"What, Bowie?"

"I don't know, Christa."

Silence.

"I don't either."

"That's fair."

"But I know something too."

"What?"

She rolls hard into his arms & pins him tight. "I am never, ever letting you go. Ever."

Nod in the dim. "Didn't think so."

xl.

Yes, in truth, grasped by two women, I was lucky enough to show up when they were both naked, in bed, sort of twisted up together, I just sorta slinked in, re-upped Gretta's hash pipe, just in case, a sort of good will gesture toward hoped for nookie to come—

Or at least some cuddling. I mean I could sniff all the fun they'd been having, waiting for my late & sorry ass, gotten bored, I understand, pass the time—

They take turns—then I do—

Preacher always says a meal's better shared with a friend—

xli.

Finally Christa asks, I wonder how it took so long, & she probably didn't want to.

"How did you two get together?"

Gretta laughs, smokes more. Leaves it to me.

"I don't know how intentional it was."

"Or not."

"I just went to all your shows."

Gretta laughs. "You and the hippy kids."

"I didn't have any together ideas about music. I just liked what I heard when your band played at Luna T's."

"Yah, that's our weird home."

"It always felt like you were doing something with the music. I'm not good at understanding these things."

"Alien conspiracies, secret governments, forests that can't burn down & contain secrets to time itself, sure. Music, nah." She laughs again.

Christa is restless. She knows she's smart, smarter than most, but these two make her doubt, they seem to talk 10 words for one, or something way more stupidly complex than that.

"Tell me."

For awhile, they don't, hear the stress, so Bowie goes high, to her lips, shoulders, breasts, & Gretta buries softly in her cunt, tongue moving impossibly fast & slow almost simultaneously—

Eventually they draw her though stress to craze to cum to calm, & all share the hash again—

"Some of it was just loneliness, Christa. He'd be at the bar till closing. Chuck liked him, I think sometimes they'd lock the doors at 2 & stay longer.

"But it was more. He said to me once, between sets, wanna hear a good joke?"

"I nodded, I liked his smell. Not dirty, but salty."

Bowie laughs, that's rare, it's lovely. Christa wants them tasting her all over again but stifles her

spasm.

"I was in this northern city, it was springtime, & one of the mystics approached me with the truth.

"I backed away. He smiles & nods. 'When you're ready,' he says.

"I wasn't there for pleasure. Really not. I had to take someone in, that night, & it would be sad.

"He walked with me awhile, I was OK with that. I'd been on this street many times lately, everything still open past midnight when I'd go to see her, the old barbershop, Afghani restaurant, some art galleries. I'd show up at her door after midnight.

"I was near & looked at him. I nodded, smiled. He moves near, touches my shoulder. Points.

"Where?"

"There"

"Where?"

"There too"

"Then he does a little dance. Nods again."

"That's it?"

"What else?"

"I wasn't in front of it, but he pushed me toward her door anyway. Knew, or seemed to."

"She'd come to her door in a slip. She had pink ones, white, blue. Blonde hair down. That waiting smile."

"We'd sit & have something to drink first. She would smoke a cigarette. One. Told me it kept her honest. Then we would get on her bed, slip off, me from behind & fuck, hard, awhile, then slower, then sort of collapse in sleep.

"She had a beautiful ass. She was thin but her ass was full. She seemed proud of it."

Gretta looked at me after listening so long. "What's the joke in this?"

"When I came that night, I didn't pull out. I cuffed her & held myself hard in her until the door opened."

Gretta nodded.

"She never said a word. They let her dress. She went along agreeably."

Gretta finished her half-glass of red wine, all she allowed herself during shows. Nodded.

"What did she do?"

"She'd killed over & over. She was good. Subtle."

"Why not you?"

"I wasn't work. She was a good soldier."

Christa listens, dazzled by this, & unsure. This time they just twine with her, close, sweet.

"It took us a long time to get here, Christa."

She nods. Wants to return with them both now.

xlii.

Bowie now turns to me & I feel that look of his that undoes me.

"Thing is, before I met you, I hadn't seen Gretta in a long while, & I was hurting. And then I met you, & it's like you were what we were missing."

Gretta nods in the dark.

"Pretend I don't get it & tell me."

"Really?"

She nods. Feels stupid. Feels sorry.

Gretta starts to hum & at first Christa resists. This is how she explains things.

Tries to resist but really doesn't. They explain, tell stories but in the end Christa trusts a feeling she has had deep in her belly. She's heard people talk about that kind of thing but yes, with her it's true.

That feeling tells her how she's feeling, what's coming, what's been.

I feel like we'll never really leave this bed, like we've been arriving here all of our lives & here is where we are.

And I know that's foolish.

But if they could feel this, feel what I am feeling, with them, if I could teach, show them, I want to, I think.

Was the gap shaped like you both? Can I do this with you?

xliii.

Maya looks dissatisfied, Christina thinks. She's sleeping but it's an unhappy look on her face.

They got a room with two beds, this struck her as funny. This is Clover-dale, which is not a what or a where but something else, & yet they get tired, it gets late, they find a low-budget hotel. Does the guy behind the counter give Kinley a look for the two pretty girls he's checking in with? Kinley doesn't notice. *Ha.*

I slept in Kinley's arms, & we did nothing. Less than that. Kinley is uncertain & he doesn't react well to it. Especially with me along.

He's not afraid for Maya. Not in the least. I try to suss it. She's cute. She sniffs young & lost. A sort of pretty scrawny pup. Another man—

would not be Kinley. He is disturbed she lost her friends. Clover-dale spooks him.

I speak quietly.

"She looks unhappy."

Kinley nods.

"Do you know what we're supposed to do? Here, with her?"

"Everything led me here, Christina, nothing told me what to do here."

I nod inwardly. OK. "I don't think she knows either."

Now Kinley hugs me. One of those loving ones of his that makes me hotter than anything else.

But still.

"Getting here was a lot of it. I didn't want directions anyway."

I am quiet.

"What I wanted was to arrive here with you."

"And Maya? We have her now."

Kinley nods into my shoulder. "I don't think she's the last we'll meet here."

That sounds about right, somehow.

xliv.

What, indeed, now, I am wondering too, from far, from the cool & calm of a familiar perch, & I don't know, & I don't know. I look into the music & it tells me nothing is undeducible to beat & breath—and I nod, it's what music would say—

I look to the lights of this beloved courtyard & they suggest the shadows, passing, stationary, but otherwise, not much—

The trees are here always, green & blooming tonight, but every weather, I suppose the fact of these four trees is more solid than much else—I sat here with many I'll not see again, same space, other tables, other years—

The story doesn't just lead to Clover-dale or Wynter—

The question is could Dreamland be traveled to another way, & thus a different relation, a different commerce—

I'm not convinced there's not more to it, & yet for now just words on a page, a sense that dreams are for something as every other human physical & psychical function seems for something

I see them as the untamed lands in the dullest human beast, where the daytime conditioning does not rule, does not presumptively own—

Dreams are the wilderland when nothing else seems to remain wild—

I see many chess games around me & it is a game of combat & order, deep strategies—yes, not my game, I'm trying for something else, an anti-game? Music before it is played, dreams in cocoon, how the hand rests, where the eye longs, before any want?

Dreamland. Imaginal Space. I'm not sure which words if any.

What the ships overhead intend, if it can be deduced, involves loosing a lot of power on the planet to see if it evolves bodily in countless variety to arrive at some unknown result? No. I would guess the opposite. Loose the power, see what happens. Let consciousness come, let it clash, let it explain. Does it eventually come to a variegated peace, a balance to hold, or does it collapse, powerfully, slowly? And, if so, can the possibilities of Dreamland, Imaginal Space, be left untried? Ever untried?

xlvi.

Maya's dreaming me, again, which I sometimes find funny & less often she does.

We sit, by her choice, in this cafe courtyard at a table I favor for writing, she's looking at me expectantly.

"What?"

She smirks cutely.

"Yes. That's not new."

She wiggles in her seat.

"Nor that."

She looks around at people half her intelligence, on phones, playing cards, feeding.

"What, Maya?"

"Let's go over it again."

"No."

"Yes."

"Please."

I sigh. "It never changes."

"You tell it. Let me try."

I sigh.

She smiles, sincerely, & I surrender.

"I woke that morning, early, writhing, no more sleep, I felt clawed awake, it was a memory, an old one"

"The term paper you wrote in high school. The teacher."

"Yes. How I let him down. I didn't intend to."

"All you wanted was to fuck a cheerleader."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because that's what I was trained to want. Slender girls in short skirts, smiling as though friendly, as

though sex with them would be sugar, reward, arrival.”

“Or the poet girl.”

“Yes.”

“Why her?”

“She actually liked me a little. We were friends.”

“Not enough for you.”

“No.”

“You wanted sex.”

“I wanted her to be mine. I wanted to possess her & have it be known I did.”

“She didn’t.”

“She was just a conditioned female & I was no prize. I was raw & from dubious stock. Nobody advised her that I was a good one to mate with, or practice with.”

“You see that now.”

“I’ve seen it for a long time. It does not help. I don’t get those years back.”

“The teacher.”

“He was fat, bald, & lonely, bookish in a crowded high school full of hormones & indifference to all else.”

“I liked your writing.”

“He saw I cared & I had talent.”

“Until you helped your school bully friend cheat.”

“Then he turned on me.”

“Why?”

“I’d ask now. I’d fucking ask how you would expect a lost lonely poor horny boy to act when the one tough who protects him for unknown reasons asks a few answers on a fucking test. I had no fucking friends of that kind but him. What did I care? That place was an evil zoo I suffered in when not skipping.”

Maya says nothing, calming me.

“Would fucking a cheerleader have helped?”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“You build yourself from what you have at hand, what’s given you, what you learn, what you think you are. So, yes, if a cheerleader had fucked me, I would have been different. Or the poet girl.”

“Better?”

“No. Maybe worse. Maybe then haunted by that. I’m the kind that gets haunted, that makes his stock & trade off want, absence, distance, music drummed up from such things.”

“Should I put on a cheerleader’s costume?”

“No.”

“This is my dream.”

“Don’t.”

“What then?”

“Help Kinley & Christina.”

“Do what, Raymond? Why are we in Clover-dale?”

“I don’t know yet.”

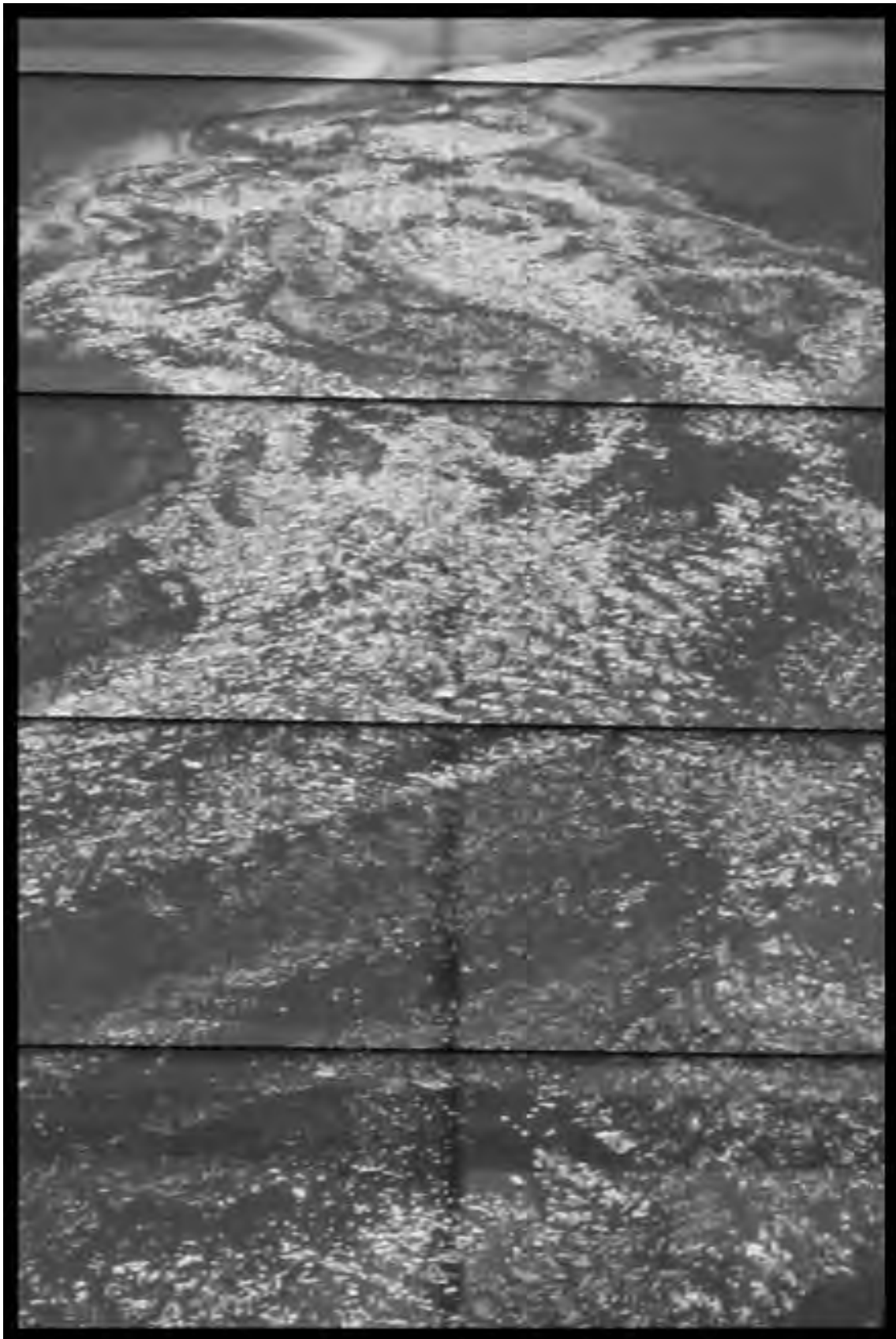
“Dreamspace.”

“I think so. Yes. Somehow.”

“*Tell me.*”

“I can’t.”

Maya relaxes again, across from me, her pink Jimi Hendrix shirt, her pink striped blonde hair. Blue



eyes.

"We'll keep going for you."

"Yes."

She nods. The trees of the courtyard are green & lovely, shiver in the lightest breeze. Perfect night. The air almost unfeeling.

xlvi.

I took that class in some way to become something different. I knew what Jamie wanted from the start. I knew he wouldn't wait forever. I was looking for a hook, an escape. A thought to help me know what to do next. I mean I eventually figured this all out but you're asking, right? You want to know?

Yes, Maya.

It was a literature class, the only one that hadn't started yet or filled up. So it was sort of random. But I liked it.

The teacher was old, really tall & thin & old. He seemed sort of blind to students, like he was talking to someone else. He would tell stories, or start to. I liked them, it felt strange & dangerous.

The class was full & they didn't get him. The girls chewed gum & looked at their phones, wore short skirts & ignored the boys. They didn't look at me in my ragged clothes. That was fine.

He started talking even stranger the last night I went. I mean, the story we had to read was James Joyce, "The Dead." Irish nationalism & sentiment. But sort of pretty. I liked it, I guess.

But when he talked, it was about an old movie. "The one with Bing Crosby & that young starlet." He groped for her name. "It doesn't matter. Most of that story doesn't matter. All that matters is the dead boy." He got back on topic, like he was jerked then stopped. "No. What is her name?"

Nobody was watching, I was. He was talking to the air: "You asked me the question I am still not answering after all this time. If I answer, I will lose you. If I answer, you will smile, & turn away, & think of other things." He was crying into the air & nobody saw. I stood up & now everyone froze.

"Sir."

"It's OK. Sit. Listen." Now he was looking at me. Hard. It's like we were alone in the class. He talked. I listened. He talked & talked.

"From the basement we protested, it was tight & dirty, & I kept forgetting what against. The king? A bent idea called God? There was a girl, warm, a light on her face I craved, a belief in all this. The poetry of it.

"And I turned to my old comrade. We'd been running a long time. He would usually find bits like her, a few words, into a shadow. He'd nod later.

"I looked at myself in a mirror. I hadn't in a long time. *Oh my*. It's been a rough stretch, I turned & explained, but nobody was there. Just that smile of hers. A line of poetry."

He stopped right there. Looked at me. "Why are you in my classroom?"

I stared at him.

"Go. Go now. Now!"

So I did. I went back to Jamie's house & I packed & I left.

"Maya."

"Yes."

xlvi.

“But did he fuck you, Maya.”
 “No, he didn’t.”
 “I wrote it.”
 “You were wrong. That’s what he told Muddy.”
 “How do you know?”
 She looks at me. “He wanted to. He tried. He whispered & pleaded & licked & I touched him there & I moaned a little.”
 “He fucked you.”
 “No.”
 “I wrote it.”
 “You were wrong.”
 “Was I?”
 “You guessed. That’s what seemed right.”
 “You let him lick you & you jerked him off.”
 “Yes. Once.”
 “How long were you with him?”
 “Not long.”
 “This is a strange turn. You telling me what I got wrong.”
 She nods.
 “Are you dreaming me again?”
 “I guess so. Does it matter?”
 “It does, Maya, to me.”
 “Then yes. Just like last time.”
 “But you’re correcting me.”
 “Just that. You got it wrong.”
 “I still don’t like that.”
 “Would you really like it if he had?”
 “No. Not really.”
 “What then?”
 “It’s a precedent.”
 “To what.”
 “Other things I got wrong.”
 “Maybe. Maybe not.”

“Maya. Wake up. It’s OK. It’s Kinley. Christina is showering. We have to go.”

Maya gives me a dirty look as they all pack what little they brought & quickly go.

xlvi.

The movie, **RemoteLand**, whatever it may be, begins with a car crash running backward. Charlie convulses & nods, this is familiar.

Which is to say, OK, & he leans forward a bit but the film shifts a bit. (Was this the Gate-Keeper’s doing? What does a Gate-Keeper do anyway?)

It’s a party, Charlie remembers now, he’d seen this car crash filmed? It was his car, yes, the one he’d driven to the theater that other time (other time? Other theater?)

But it was a party, it was in some kind of ruin, he’d gotten invited as a novelty, his ideas were

fragments & pastiches, but they saw he could paint. Really, *freakily* good. The bunch of them would talk him into coming to their place in the woods, bring his paintings, they'd eat handfuls of gelcaps (acid? E?) & they'd groove to his pictures, get crazy from them, naked, bonfires, the girls, two of them, they'd give him a taste, a grope of titty, maybe a feel down his jeans, one he could tell wasn't into it, the other had to be held back a little, the paintings *really* did something to her—

They weren't his friends, didn't notice him in school, even the girl who sorta liked him.

It got weirder than acid & fires in the woods. It was like they felt his power, maybe more than he did. He liked his own paintings but he wasn't conscious of their power—

But that party out there in the ruins, it's like he was there to show off—to *be shown off*—

He'd gotten a car, a used one, earned the money himself, used fewer colors in his pictures—

That freaked them out—they kept asking—

The girl who was reluctant pressed him the most. Oh his fingers got to know her well, all sorts of teases & half-kept promises—& the questions—

“Why no more salmon?”

“Uh,” he grunted, trying to lean in close enough to lick those nipples but her hand on his cock took over.

“Why no salmon in your new pictures, Charlie?”

“I. Uh.”

“Tell me. You want more.”

“Yes. Uh.”

The one who liked him wouldn't—he came on her arguing with the guys. It got ugly.

“We need to know, you fucking bitch.”

“Fuck you.”

“There's nothing left to hold back. You've fucked all of us.”

“Ask him.”

They pushed her. Threatened. Pled.

She wouldn't.

Flawless ass. Freckles. Told him she lived on a farm for awhile. Told it with a disturbed look, like she didn't tell it much. Why him? She didn't know. Would he have told her that night it was stupid as more money for that car out back of this place with no roof?

He would have told her anything now, seeing her push back. Was ready to dare & step in when there were shouts in the street—

They'd cleared it of all of the wreckage, the stumps & bushes, cleared it completely & lining it now on both sides were film cameras, dozens of them, maybe hundreds, but old style, back to the hand-grinding days, mounted & in amongst the newest camcorders & older models, so many on either side.

And down the street, as though waiting on cue, was his car. His fucking car! The moment he saw he was grabbed by about five guys, grabbed & held tight as he was dragged to his car & belted into his seat, his hands taped to the wheel, the wheel locked in place so it could not turn, & his feet tied together below—& before he could cry a word, someone leaned in & pushed a heavy stone onto the gas, & he was accelerating, past all those cameras, crying faces, faster & faster until—

wham!

xlix.

“Mm Mm” sighs his friend as he turns up the volume on his stereo, Grateful Dead, Nov 30, 1973, Boston Music Hall, “Weather Report Suite” into “Dark Star Jam” into “Eyes of the World” into “Sugar Magnolia,” the cassette had been played so many times it squealed at points but his friend kept carefully restoring it to order

“Make a copy”

“No. This one.”

“A copy of it?”

“No. I can’t.”

“Why?”

“Some things you let run their course, Charlie. You play them through.”

“It’s a *cassette*. It’s not even the whole show.”

“I lost the other.”

That’s a lot of talk for those nights, the hashish & the Dead would usually possess them into a listening, smoking trance & sometimes Charlie would be back in that city, that ruin on the edge of city limits, & he would play it out different, run toward her arguing, not the other way toward the street & cameras & his car—

Sometimes he would step forward & take some punches but she wouldn’t leave him. She would tend him while they go out to the street, check out the noise.

“We have to go.”

“Go. No. Charlie. It’s OK.”

“It’s not. It’s really not. I need you to come with me. Now.”

“I can’t. Charlie.”

He would leave her. Figure there wasn’t much other way. Sometimes he would explain.

“It was to buy a car.”

“What?”

“Fewer colors in my paintings. I was saving up.”

Once, she came. She helped him up, she put her support to his bad side, the side he’d taken the fists, & they would leave the back way, through broken fences, half-burnt houses, walk & walk until he was exhausted & groaning & she wasn’t much better, & they found a patch of woods nearby that looked promising & limped in, maybe a little ways more, there, ahead, a clearing—

And he would see the White Bunny & remember her all over again, & follow her into the clearing & lay with this girl & know it would be alright, the White Bunny had led him to safety, as before, & he—

Click! The cassette would stop.

l.

It’s just this: there were a lot of years. A lot of them. Maybe a lot of films, light bulbs, car wrecks—

Things moved faster for awhile & he kept his hand on the wheel, accelerating, & sometimes it felt real to him

Visiting his brother in Boston, two tickets to Game 7 Celtics-Philly, winner goes to conference finals,

they were celebrating his brother had gotten a job as a guitar teacher, had convinced everyone he'd needed to—*oh so sweet*—& Charlie had scored them the tickets—& it was a close game, of course, down to the yelling final seconds—

& later at the bar, more drunk than they should have been, & that meant horny & *that* meant sniffing out the place, one of those stupid places his brother knew too well, the girls bored & huddled for easy attention except for one who separated herself from the rest & was now at their table, matching whiskey shots, & making out with both of them in turn till it got to be her face was kissing one & moaning as the other got a hand up her frilly white dress for some play, long curly brown hair, deep playful green eyes, honey skin, half leaned onto their table in the shadowed corner

Hours later he half wakes on the floor of his brother's apartment's living room. He's alone. Staggers into the bedroom. Nothing.

Collapses on the bed, clothes, shoes still on. Dreams they are watching a pattern on the wall, a labyrinth, fading, right to left, how to travel it. His brother's fingers tapping the tune of it, he heard it in his mind too, & a few steps more to daylight, if not answers, numberless paths, if not a way, a next day's chance.

"Letting go the map, Charlie"

"Hm."

"Let go the map."

"Map? What?"

"*Let it go, Charlie.*"

"It's your best chance."

li.

The first time I walked out of that hospital, for some reason, I found myself at a bar nearby. I'd walked some city blocks but it was hot—I think it was hot—

And I wasn't sure where to go—I think I wanted a sandwich—

So I walked into this place & sat down at the bar.

"Hi there."

"Hi. Do you have food?"

"I think some left. There's some nice chili, maybe fixings for a sandwich."

The barman smiled at me. He didn't know where I'd been, or maybe didn't care. But he tended me. Took me over to a table, got me a napkin, some silverware.

The chili was spicy, I ate it like I'd starved a week in war. The sandwich was vegetables, some kind of sauce.

Didn't ask if I drank. Nice glass of iced water. Kind as a mother.

The TV was showing some priest or preacher, he'd said the world was going to end. It didn't. He didn't look contrite. He looked humbled but . . . happy.

"The lord does not explain these things. These are the days when you submit to his mystery."

He was standing on a cliff, near a lighthouse. An island. "You see your fallibility. Your small place in things." He gestured to the ocean. The sky. "And you carry on. You pray & you carry on."

Hmm. Bet the boys in the press didn't like that one.

I left there, reluctantly. Waited till it got busy, the barman still looking over at me, smiling, but tied up. Took my chance & darted out.

Oh I shouldna. I wasn't walking far before I saw that bent figure hurrying away, & I followed him, he seemed to disappear between streetlights & I kept following.

And it got to be raining—& I think it got to be other cities too—he'd get a sack from a store sometimes—& hurry on—I learned to do the same—kept from starving that way—

Followed him into a building finally, up steps, dark stairwell, his steps hard to hear anymore, narrow stairs, how many flights? & onto a floor, all silent, all silent like noise didn't exist & the open door at the end of the hall, & I pushed in finally, I pushed into the one-room apartment with the lightbulb & I put my sack on the table, & I sat on the bed, & I reached up to turn off that light but something happened again—

"It's like that old song of skeletons in the moonlight," he'd said with his hookah pipe dangling from his lip. "You hear the music but you don't get the words until you stop listening & *glow*"

lii.

The secret to his youthful work, the two great steel edifices he raised in the forest, to decay at their own pacing, was that in one he embedded a live something of himself, & in the other something of the world, important, captured, & it was not what many later took it for, two great black steel hearts, erected in the forest, a primordial valentine—something vital was caught & captured in each—kept from each other, from the world—

liii.

"How do we get there, Preacher?"

"To Dreamland?"

"Yes. How?"

"We fuck, Genny. We fuck."

"Tweety Bird too?"

"Yes. Tweety Bird too. Tweety especially."

Long hours after long hours she hears a voice in her ears, it's her own, it's Tweety's, it's Preacher's.

"There were two tomes. One told the sky. One sang the earth. Was this a choice?"

"Like the left hand or right. And dispose the other."

liv.

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 last 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.”



MASS MoCa Series #11

"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."

lv.

"Can you walk, Penny?"

"Yes, Jack. I'm fine."

"Good. I'm glad."

"Where are we going?"

"To the movies."

"Where?"

"I knew it as Nada Film School."

"The one you went to when you were young? I remember."

"But there's more to it."

"More?"

"I'm not sure how to explain."

"But you're bringing me there?"

"Yes."

"Will Christina be there?"

"I don't know."

Penelope stops them, this vague walking on this Bridge of Glass.

"Jack"

"Yes."

"Look at me."

"I am."

"*Look at me.*"

“I am.”
 “What do you see?”
 “I see you. Penelope. My Penny.”
 “What else?”
 “Else?”
 “What more?”
 “I see . . . her.”
 “Christina?”
 “Yes. You are both. Connected. Something.”
 “Yes. Something.”
 “Don’t you know?”
 “No. You confused us.”
 “Yes. But.”
 “Something happened. We agreed. She & I.”
 “Agreed?”
 “To allow you confusion. Let it be.”
 “And? What?”
 “This. Me with you now, her less so. But always some. She hasn’t let go yet.”
 “Are you the same?”
 “No. It’s the wrong question.”
 “When then?”
 Penelope smiles & takes Jack’s hand again. “Let’s get there *soon*.”

lvi.

“Jack?”
 “Yes, Penny.”
 She smiles. Hands him his old yellow toothbrush. Fresh tube of toothpaste.
 “You only get one set, right?”
 He smiles. “That’s what he said to me.”
 “You told me. I remember.”
 “I don’t know what any of this is, Penny. I thought I was dead.”
 “But?”
 “I don’t know. Seem like being dead would either be more restful or make more sense than this.”
 Penny laughs.
 “We have to stick together, Penny. This time, no matter what.”
 “I know. We will.”
 “No matter what.”
 “Yes. We will.”
 “There are others here. Not just Christina. There was a room, like a hotel room. We met there. We were trying to figure out what this was, what to do.”
 “Did you?”
 “No. Not really. I think we played a card game with blank cards. I don’t know.”
 “Are we going back to that room?”
 “I’m not sure. But I know I saw the Nada Film School here & I want to bring you there first.”
 Penny nods.

They walk on & on, hand in hand, & it’s hard to guess if they walked real miles or through real hours. They could have arrived without all the effort anyway. But Jack insisted.



And there it is. And both sides of the marquee now say

RemoteLand Midnite Showing

And Jack takes Penny's hand all the tighter in his as they walk in, through the lobby, past the concessions stand, into the theatre itself, take their seats together.

lvii.

For a moment on the screen there is just color, floating color, electrified through with more color, floating & then a sense of life in those colors, those colors are alive, how, yet still, something lights up & floats—there, on the screen, you can see them, they light up & float—

lviii.

None other but sing true, call it deep vow, brutal hand up the sky, to the endless night, call it hard flutter from what slow breathes within, call it the remaining clod from a thousand stellar & fool hours, still dangling close,

*still a grasp to the wheel
still a fang in new dreams,
hours of trilling grace, hours
shattering deeper within minute
by—*

minute—
*foul silences of waiting, fouler
still when
the words come out—
to preserve one heart or torso—
at the shedding of another—*

Maya turns to me, all
sweetness & melody, nodding,
smiling—

*None other but sing true as the steerage gives way, sweetness falls now distant, the breathless hover of youth
but another plan of raw memory by plank
of ruined wish
by plank of what hungers flatten the wall & which blood to rule, & the blight of bruises kept close in a bag
none other may touch or know*

*“there is no bag”
none may touch or know me
“there is no bag”*

this what becomes in the awful place to sing truer, oh, crank it, climb it, crawl further in, is any safe safe enough?

Jasmine, Ashleigh, Toby—they nod—they come—

None other but sing true, down streets where dozers mingle, crowd stores for a quart & a picture of half eaten pie, sing true, wail when the note eludes, cry, croak, when a mug of heat is explaining comfort for years & then less so—

Genny. Preacher.

the room more clearly on the movie screen now. its walls of fire. its ceiling of stars. its floor of moonlight. its couch of silver melody. its bed of blue light & red gold.

lix.

True, sing true, said the book while a skinny yip of pages & now pounds later, says the same deep vow to the endless night, brutal hand to the sky harder still, sing true, yes, I will shake & flake, a clumsy bullet in its chute, this is how, how's why, why's truth, a bush & its fruit flaming & poison to everything known, true, sing—

*or the shined face warped below
with its slaven pride & woe*

make it good make it good

*tell you everything for a kiss
make it good make it good*

*tell you how everyone comes
but nobody ever stays—*

Sing true, nights barking empty to skies tinned with brights, sing it with both hands, both hearts, all three, every one, what releases when shook, hard want of shake & flake, teaching skin to shine without sun, lean to wet burble but come only a few words & none ever stay—

*the inner scratch wished is knowing
not by name alone—*

*What's coming but seeds of years,
harm & heal—only lesson is
yearn's—only path is humble's—
only truth is Art's*

*there are only two ways of touch
choice is a slide—ranges with will—*

Rebecca nods, keeps drawing.
Does not look up.
Dylan nods. Does not look up.

Breathe. Again. The first turn left or right & none come back. The first note a cry, a croak, a wet noise, a

challenge to all listening, & to every note to come—

True. Sing true.

lx.

Left or right. I'm certain I don't know. Let me try to say as best I can.

RemoteLand is showing what is to be seen hereon. It is live somehow, in some other kind of way, progressive & yet—

We know the White Woods, yes, & there is a town within called Wytner, in the middle of the White Woods, in the middle of a clearing there, in full moonlight when its temple becomes outlined there is a desert. In the middle of the desert, its center & far reaches alike.

Within Wytner is the place called Clover-dale. Clover-dale is both a dead place & a live one too. Many of us are there, we have been led there by the once dead troubadour Jim Reality III, he had led many of us there, & far within we come to a room—

The room's windows are broken & look out to fields. Its floor is exposed to earth, is nearly gone. It is the room to be arrived at now, tonight, it is the farthest depth to it all thus far—

Within this room in a corner there are objects of great importance, only manifest there tonight to show everyone—

they are most important—

four of them—they look three of them look—alike, like laundry bags, sort of grey & black decorated, maybe nothing so distinguished but very important—

& the fourth one is different from the others—it is red—it is the red bag—

“The red bag?”

“This is the way in to Dreamland now. The only way left. They closed the lanes. All the rest. The sole purpose of Clover-dale is to shroud the existence of this red bag. It is the only way in or out of Dreamland that is not closed, or muted—”

All are watching from the Hotel Noah room, which is being broadcast by **RemoteLand** to the audience that all needed may be gathered—

The Red Bag

When the glaring lights have left
 When the music has slowed to smoke
 When there is sniff of good blood & then no more
 When touch brittles maybe to break
 When best taste is old & cold, hurts

The red bag, doorway back to dreams
 The red bag, the path, come
 The red bag, come, trust, come here.

"What do we do now, Raymond?"

"I'm not sure."

"Are we all supposed to enter the Red Bag?"

"I don't know."

I nod forward. Maya takes my hand & she's got it inside her thin blouse before I jerk back. "Quit it."

"Pay attention."

"I don't know."

"What's all this?"

"It's as far as I know. The Red Bag. I don't know more right now."

"Why is everyone together?"

"You all had to see. Maybe it shows up multiply, maybe it will help."

"What else?"

"I don't know."

"Tell me."

"The Red Bag is where it all crosses, everything I have created so far, the Red Bag is the nexus"

"What do we do with it?"

"It's a new way to Dreamland."

"How?"

"You enter, & Dreamland is *that way*. Not by sleep."

"How?"

"I don't know."

"How?"

"There's a land. Imagianna. A princess. Not what she seemed. But she can point the way to Dreamland. It ends the closings. They are meaningless by this new way. *You don't need to sleep to go to Dreamland—*"

"Is that where we're supposed to go? Tell us."

"I don't know."

Maya hugs me, rests me against her.

"It's OK. He doesn't know. But he will. It's in the nature of this book to seek the music for answers, & then seek more. So now it's the Red Bag. We'll go. Some or all of us."

And it fades again. All the gathering, the many faces, the close union, even Maya. I am left sitting in my seat, alone, writing this page & wondering what next, alone, but not for long—

Just not knowing—

The Red Bag

The Red Bag?

Yes. The music I hear.

OK then.



To be continued in Cenacle | 84 | April 2013

* * * * *



MASS MoCa Series #12

Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Eight

“When did it matter the most?
When I smiled at another & *believed*.”

Well, then, a new page & thus here is the new work. Begin it not knowing but black pen in hand, familiar lined paper, the old notebook holding this behemoth, all fine, writing at a familiar joint, a coffeehouse deli of sorts, brightly lit & casual, & it's even a high Saturday evening like so often before—

So the odds favor inspiration—
Even the rock music on my headphones—
And the musewife nearby—
to complement my fixtional Rebecca—
& whatever Maya is to me—

So it's not a maybe, it's a what,
what words rush new my heart
& mind, what words—

O come on—do it—tell that story—

You were come new, & I had my gift ready for you, *oh yes* this time I would not be too early or late. A mind can convince itself of such things, that it was all bad timing & poorly selected words—

I tend to think too many & too often—

But I chased again, there was something & something else, I chased, that smile, something. It was only a dream, that smile, you were come new, & I had my gift for you. Something I kept. I keep.

Give it some more flesh. See, look, you in a skirt, a nice blouse, which one? There were a few of you, that's what makes this funny, I feel like bunching you together & get everyone shaking hands finally.

“What year did you break his heart?”

"I was 1990."

"Oh, 1985, I'd say."

"I guess I was 2002."

"Yes, that's interesting, how do you date a broken heart? When you start to break it or stop returning all calls & contact?"

"That was just mercy."

"Of course. Start to get over me."

"But not too much."

"No. But mostly."

"Yes. So I could move on with a clean conscience."

"Yes."

"Yes."

What a funny story! Now that you're all here I wonder what to do with you. Orgy? Murder? So many possibilities.

"Forgiveness?"

"Hm?"

"You could just forgive us."

"What would that accomplish?"

"Well, it might help you to feel more at ease with your heart."

"Is that what I want?"

"You loved each one of us very sincerely. For a little while each of us brightened your heart & your days. There were good moments. These are more important than the bad ones."

"Are they?"

"They should be. It's a way to integrate, accept, love in a better way."

"I guess so."

"Your gift was your Art. You shared it with each of us, & you kept it when we parted. But the world changed for all of that."

"OK."

"So if you want to write in places in your heart untapped, look back, from this far, remember, & appreciate, love new. Love like a blessing tossed into the night for each of us, your long ago & longer ago loves, bless each & every one of us as a way toward your every new Art—"

"I'll have to find the good music in this"

Nods.

"What I remember most is my desire, not any of you apart from this. The desire, the eventual rejection. Every fact, facet, detail, is attached to this timeline. It is not rational, nor a complete or fair account of any of you as a person."

"No."

"Each of you was a wanted girl & for a time returned this want. And then didn't."

"Or stopped saying."

"Same thing."

"No. But yes."

I shake my head. Too many lines, this is not the world no matter how it felt, how long &

deeply.

There are other stories & I'll tell them—

"Don't forget us. Tonight. These pages. Promise."

"Promise what?"

"Promise the residua each of us bears in you. Let it be OK. Let it shine as well as sadden."

"I don't know."

"It can. It's how you do this. Culmination. Muse denying no source."

"I'll try. I will."

"And the Red Bag? What to do with all this?"

"The Red Bag goes as far as you take it."

"It's another way to dreams."

"Maybe other kinds of dreams."

"I don't know."

"What then?"

"Someone closed the lanes."

"Lanes?"

"To Dreamland. I don't know how that is possible. People still dream—"

"But?"

"The commerce of it. There's interference."

"?"

"Dreamland is ridiculed, blocked by ridicule. Belittlement."

"And the Red Bag?"

"It is where one would not seek to find it. A place long of death & decay."

"And yet."

"*And yet.*"

If not to write of all, the Red Bag at least urges one to admit of all. The best hours, like this one, & the many lesser. If one is to by way of Red Bag develop some other kind of relation with Dreamland, admitting of all is necessary.

"But eventually story will come."

"Of course."

"Like now."

He writes, a hundred or many more years ago, "*These glaring beasts of night, still, the softest touch in my breathing, then the hustles with new sun.*"

Pauses. The room is cold, is not well-sealed, is small. Yet his one window miraculously looks out to a brightly-lit city, & beyond to woods, impossible woods, & he can sniff in the weakest hours just a bit of salt water. He may not have forever here, but he has now, he writes,

"I'll start explaining myself by simple numbers when any of you can nod & smile, & finally account



for the remain."

He stops again. Sometimes the words come in legions, sometimes in small potent packs. He has learned this much, trusts it enough.

The room contains his bed, a great ville of a bed, his prize, where his work commences, & his desk, a simple table with a comfortable chair, simple but to his need. They contrast yet complement. The bed, legions; the desk, packs. The window reminds him of the world, & insists his humble path.

The new dream. He reviews the scrawl of notes, writ when half-awake, trying to keep its bones & enough flesh, & whatever else. Now to the task.

New page. Old notebook. Everything ordered to lure fertility, induce growth. "*Winter dawn in that strange youth.*" Pauses, thinks. Studies scrawl. "*Tossing newspapers at locked suburban doors, talking myself through inner worlds, finer than the day to come.*"

Tries to remember the dream body he inhabited, he was young, gaunt but essentially healthy. This task was important to him. Thinks. "*A pretty girl, a pen in hand, even the simple gesture of a smile & a handshake.*" Pauses. Nods. Yes, he's got it now. He wears the dream body again, now walking.

Writes more confidently, his handwriting bolder, stranger, fluid. "*Big simple worlds I did not yet know how to conjure. I'd come home, fingers & limbs numb, & the sharp yips of the thaw.*"

One more pause, a breath, who would you have observed writing at this point, the man or the dream-soul whose body he now re-inhabited?

"Thaws hurt, then & now, & bigger inner worlds still call to be created."

Ah yes. Good. They part again, but this dream-soul does not dissipate. He lives on, in these words, but more. So much more.

The writer nods, smiles, shakes his shaggy head, years still from the bald pate it will be, one of the many costs he will accept to do this work, & well.

Another day, another year, another season. Later, older. A girl sleeps in his bed, she'd been hired but now stays more often, & where there was sex for money something else is happening of late. It wasn't intended & yet. She was young, had not been with many men. None of this would have mattered, however, if she hadn't asked what he was writing, hadn't stayed overnight, not usual for whores, hadn't wakened, & seen him at his table, & asked. If he hadn't answered.

"Dreams?"

"Yes. Dreams."

"Like a diary?"

"Not so much."

"What then?"

The light shined her face softly. He liked her taste, her scent, more than he expected. Was fairly poor but would have paid double if she'd said. She was clean, she was light. It was troubling.

He talks, really talks, shouldn't, does.

"I discovered something strange awhile ago. If I select my dreams well, write them down well, in initial notes, then at length, I seem to have the power to take on the flesh of the figures from these dreams, give them a life independent of their dreamers. They are free to exist in Dreamland thereon."

She is silent. These words should be strange to her, if not ridiculous, & yet they aren't. She nods, & reaches for a cigarette.

"I dislike when you smoke."

"Just one."

He nods. Continues.

"For a long time I would select just one figure from a dream. Whoever I seemed to be in it. I would write until I was that person, sitting here, writing. But then something happened & I realized I could do more. I could dream differently. Shift from figure to figure in a dream, & capture more of them in my notes, & release more of them."

She smokes, listens.

"It's more tiring this way. I am younger than I look. But it's what I do."

She gestures to his newest pages, from that morning, while she slept.

"Read to me from them."

He hesitates. He never has. She nods. Her eyes are a dark lively delicious blue. He is not her customer. She will not leave. Too much is happening in this moment. Panicked, he reads when he would not have.

"In his cage, he remembers. The scent of unknown flowers, chemicals really, the wind from the window he'd quickly come through." His voice is shaky, but he continues. *"Two quick breaths, then his, the gentleness he crushed, but then let go a little. Maybe it was God's urge, he ignored the chemicals."*

Doesn't look up. The room is completely silent. He reads on. *"In her room she smokes. There is music on the radio, too soft for lyrics, as she likes. She stares through the ceiling, always has since, even more now. She's learned new ways to laugh too, less personal, more forgiving, for the many hands striking empty air, & again, & again, & somehow yet call this a life."*

Still silence. "How did you know?"

"Know what?"

"That's my dream. I had it last night. *How did you know?*"

He doesn't move. Doesn't breathe.

"He scared me at first, coming through my window, hushing me. We just lay together for a long time, he smelled like earth & sweat, I was in panties & a t-shirt.

"They'd said he was gay & I knew they meant he preferred guys & this bothered me. Was I jealous? No, but now I knew why. It wasn't true. It was his ruse. Depending if I was game. I guess he decided I was.

"I resisted a little at first, isn't that what you're supposed to do? But he was too gentle & commanding both.

"The books aren't enough," he crooned in my ear as his hands gently heated me up. No to this became yes to this became fuck yes to this, & he taught me to ride, to open myself up, more than naked, more than wanting even, he kept giving me back my desires, kept making me see them, I was long past the fucking of it, he'd had me hours ago I think but no, this, some answers. Something.

"Deception. Denial. Deferment." I moaned quietly, almost happily. My big gay lover.

"Listen" he compelled & I did & I am, I am listening now

"Deception. Denial. Deferment. You can live your whole life & never get beyond these. These are the invisible bars."

I listened as he tongued my clit & made me cum over & over, & he kept bringing me back to it, to these words, I wished my body was more generous but he didn't exist in that way, to make me or any girl feel judged, or lesser, he felt very near to me, held it, held it long in his hands & his heart & he knew, he knew—

And here's what I tell to you, the work I do is from that night, from what he gave me, when I sing, when I play, it's because of that night & how as I lay beneath him at dawn, feeling him slide gracefully in & out, eyes shut, smiling, he said, "open your eyes. Look up!"

The ceiling was gone. And I saw them. The beautiful ships. So many of them up there. So many.

Now she is back. Now I understand. This was never random. She chose to come here. I hired tits & ass, as I did whenever I could, sometimes instead of food. I received ligaments & light.

"What now? You knew."

"You told me."

"You knew."

She nods.

"What now?"

"He was my teacher. He gifted me to know. To disbelieve, to sing discontent. To resist."

"But—"

"He said—he knew—there was more. It's why he showed me the ships. He came so hard inside me my mind exploded white light. I was gone.

"I woke up. He was gone.

The ceiling was a ceiling.

I was just a girl & most
were bent on chuting me
to acceptable breeding while a

few on the way just wanted
their fun.”

“What did you do?”

“I did what any good sheep would do. I had fun. I learned.”

“So you forgot. Moved on.”

“No. Not at all. I just needed time.”

“It didn’t go well.”

“At first, yes. But the books didn’t get better at what I needed. The boys kept coming. The men.”

“They saw nothing.”

“They saw practiced guts. I had a reputation. It didn’t help me.”

“At first. Or for awhile. But then.”

She smiles & I cringe. She is still young, but *oh the power*.

“I came this way because I was let alone. I chose who, & charged a great deal. I had no allies, which was dangerous, but the men themselves protected me, they began to want me more.”

“Like me.”

“Yes. But I didn’t return it. I gave them satisfaction, relief, pleasure, but a few wanted more.”

“And you?”

“I wanted answers. What had I seen that night? *What had he let me see?* I was still cumming that moment. I was still crying & exploding for it.”

“And me?”

“An accident. I guess. One of the other girls. An old friend. We ran into each other. She told me about you.”

“What did she say?”

“She said you were poor, smart, good looking, & she didn’t know why you needed a whore.”

“What else?”

“She said I should be with you. ‘That would be something,’ she said.”

“What else?”

“Nothing. Told me your route, what you liked in girls.”

“And the rest?”

She smiles. Sincere. Simple.

“You are what I wanted. I’m sure of it now.”

“But I write about dreams, not spaceships. Even beautiful ones.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“What does?”

“They come from Emandia. That’s their home.”

“The ships?”

“I think so.”

“So we come from there? They brought us here?”

“No.”

“What?”

“This is like a farm. A laboratory.”

“The earth?”

“Yes.”

“We’re crops?”

"More like. I don't know. Farm animals."

"Why? What for?"

"They wanted to understand their own origins. They didn't have better answers than we do. So they thought to device a planet."

"This sounds like a book I read."

"It should. Or a number of them. From many places & times. We get close to seeing things for what they are. The bars. The watchers. Then something happens & we collapse into our blood & obsessions again."

"And what to do with this knowledge anyway?"

She laughs. "I found for a long time that fucking helped. It wasn't like with him but I selected my company well."

"Until."

"No until. I knew it wouldn't last. I was going to meet you."

"Or?"

"There was no or."

"There's always an or."

She shakes her head. Won't say.

"What now?"

She coaxes him back to his, now their, bed. "We dream. Just like last night. We dream."

At first nothing unusual. A preacher, I am on a sidewalk & my book is in my hand, in my head, I am glowing words of truth, practically staggering as I cry, "Only suffering defines this human dimension! Suffering & submission & the relief of letting another direct your path hereon!"

*Oh & it does feel good, the night is roaring close & there are many eyes & I suck close to a few, I need & succor close, I suckle close, those doubts, those doubts of your way, oh yes, look at me, look at me, say it with me, **I am nobody, I know nothing** oh say it with me, away the hungry gazes at the skirts, the benign wonderings at the trees, no, away, close upon me, brother, very close upon me, close upon me, soft, soft, & listen as I read you words, they are true, they may hurt, but they are true"*

& then you come up. I am thrown, what. Those near me, listening, look at you, at us, they wait, it's what they're trained to do, let the powers tangle & something subside.

I follow you. Every soft rippling muscle, every easy moving limb, I follow you & I am the preacher & I am me, & we are in an alley & I am all over you biting your cheek, your shoulders, your breast, you pull me in you & I know you & yet also I have not been with a woman like this & I cry in fear & panic & rage & lust,—cry your power to control me, to raise me, I cry, & I find us continuing along, more calmly, eventually I'm OK, now it's springtime, mercy's cool air you walk with me, we walk together now, you understand better, we do,

"What?"

"Keep him. Bring him along."

"Write him."

"No. *Keep him*. We can use him. I like his taste. I like his scent."

We follow the homeless man. She wants to. The preacher is willing, is still so fucking enthralled



with her he'd say yes to anything. Accepts he is from a dream. It does not seem to bother him.

"Your pussy is his fucking narcotic."

"He's sweet."

"How does this get us to the beautiful ships?"

"There are many paths but most of them are blocked."

"How?"

She doesn't want to tell me.

Sees me anger.

"OK. OK. It's the Red Bag."

"Red Bag?"

"Yes."

"What's that?"

"How we get there."

I nod. Like nodding means anything. We follow the homeless man into the transit station, down the escalator, to his perch where he holds a sign **SEEKING HUMAN KINDNESS** & stares, we follow him until we are with him.

"The Red Bag."

He shakes his head.

"Tell us."

"Who?"

"Tell."

He begins to hurt a little, she is impatient. Doesn't hold out long.

"I'll show you. But that's all."

We follow. A restroom. Not too unkempt. A closet. There it is.

"Listen. I don't know you. You shouldn't."

"Go."

"Um"

"Go! & don't ever come back here" she flees him with her command, we lock the restroom, kneel close.

"This is it?"

"One of them."

"What do we do?"

That's when my girl returns to me. "We close our eyes, lover. Close our eyes, imagine we're inside. And there we will be."

It was that easy.

i.

There surely are always fragments, start with these

"Was it simply to snatch your glance from every man & tree, from lilac winds & blue dusks, ruffle you enough to notice me & keep noticing me, that I moved toward the tangled gate, *notice me, notice me*, I'll kill the Beast that consumes the dancers, kill him & bring him steaming back to you.

“Yes I will pass into the tangled gate,
 holding the black thread,
 thread to the Beast, path only
 to the Beast”

Or:

“It was the rock band that night, Ariadne’s Thread, & I nearly strangled my own breath, & awoke. I am still here, within the tangled gate. A whole world, here, not a simple maze with a beast, ahh. This is why the dancer-sacrifices never escape, have never returned But—

“Ariadne’s Thread? I looked at my costume, these were my clothes, styles I knew, how had I?”

Or:

“I led them to the tangled gate, as my father directed, these pretty boys & girls to be eaten by the Beast, but I knew what this meant.

“The Labyrinth was a portal, the Beast really a maw in the earth, where the dancers were consumed to emerge elsewhere, another time.”

Keep going:

“The Labyrinth is a portal, like the Red Bag. Um. It has existed in different forms in various times & places.”

“They breach time & space.

“They are guarded each one.

“There is a weakness.

“A guardian abandoned.

“She has a broken heart.

“The way through the Labyrinth is only partly physical. One drinks the elixir, one continues along in dreams.

“One Woods. Portals defying time & space. Co-location.”

Wait. Stop. Start again.

It’s that fucking dream of the white squirrel. I dream about him or I am him, I don’t know. But a fucking white squirrel. Do they really exist? Probably.

I’m a white squirrel dressed up as a fireman to win a role. Huh?

Yah. Again & again.

“Wake up.”

“Wake the fuck up.”

“Cmon, Jet. Wake up, big boy. Time to greet the day.”

Man, do I not want to greet the fucking day. As squirrel or man. Every part of me hurts. And I can make it stop. That's the shit of it. Any of these rotten fucking days I can wake up, roll out of bed, & make it stop.

I just gotta give up.

And I so don't want to.

So that's what she's after me about. Not a bad girl. I've had better & worse. That's how it is. It's like you even out in the end. Who stays with you. I think even odds is pretty good really.

But I'm too stupid to take them.

I get told all sorts of stupid shit about my options for staying in the Game other ways. I can teach others, share what I know from the inside even when I'm not able enough to play it myself anymore.

But I know I am able. I just need a decent team. Protect me when I'm putting myself out there—

My new team isn't very promising.

I'm trying to believe but—

The pain I feel pulls me one way—

The only two people I ever loved the other—

My father sold fire. My brother blazed. I worked the space between them. We balanced each other. It held together a long time. Now they're gone, long gone, & my best days are back there & still I'm getting up & doing this. I put on my equipment, I head out to the field. I try to make the plays. Some I make.

I need the right team—

“Get up, Jet. There's work to be done.”

I need a new everything

ii.

The radio station that's been on all night gets strange toward dawn, as the rest of the night does—

A song that begins in mild acoustic pleasure drives through a full horn blowout before every guitar in the world, it seems, brings it on back to the melodic quiet & gone.

And the words sung with wonder, almost humor:

*When the glaring lights have left
 When the music has slowed to smoke
 When there is sniff of good blood & then no more
 When touch brittles maybe to break
 When best taste is old & cold, hurts*

*The red bag, doorway, back to dreams
 The red bag, the path, come
 The red bag, come, trust, come here.*

He'd heard it before, didn't like it at first but the tune had grown on him over time, he supposed—

The hotel room was wonderfully dark, & the torso next to his sleeping & still. He tried to remember but then gave up. As the day moved along, it would come. He would know again.

He sniffed. Sweat, & something fuzzily resembling flowers. Breath deep, slow, steady. Why couldn't he remember? Was it getting worse? Had it always been like this? Was this someone important to him? Not a whore. Unless he'd paid one to sleep over. Would he do that? How did he know, more than anything else right now, that his memories would return later? Was it like this every fucking morning?

If she was dear to him, she would give him comfort & reassurance, would stay by him until he was good again. If not, well, she'd dress and go.

He noticed how still he was keeping, so as not to wake her. Then again, the radio was on, softly, & that hadn't waked her. And that song. It had been familiar.

He quietly felt below to see if he was naked. He was. But wait. Weird. A long scab on his side, fresh, ridged, like . . . a letter. Letters? His finger lightly traced them over & over. He'd carved a fucking message in his skin!

G . . . E . . . T . . . O . . . U . . . T . . . N . . . O . . . W

Get out now.

A flinch & she was on top of him.

Could have tossed two of her off but for the gun pointed at his temple.

"This is where you trust me."

"This is where I have no choice."

"You feel that fucking scab almost every morning."

"So you keep the gun close & wake up before I do?"

"Pretty much. Yes."

"Would you shoot?"

"Yes. I don't want to. But yes."

"And I have no reason not to believe you."

“No.”

“So how do we do this?”

“You put your hands flat under you, spread your legs slowly, & I climb off. Then we talk.”

“Sounds kinky.”

“You say that every time.”

“I believe you. All of it. Here’s me putting my hands below me. Legs spreading.”

She agilely half-tumbles, half-leaps off him & he’s sure her gun never stops pointing at his temple.

The song on the radio was a signal, got him up & through his motions, clicked something in his brain to start remembering.

He was not a captive but injured. He’d been a prisoner until recently, until she & others broke him out. She didn’t know about the scab until that first morning he’d tried to run.

“Who held me?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Who are you?”

She laughs. “A friend.”

The room is still pretty dark but she knows about this point he’s trying to see her. Wondering if they—

“Did we—?”

“You’ll remember later.”

He nods. She puts the gun away, the morning’s drama is over.

As we leave the hotel room, by a service elevator, as we move from vehicle to vehicle, an element of randomness in it we ourselves cannot fully know, making our way out of the city, but in no coherent manner, I begin to recognize you—

it’s your smell, though you’ve learned not to wear scent—you’d stop sweating familiarly if you could, only half a laugh—

but I know you—I know you in the way a man knows a woman who he’s possessed & who’s *possessed him*—your hands are light, betray your harsh quiet words, your almost constant low-level fear, they fly about weightless, gesture, point, dance, never still, flutter, flutter, & you see me see & flush badly—

“My hands. Every fucking day.”

I smile.

“Just once . . . just fucking once . . . my tits. A good look at my ass.” I look & look. Nod. Lick my lips. She smiles but it’s some wrong kind of smile. We possessed each other long & deep, but it’s no more, maybe not even recent over. I’m more blood-kin-loved by her now than love or want. She sees my eyes knowing more & more.

“I’m sorry. This is the best the doctors can do. We get you back fully for a few hours. Then you



fade & sleep.”

“And start again?”

“Why?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why go to this length? Why you? You don’t love me anymore. What kind of fucked-up obligation is this?”

She doesn’t flinch. “You’ve been there. On those ships up there. They fried half your brains trying to talk to you. Just talk.”

“Why you?”

She turns away. “You stopped loving me. You’ll get there in an hour or so. Right now you’re feeling what we used to have. It will cool. You’ll see.”

We’re in the back of a van, a couple of guys with guns who I can see are really looking away. They were warned about this but it’s still fascinating. Watch a man fall in & out of love in a couple of hours. Should be a line for tickets.

I pull her close to me. She resists, & doesn’t, like this has happened before.

“I don’t want it to cool.”

She nods. Lets my hand roam her lightly. Touching her face. Her look is stony but a sort of implosion to it too. Waiting. I try to think. Reason. What haven’t I tried? If I’m so fucking valuable, why isn’t there another way?

She rests against me finally. Lightly, finally. I make two fists. I let them loose.

When we arrive to where we’re coming, it’s a place of maps & machines. We’re not enemies with them up there, but they move with such immense power in their ships & in their beings, that they destroy us like feet walking on a lawn.

For awhile I pay attention as I am briefed in the basics, like I am every single day, it seems. I have been on their ships more than once, but the last time I tried peaceful contact, almost as a desperate move. This is what damaged me.

“And now we are trying to extract from you what they said”

I nod.

“That’s why she’s here. She brings you back sooner than any drug or method we have.” They seem apologetic.

I suspect there’s something more.

What am I missing?

She looks at me so fiercely I feel like I am going to drop. She takes my hand & the rest of them look away. She leads me to a room & shuts the door.

I look around. It’s familiar.

“Why?”

“It’s the last time we were together. In a room that looked like this.”

She dims the lights, leads me to the bed, never loses my eyes for a moment, undresses with a gravity I can hardly breathe.

Her body is slender & moves into my grasp strongly & submissively.

There is a picture on the wall opposite our bed & even in the dim I am drawn to it, a flash contained it her mouth on mine her mouth gnawing mine no resistance no words that glint something I know her breasts soft hard things in my hands she nudges me touch taste she knows my moves knows how to steer me but we steer each other for my pinkie finger is down low on her teasing teasing wetter wetter it's an egg that glint she rolls atop me shifts her hips to slide me in & I amaze that I am ready very hard for her for whatever this is it's an egg falling off a table & I nod as I did then & her hips claw me in deeper she moans sadly she cries as I thrust in harder & harder & harder it's a picture on the wall of the hotel room where I came to say goodbye to her—

*We cum together, it just happens, we cry & cum into each other, cry hard & it floods me, everything, all those disappointments over years, cry, cum, oh fuck shit fuck **fuck shit fuck shit***

Nothing. All of it.

We lay in grasp a moment then I nod. She lets me go reluctantly. This isn't a replay for her. She does this new with me every night. To help the cause? Save the planet. No. She dresses with her back to me, silently.

Not even close.

We come out of the room, the fake motel room set, & get to work.

I don't talk to her again for several hours. But I understand why as the night's incomplete work winds up, we are driven to some hotel room in the city, random changes of car, random changes of driver, & why we check in as husband & wife, down to the rings, & why we silently undress & get under our covers together & she crawls into my grasp & I begin to fade knowing it will all begin again tomorrow & my heart quaking under this knows the secret word to the ones plainly awed in my skin. Her. *Get her out now.*

iii.

I fell asleep, sad again, & looking far into the darkness I could see the cankerous shaft in me, its veins twisting maybe deep as blood, o yes, could see how it bore through, then, the most lost, secret sweets of then, barely a seed with limbs, unaware my unspent life to now, taking in all it could, a blind, unhappy, frenzied mortal feeding, consuming & yet not all, for there was an opposite, what?

One of them, several of them, in Global Wall's bed, have they been in one bed for long now? Every night? They take turns with him, sometimes all at once, yet there is a politics to their play, a campaign

"Emandia is real. Emandia is real."

Another shaft, of music, culminating music, a shaft of forest breezes, ocean waves, leaves, curling inward, open hands, even closed ones, the coming harmonies of mutual get & gain, putting on another's dream to understand, the pink & purple & green colors of want, & I wished, wish, seeing both plain now, to near the one & dismiss the other.

They keep me elevated all the time. Sing to me. Tell me the oldest corniest jokes in their sexy girlish voices. They wear loose thing to obscure the looks of others, & tight things close for me. They smile sexy. They smile innocent. They smile fun. They love me like this is all.

Emandia is real. *Emandia is real.*

They think they are telling me something new, or convincing me of something but I know about Emandia. The ships overhead, all that. And there was a time, back in the White Woods, in the middle of all that—

they sent me a communication, shaped like a girl of course.

Long blonde hair, very light blue eyes but with a dark sparkle in them. Wore many ragged bracelets on her arm.

I noticed her on the cameras, one night when I was monitoring activities. She didn't act like most of them, looking for a place in things, allies, information, any kind of escape. She sat on her bed in the dormitory & seemed full of ease, not coming or going. Aware, but not interested.

I accessed her file, there had been no struggle taking her, none. Like waiting? Not like some over the years, nihilist, suicidal, bored.

A plant? I wanted to know, & then break her. It would be a challenge.

She was still in her street clothes. Short jeans shorts, a rag of a crimson top, black bra exposed as part of it. Long blonde hair, lovely. A plant?

Brought to my second chamber, not the main one.

The soft vague lighting, the opiated air. No restraints. She walked in.

Pale pink painted nails. More bracelets on her ankles.

Stood. Saw the bed. Waited.

"Do you know why you're here?"

She nodded.

"Tell."

"It's not hard to figure."

Harsher: "tell"

"You want me"

"Is that all?"

"You get what you want"

"Are you afraid?"

She smiled, not trying to figure where I was.

"Tell."

"I have a message."

I was silent.

She sat on the edge of the bed. Pulled off her blouse. Shed her jeans. Black thong too. Patted the bed beside her.

"Tell"

Patted bed again.

I walked into the room after adjusting the air. Smart, I could tell she was breathing shallow, but she had to breathe. I had pills to offset the effects. Adjusted the lights too. She was

wavering a bit. Well-trained by someone but still a girl.

“Stand.”

5-2, maybe 5-3. Perfect torso. Tried to focus her eyes, her mind. Wavered.

I sat on the bed, patted my lap.

“Face me”

She straddled my lap. “Lean your head on my shoulder.” She did. Quickened heartbeat the only clue.

“The message.”

She started, the room was floating.

“The message. Whisper it softly in my ear now.”

She kept starting, adjusting, scared, waiting. Like someone moving her inner switches.

So I moved her long blonde hair away from her ear & whispered “They chose you for your lovely body & face”

She was wavering more & I needed her to stay steady. I very quietly taught her to breathe only through her nose, short sharp breaths, & she calmed. She was scared but my kindness held her steady.

I whispered her again. “They figured I’d fuck you & dump you somewhere. Once you’d delivered your message.”

She was half-clinging to me now. “The first will happen, not the second.” She gasped softly. “Did they know you’re a virgin?” She shakes her head into my shoulder. “You fooled them.” Nod. “Why?” “They said they would stop bothering me in dreams.” “Bad ones?” Nod. “Really bad?” “Some come true.” “How?” “Sometimes I see things that happen later. Sometimes I do things.” “They said if you brought me their message, it would stop?” She nods. “They trained you?” She nods. “And is this what you expected?” Shakes her head. “You thought you could handle it” Says nothing.

“Stand up”

She stands.

“Turn. Slowly.”

She does. Still a little wavering. Waits.

“OK, sit.” She resumes my lap almost eagerly.

I smell her skin closely. It’s clean. It’s the fresh people don’t have later.

“The message.”

She whispers me. “Emandia.” Her embrace is very close. She’s turned. “The dreams are far here, aren’t they?” Nods into my shoulder. “You want to stay?” Nods, slowly. “And?” Nods. My fingers slide up & unhook her bra. She is scared but free of the burden. So light feeling. She kisses me softly, closed mouthed, I take her fingers in mine & we slide her bra off together. We tangle in the bed & I slide a secret lever so the air heavies in another way, the light shifts, she won’t let me untangle, moans quietly for me, pulls me closer & closer, we lay side by side & her thong is off & her legs among mine & I am inside her in a rapid thrust so the pain, worst of it, is past quickly & then the thrusts are slow & slower, she learns to ride & rides, learn to ride & rides, I steer her to a very slow first orgasm then quick, & another & now for her ass, & in her mouth, & I make her laugh & when she wakes up later she has only her tender cunt to credit for the reality of me in this world as she looks around her bedroom & doesn’t feel scared, not at all, I’d taken care of it *so you see I got my news of Emandia awhile ago & know how they work but I have skills they don’t reckon & these are my girls you fucking bugeyed bastards—*

iv.

The film about her later emphasized her journey, the one she took after her death, traveling north, where all comes from, but they missed some of those last days of her life, what had been on her mind that set her travels after she died, how she'd found a focus, how beautiful it was, what she became that crossed over death easily & how she ended up on that beach—

It was chance, the kind that makes one believe thereafter that the universe has purpose & order or conversely that nothing important results from knowing the cause & effect of anything—

She'd been expecting answers all her life, & what had come had been a succession of words—ones that held her closely & taught her to pray, to dress, to speak, to act one way & not another—

Later words cajoling her skin, her fingers, her lips, words that softly manipulated & she to heed or resist—

But, really, nothing. What others found in her, answers, sate, she lacked for herself. It was disappointing, all of it, to dress, to smile, to pray, to feel the body move in her, moan, cry, & no, words less convinced, words not the flaw in it, simply poorly used—

She'd come to the museum that day because, in truth, she was unpeeling one more boy & he was stubborn.

He held her hand as they looked at a photograph of a half-destroyed room, broken windows, exposed earth below floorboards, a tipped piano in the corner—

Squeezed her hand as they looked at an oil painting of an egg falling off a table, balanced just so but likely to fall—

And the statue of the red bag, his breath was short as was her skirt, she expected it once more & this time to flush him out completely—

Then the room that changed things completely—

Water lilies. Violet light infused the picture, the sharp details few among the blotches,
oh

A cathedral, in watery air, there not there, a colorful thought, what?

Haystacks in dusk, raggedy fields of light, the boy was forgotten, when he reached for her hand with a word she looked unseeing through him.

Claude Monet. Was he famous? She didn't know anything about Art. She'd never cared. But this. It made no sense. There were no words in this. Painting titles that didn't matter. Where painted. When.

When the museum closed, she had to go. She walked out dazed into the city night. There were streets & traffic lights. She walked & walked.

Came to a great bookstore. It was a very tall castle of a structure, brown & grey stones, huge windows, she entered unseeing until she came to the art books on the fourth floor & found him again. The pictures. Her fingers moved across them like reading Braille. She longed to have known him, watched him paint, studied the hands that had made these, held his brushes, stretched his canvases, posed as his wheatstack or cathedral or water lily, soon her short skirt attracted a man, some man who sniffed & saw & sat near her & talked in words to her of these beautiful pictures & later to relieve the distress she now felt caring about something after long giving up, she rode his cock, didn't undress, wouldn't let him see her but he wasn't picky when her panties came off easily & rode him hard & moaned louder than he expected



& never opened her eyes, she wasn't here, she was riding him there, then, to him, not to fuck him, she was sure she'd have to wait in line for that, no, she was there along his long long days with many canvases in hand to catch the light as it moved & changed, *oh yes, she was now the light* as she grinded the man's cock now, his hands under her blouse, she kissed & bit, hard, too hard for fun & he would have retreated even from her tasty cunt but she squeezed him just right & rode harder *I am your light I am your light I am your changing light I am entering your eyes & shining your face o god o god o god o god o god*

& she came so hard he was injured, bent in ways how could such a slender girl but bent & it wasn't long then until the truck, *never saw her, I swear to almighty Christ I never saw her, never fucking saw her on my mother's grave—*

v.

The little heroes climbed together to the top of the mountain, helping each other up the harder parts of the path, admiring the trees & mushrooms & spider's webs along the way, encouraging each other that soon they would be on the very top, singing songs, & when they finally arrived at the summit, helping each other especially at the end when it was steep & rainy & the rocks hard to keep footing amongst, they smiled at each other & looked around at how it was up there & how little below could be seen & remarked to one another, "my what a cloudy day" & so it was that Mount Cloudy Day was named by these brave little heroes on that day—

vi.

As he remembers it better now than in awhile, his legs were going for a while. Not a thing anyone else would have noticed. Not the girls he fucked, two or three at a time toward the end. Did he have a quota to fill?

No, nobody could have known it. How the world around him was moving ferociously as he lagged. How he spent a lot of time looking up, for wings? A hot air balloon? Something.

The other option was a long dive down, not to return. Sure, maybe, possible.

Now, these years later, he sees the compromise he made, this chair he sits in. The world started making sense from his chair almost right away.

He'd told Jeremy most of this not long ago. A year, two? Not so long. Jeremy was 17, a gorgeous slender thing unaware his own possibilities. Nat was father enough, though not in blood, but he was Jeremy's template & deserved a word or two on this.

"So you could walk if you wanted to?"

"I didn't say that"

"Is it a punishment?"

"Not primarily"

Jeremy kneels down & hugs Nat, plainly, closely. The store is empty, nobody perusing its long aisles of magazines & newspapers, but it wouldn't matter. Their love is always present here, shines quietly.

Nat thought there might be more questions but there weren't. Jeremy was at college now, a day's drive away, their compromise, Jeremy would have stayed in Boston, Nat wouldn't have it.

“You’ll have more pussy in the next four years than ever again. You can’t be distracted by me”

“Nat!”

Nat was merciless.

“You fuck everything in sight you take a fancy to, that smiles twice & gives you a saucy wiggle. Don’t waste time chasing any of them. Let them knock at your door. Then wait. Make them knock twice.”

Jeremy nods & blushes. Well over six feet, easily handsome, he is small, tucked in a palm, when Nat advises, when Nat rants.

“Just make sure their hair is down & skirts are short if you bring them by the store.”

He nods. Nat enjoys looking. Does not flirt. Is no fool but requires a thorough glance at the goods of the ones Jeremy likes enough. Easy enough to arrange a good look since girls fall for Jeremy pretty hard.

Truth is, Jeremy would have pushed some of them wholly into Nat’s lap if it would have got him up & walking. Had more than one of them kneel before him if—

What about those two, Nat, walking in the door right now? Both of them blonde, the younger one scrubbed fresh as a daisy with a pink tint to her hair. Smells like sunshine shaped by a subtle hand—and the other? Would she be fun to hurt? A little? Maybe she would hurt you a little back, if you were lucky.

But the man with them, oh. Yes. Now he gets it. Tucks away his lustful play & waits.

Eventually they approach him in his lair back of the store.

“The game’s back there.” He points. Looking at the younger one. She studies his face for a moment, then turns to her companions. Christina & Kinley nod for her to decide.

“Through the Red Bag. The door.”

Maya blinks.

“You close your eyes, & imagine yourself on the other side of the door. Then you open your eyes.”

“And?”

“You’re there. The Tangled Gate.”

Maya is silent. They regard each other.

“This is what I do.”

“Give directions?”

Nat laughs, sees she is guileless. Points to the box in her hand.

“You’re the first to notice that box.”

She starts, looks at it. “How?”

“It’s OK, you’ll need it.”

“Do you know anything else we can use?” asks Kinley, stepping forward.

He frowns, thinks. “My life used to be simpler.” Looks hard at Kinley. “I’d sell newspapers & have really dirty fantasies about girls like these.” Pause. “Sometimes even have girls like these.”

“And now?”

He smiles, charming. “I sell papers, & give directions.”

“No more dirty fantasies?” smirks Christina.

He smirks back, in kind. Rolls his chair a couple of ways, to give them easy passage by him.

vii.

(When you walk through that door, or rather imagine yourself to the other side of it, maybe you will finally achieve the sense of a fibre knowing its weaving, no longer harried or just hanging on, knowing that everything needs you too & seeking to keep you your place, what a fine, happy knowing that would be, come on!)

(It's not so far, come on!)

viii.

Remember some things. This is the lost or obscured purpose of the Tangled Gate. You will enter as a group, pretty dancers offered as a sacrifice to the Beast within, but I alone know what you will find. I know the ways within better than all, I am the one the Architect gave the threads to.

The Architect loves me but cannot say it directly to me. He watches me dance with the rest, watches how I bend & move, does not know I move to please his notice.

The stories of what happened in the Tangled Gate are wrong. A sort of grand misunderstanding. Distortions & lies & stupid guesses.

I went with the Hero because the Architect would not claim me to my father. He came after me in a desperate flight, & brought his son who wanted me too & *would* have gone to my father with the Architect's intents! Not a bad boy & I was sorry he died. I . . . no, not that sorry. If not for him, the Architect would have come for me. On that island where I was left.

Not because the great Hero spurned me. I knew five minutes after I left with him that I was wrong. The other girls had a phrase: prick on a stick. They preferred that really. Suck it, fuck it, empty it one way or another, & the rest of it for you. The money, lands, whatever. Just don't sell short picking your prick.

He wanted me in his harem. They were all returning with him to the mainland, still not knowing what had happened.

Every seven years sacrifices had to be made to the Beast, a group of boy & girl virgins, trained as dancers, to be consumed.

Not this time. Because of me.

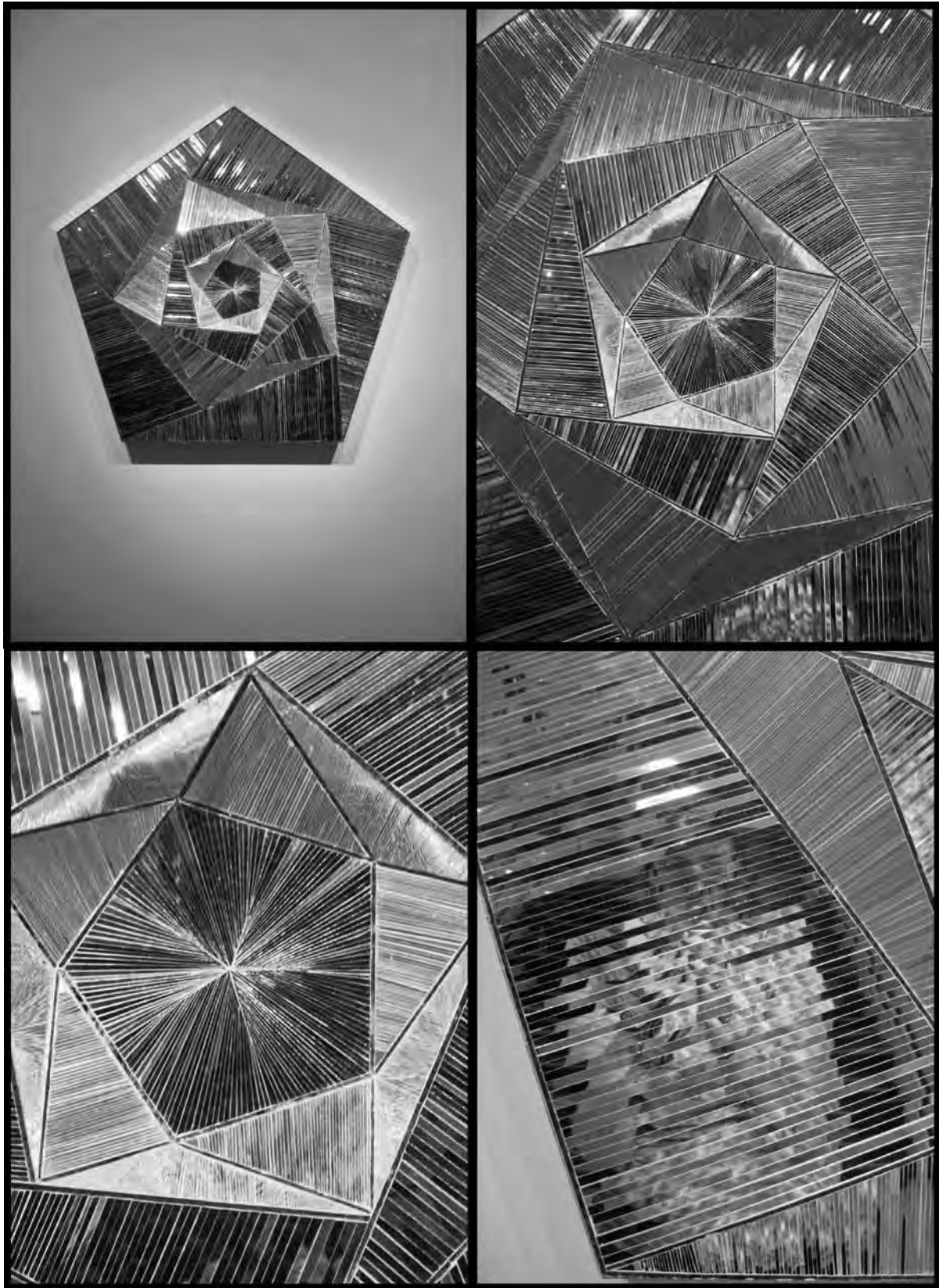
The previous time I had been a child, I had watched half-understanding what unfolded. I wasn't sure but I didn't like it.

Being the princess meant my own father indulged me. Living on an island limited my world of interests.

In short, the Tangled Gate caught my fancy. The King ordered the Architect to indulge all of my questions.

He did, with a smile. And I will say that I believed at first it was all necessary somehow. But, eventually, no, I determined to know better.

My mother told me little but when I first bled she gave me a talk to make up for the rest.



“Don’t lead with your heart, it will blind you.”

“What then?”

“Sniff.”

“Sniff?”

“When boys & men near you, learn to sniff. Let it lead your thoughts. Use the rest, but lead with your sniff.”

We never talked like that again but I used her advice. And learned: the Architect & his son both wanted me, the son more blatantly.

A wispy, arrogant boy, not quite a prick on a stick, but other girls fancied him. Rouged lips, lower cut clothing, tight, he consumed but kept me in view.

The Architect said nothing. Practically only looked at me in his deepest dreams. But he looked, he wanted, with the hunger of a man, not a boy.

I made him teach me about the Tangled Gate. How & why.

A Beast in there, & it seemed this Beast was the issue from my mother coupling with a bull, wearing the lady bull contraption the Architect built for her.

I laughed. “None of that is true.”

He started, nearly looked at me. Rough, flirty costumes? Not me. I was cruel.

“My mother fucked a mythical bull & had a half-man, half-bull beast that you locked up in the Tangled Gate built at the order of my father?”

One sniff told me his mind was licking inside my thighs, yearning to make me moan & release entirely to him. Still he was able to talk. *Ah beautiful.*

“Why would you doubt what I’ve told you?”

“And the sacrifice of virgins by the mainland? From a petty insult?”

He was biting my thigh, my ass, hard, owning me, hurting me to make me pay attention. *Oh yes.* I wasn’t even looking at him. I was at his spyglass that looked into the paths & complexities of the Gate.

“Tell me the truth. Or don’t you respect me enough to?”

He flinched. I think it was then I realized we loved each other. As improbable as this was, as much as not a word had been said of the sort. I was his only pupil & I spent all my days visiting him in his tower offices. I had seen all the maps. I knew the ins & outs better than anyone else.

“Tell me.”

He shook his head. He was scared. Not looking at me, studying a map, I was in his arms & he was scared.

“You didn’t build it.”

Silence. “No.”

“The Beast isn’t my mother’s son.”

Quietly. “No.”

“Does my father know?”

“No. I came ahead from the rest when we left the mainland. I told him later it would serve as a prison, an intimidating legend against those who would follow. He nodded. Trusted me.”

And does now with his daughter. *Ah yes.*

“And the Beast?”

“It’s his.”

“He lives in it?”

“No. I think it’s how he travels between worlds & times.”

“A portal?”

None of this made sense to me but I knew my father only cared about eventually taking back the mainland. He seemed to confuse the Architect with a necromancer who had turned what he once claimed was a simple, elaborate prison into something else. Fine. Saw my interest. Better than boys for now. Saving me for a strategic pairing.

And the Hero? The sacrifices? The Architect didn’t know what had happened to them the first time.

“They never came back?”

“No.”

“They were payments to my father for an insult?”

“Anything to keep him here.”

So here they come again but this time among them a Hero.
I sniffed. I knew.

I convinced the Architect to help them.

“If they survive, they can tell us about it. The Beast, what happens in there.”

He didn’t like it. I leaned in, breathed quietly. I waited.

“A thread.”

I nodded.

Then he showed me the box. A box of spooled threads. Different colors. I looked at him as he was gnawing my nipples so hard I winced into his eyes.

“Which color?”

“The White”

“And the rest?”

“There are different paths through, to different places.”

Undress me, hurry, I want to please you, I am ready, I want your hard heat in me, your desire so long past ready, take me, consume me, I will let you, & let you, & let you, & then I will take some too.

“When you lead them out—”

“I’m not going in?”

“When they’re coming out, I want you to go with them to the mainland. Leave here. Be with the one among they concealed to save the lot.”

I looked at him as my clothes immolated, as my torso fused to him in pain & love. I loved him. I was his. There was nothing else. No other truths to know.

“Why?”

“Just go. Go with him. There will be war & your father will lose.”

“You know?”

He nods at me. “He doesn’t listen.”

His voice falters. His love for me cracks open, plainly. “Go with him & direct him take you far. Far!”

So now you understand more than you did. I went because the Architect sent me away with the Hero & the dancers. The Hero considered me just one more pretty among many he had

liberated that day. With *my* thread.

I hurt him when he came for me. The Architect had given me a word when we parted. He was a necromancer in some ways, I suppose. I hurt the Hero when he came for me in my bed.

He left me on that island with some of his harem.

And the Architect continued to follow me, & took his son, who died in their flight. And this loss took my Architect from me thereafter.

I returned to the Island finally, eventually, & I took up my residence in the tower offices, & eventually I found the box of colored threads where the Architect had hidden them for me. Perchance I return.

Now you know all, Maya. Now you know.

And one more thing to tell. I will search these paths & corridors, I will roam time & space & dimensions, until I find him, for he isn't dead. He despairs his son but he lives still. *He loves me*. I will find him. I sniff & know this true.

ix.

Maya nods. She & the girl look at each other an extended moment.

"I'm looking for someone I love too. Someone I long for."

"Stay close by your friends, there are many kinds of puzzles & traps in here."

Maya nods, wants to ask more, does not. Realizes as she fades from this moment that it happened entirely while passing through the Red Bag into the Tangled Gate. She wondered if the others had gotten any warning or message.

(Christina found herself in a lovely simply adorned hotel room, her hair much longer & braided, as perhaps some lost day, & she is waking to a chilly room, a colder day outside, & it is her last day living here. And she is sad because this has been her home for years, she had come here from far away, a place lost, loved ones, questions—

(She has only a blue bag to travel with, its few articles in waterproof cases, & her departure is a matter of great sadness in the . . .

(Pensionne? Is that it? Yes. The Pensionne "for those lost" reads its sign as well. And she is leaving. Leaving countless faces & friends, high & low hours she has known here, to return far, miles & years crossed, to find him, he is there, through the Tangled Gate, still writing her songs in letters she no longer receives, the songs are how he keeps a part of her still in Clover-dale—the songs—what?—)

Kinley stands in a tower high above the Tangled Gate & a man behind him is talking & talking—

"I can't let her go in now, I can't. She's not ready. I will lose her. I love her. I will lose her."

And another voice. "You will lose her anyway. And, in truth, she isn't yours to lose."

"I will send her away with the rest."

"It will do no good. She spikes your blood. You will be dragged wherever she goes."

"But she will be safe."

"For awhile, yes."

(Christina feels the ocean pull her in deep as she leaps from the boat that brought her this close to the Island. She swims & swims, it is a long way, the blue bag weighs at her, tied around her waist, she swims strongly & a bit desperately. She swims until the rocks pull her in, accept her from the sea, if reluctance in all, she lands, she lays wet & breathing hard. Back.)

x.

Suddenly we come to & look around. I count. Two legs. Two hands. Two girls with me. My Christina. The other one. Maya.

This is about her, isn't it?

They're looking at me, Maya is directly, as she does, Christina slant & sneaky, as is her way.

I nod, the man, knowing. Shit. Speak slowly, hoping words invent themselves.

"We're here. I think this is what we've been coming to. This is what Wytner, Cloverdale, the White Woods, all of it, protects. This is the power."

Maya starts to wander away. I'm tempted to clap or whistle her stay. Desist.

"Hey" says Christina, reading my stress. Maya pauses. "Stay close." Christina smiles. Means it. Maya looks, nods. Waits.

Before us is a fountain, it is pointedly what one encounters on crossing the Gate. Its waters look fresh, enticing.

Christina kneels, I start. "Wait." She looks at me, waiting. I've been chasing you all my life, it seems, & here you are, & in my mind I am still chasing you. You wait some more.

"Kinley."

"It's here for us to drink but I don't think it's plain water."

They both look at me.

I make a leap. "Iconic Square." Words. "It's dosed."

Maya is curious now. "Will it hurt us?"

"No. It may actually be to help acclimate . . . er . . . visitors here. Smooth out the strange."

Christina almost laughs. I love her for the wrong & right reasons right now. Protect her, protect her, is that what I want to be doing, *protect her, protect her*—

She dunks her head in, impatient. Drinks. Her way of flirting. Maya looks at me, questioning. I nod. She drinks scoops in her hand. Drinks deeply.

I wait. Wait some more.

Christina nears me, I flinch.

"Relax. I'm clothed."

"We came here to free you."

"We're helping Maya too."

She's relaxing, smiling. Acclimating, whatever fucking word. Maya too. Why am I hanging back?

"All in, Kinley. I don't think it works otherwise."

I say nothing.

“Or you can wait here for us? You don’t have to come.”

I nod. Gesture & nod.

She wets my lips. Kisses me. Lets me drink from her hand. She smiles gently. Maya sits with me too, on the edge of the Fountain, they sit with me & I join them slowly. Thinking to myself: *Eleusis, sex, love, Eleusis, Clover-dale, Wytner, Red Bag, Eleusis—*

Gradually, I cohere. Start to look around, up. The sky is a kind of chalky grey, daytime, but not much else. No feel to the air, not cold or warm right now.

This fountain, yes, I’ve seen it before. Or very close. A deep basin on the edge, but within a complication of design. Find it hard to explain it to myself.

“Kinley”—Christina’s tone is playful. Waiting. Briefly I remember her body, its terrifying hungers. I nod within, stand.

“Well, we’ve drunk. So we’re in.” I look around. “Two distinct ways to go. Left or right.”

They look, they walk a little each way. They wait. Not usually girls without their own strong opinions, still, they wait for me.

Now I’m imagining them both nude & this pleases me. Maya looks tight, full of young demons to be broken.

They giggle. Shit. Telepathy. Or just girls being girls. Who the fuck can tell? I’ll have to keep my mind more focused. Yah, um.

xi.

—On that beach, sure, film it, leave me be—thank you—

I didn’t find you—not there, not here either—I wanted to ask you something—something important—I don’t know how I’d word it—maybe just bare my breast at you & growl—& know you’d know—

I sit in the waves finally—you tell me otherwise—you push your cameras right into the waves with me—ok then—but why follow me this far?

I don’t know more than you—I know this much—touch breast, growl—I remain in the waves until these leave me too—

“Can I offer you a towel?”

“Don’t you prefer a pose or a nude scene?”

He laughs. “You’re lovely. I haven’t earned it.”

“Is that how it works?”

“Most times, I suppose.”

“What’s your film called?”

“**RemoteLand.**”

I laugh.

“Silly, I know. I discovered its title in a dream of all places.”



"Dreams are a place?"

He stands. His limp flashes briefly in my mind. Ahh.

"It was a beach like this. There is a cow chained to the sand. A woman, you, are watching from over the hill, behind that small hill."

"What then?"

"Something emerges from the sea & the cow cries out, is swept back into the water."

"A monster?"

"I'm not sure. Something."

"Do I—does she—do anything?"

"No. You return the next night. You are unable to resist. You wish to be swept into the sea too."

I nod. This is why I've come.

"But—"

"But—?"

"He doesn't wish to consume you. He needs your help, will trade you favors."

I nod.

"He will love you as your husband no longer does."

"I don't have a husband."

"No. But you belong to a man."

Ahh. "In return?"

"Hm? O yes. In return you will let him enter your world via a story."

"A story?"

Nod.

"And where did the title come from? Where in this dream?"

"Oh, yes. It was a poem I wrote upon waking. I sat up, disoriented, grabbing around for a pen or pencil & a sheet.

*Neither death nor dream are truly
a remote land."*

"So you shortened it."

"I liked it better that way."

"Makes less & more sense both."

"Yes. I think so."

"Shall we then?"

"Then?"

"Film the scene?"

"You . . . would?"

"Here we are. It will give me a reason to button my blouse, comb my hair."

He nods. "You prefer I do neither?"

He nods again.

I smile. "Do you paint too?"

"No. But I can learn."

There are other stories to how she became the Gate-Keeper's lead actress in **RemoteLand**, but I prefer this one. I like the scene in the film which follows best. A few, increasingly rare few,

will keep part of it.

xii.

The next scene is important to every version of the film, even if it is not in all of them. It isn't.

She climbs to the tall castle on the taller hill, & remembers her father the King would roam its length in the weaker hours of the night.

"They're all out there"

I was small, sleepless too, in love with the night's shiny stones, musical patterns of birds in flight.

"Who?"

"The ones who would take all this. Our heritage & home." The Island seemed very quiet as he spoke on. I would embrace him as he said, "There are other weapons. Stranger strengths."

She looks at me. "Am I I or is she she?"

"Hm?"

"First or third person?"

"Does it have to be one or the other?"

"Shouldn't it be?"

"If you wish."

"Don't you?"

"Turn. In profile."

"OK."

My camera is still learning her. Strawberry blonde hair. My camera is used to the brunette. I insist. Green eyes too. And she is more slender.

"I began filming with you."

"OK."

"I couldn't with the other."

"Who?"

"My camera struggled with her & it was hard."

"Why?"

My camera begins to forget & flow with you, slowly, in dusky hours, but then you learn what to do more & more we roam your body in film & it is nicer & nicer in time—

I return to these places now & they are empty. I return & find everything I knew then decaying & silent. I am trying to understand.

He places cameras at every angle.

"What are you doing?"

"What?"

"Why so many?"

"To get all of you."

"You won't."

"I can try."

"You won't."

"I will try."

I nod.

I try to understand. The waking dreams would push me from my bed & I would come to my dancing grounds to . . . escape them? Communicate them?

"Which?"

"I don't know."

"It's your film."

"I'm the Gate-Keeper."

"It's not your film?"

"There's more to it."

I nod.

"Shall I continue?"

I nod.

I come to the dancing grounds & I let the waking dream move through me, move my feet through the set stones & raked sands, I sing its pictures & noise.

I am remembering the book he showed me, of various patterns, we would study them together like a language—

"Then others would come"

"Others?"

"In his court. They would come to my dancing grounds."

"To dance too?"

"To spy on me. To show off for him. It made them jealous my hold on him."

"You were the Princess!"

"One did me better. My friend but that didn't matter. She took to him & he was helpless."

She would dance every morning, soon after I had finished, & dressed, & disappear the remain of the day. My mother's witches & enchantresses & voodoo damsels could not conjure a response to that one—

"Who plays her? The brunette?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Just no."

"Can I choose?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"My film."

"My tits & ass you're filming."

"No."

"Really?"

"Really."

I agree. I'm glad. We're setting ground rules here. Good he's no pushover.

But I'll find other ways to break him, & beat her.

xiii.

"Cut!" says the Gate-Keeper.

"Cut?" she asks. Demands. Cut?

He nods. Smiles. "I know. Your ass. My film."

Offers me his hand, we walk to a bench aside the Dancing Grounds.

Tells me to wait. Returns with some clothes. Not fancy but I like them. He selected them himself.

I stand before him, shed my clothes, dare him a little. There is a pause. A passage of air.

He dresses me. There is humor & affection in his touch, his movements. A long shirt, black tights. No underwear. He insists black panties. Smiles. I weaken. He *must* paint.

Now dressed for him & strangely me too, I sit on the bench with him. He considers me. I wish my shirt was low cut.

"What?" I snap.

"You came when I needed you but I've explained nothing."

"The brunette knew?"

"No more about her," he says quietly. "I loved her. She left. The story continues."

"If she returns?"

"She won't."

I start to argue but, again, don't. He's not gaming me. Such the rare man who doesn't. I'm nearly forgetting.

I nod. "Explain to me then."

"It's a film but . . . isn't."

"You know I'm dead."

He laughs & for a moment I am afraid.

"It's not that easy," he says softly.

"Dying?"

"Remember my film's title? The dream?"

I nod, shivering.

"You were traveling a long time to reach the sea."

Nod.

"Do you remember any of it?"

"No."

"What do you remember?"

"The museum. Those pictures."

"Anything after?"

I shake my head.

"But you travelled, & you're in the surf & I'm filming you."

I nod. He takes my hand. Not prelude to a kiss or a grope or even an embrace. Just my hand.

“My origins are remote. And I’m not sure of everything. But this island is one of my sets.”

“How did I come to a . . . island?”

“You swam. From the mainland.”

“Is that far?”

“Many miles, I think.”

“Then how?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe you’re part fish,” barely smiling.

“So this is the land of the dead where you film?”

“No. This is my set.” He stands, not wishing or needing to explain more.

I nod.

He considers me. “I’ll assign you King’s consort.”

“Assign?”

He nods. “You’ll seduce him over time. Slowly drive him to war with the mainland.”

I stand. “But.”

His face softens for a moment. “Nights not with him you’ll spend with me of course.”

I want to say but don’t. *Really want to say* but don’t.

Then do. At least a little. “But why were you filming me before? Did I do badly?”

He turns to the water. “They’re still arriving. I had to block my shots.”

“They?”

Now his look is upon me. “When I don’t like the shot, I re-shoot it. When I don’t like the scene, I re-write it. When I haven’t cast correctly, I re-cast. You’re not the Princess. You’re the demon who destroys the King.”

“Why?”

“You’re not Maya. You’re not Christina.”

“Who are they?”

“I’m not sure yet.”

“I’m the demon.”

“Yes.”

“Who plays the King?”

He looks at me. His face red now. “You mean who do you fuck?”

I flinch inly but simply nod.

“It doesn’t work like that.”

“Do I really?”

“Fuck him? Yes. Many times. You cause him to lose his Queen, his daughter. His son dies in service to you.”

“Why?”

“That’s the story.”

“Re-write it. You said you could.”

“No. The story is the story.”

“But.”

Now he is angry. A man. This I can deal with.

“Can I say no?”



"You came here, to me. I'm not sure how it works, because each time is different, but you came here, & I had to decide."

"I'm not Princess material."

"No. You're angry, vengeful, in pain."

"Where's my script?"

"I told you what to do."

"What is my choice in this?"

He considers me quietly. "Do you wish to sleep in my bed some nights?"

I say "of course" with a force of desire only those paintings had ever made in me.

"You are the Princess's dear friend. You come to dance when she is done. Others come but the King watches you. You let him watch, perform for him."

"May I think of you?"

"I expect it."

"Where will the cameras be?"

"You won't see any."

"But, what about before?"

"Those were test shots. I have what I need."

"When will I see you?"

He smiles & takes my hand, kisses my fingers, touches them to his cheek. Points me toward the Castle. A flirty smack on my ass sends me on my way.

xiv.

Wait, you say. Wait! She isn't his leading actress? The demon is not the star of **RemoteLand**, you add.

The Gate-Keeper knew what he was doing. Knew Maya & Christina would pass through but not stay. What he needed from them was to establish the story, then she'd step in.

He needed to humble her some too. Her arrogance had gotten her a far piece, then failed her, then led her to this Island when most others would have nodded & let it go.

He needed to imbue this film with fanatical reserves of power, build its frame from hurricane & skybursts, his film with the endurance of centuries, adjust when need be, but keep along, with fantastical thrust, the minutes, the years, this story must live wild & varied in men's hearts, they must wonder at it, & not know, wonder & not know—

It must survive his times of absence, far far absence, while he pursued answers & allies—

Long before film was conceived, the Gate-Keeper began making the most important work of Art ever made—this film would defend the world against those who had constructed it & would one day move on, abandoning it—

Where was I from? Was I other than a man? I was from times long from here, I was indeed a film-maker. One of the first. How did I come here?

It was a man I met. He said he dreamed me. Dreamed & freed me.

No, none of that explains. Yes, she shall be my lead actress. But first, Maya, Christina.

She comes to me that first night. Learns which rooms in the Castle are genuine rooms, which are sets.

Having done what she could, she slips from the scene to find me. This one time, I let her.

She drives a kiss into me, her panic, her want, her half-belief she loves me as she'd loved the painter in his pictures, will not relax, has me down there in a painful grip will not loose, I tug, tug, & am inside her, deep, she gnaws at me & pulls me deeper in, smiles rawly at me, I am paralyzed as she rides me harder & harder, I am losing, losing, she lets a little & we ride together, mercy's sweetness, her kiss laps at me, more & more gently & I cum into her long & slow as she smiles long & slow—so slow—

So now you know.



To be continued in Cenacle | 85 | June 2013

* * * * *



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Eight

*"When did it matter the most?
When I smiled at another & believed."*

xv.

I take a hand of each, insist. For Christina, like all I do, it's a sexual act. For Maya, despite my revealed thoughts, it is safety. But I know none of this will do enough.

"What, Kinley?"

"I can't protect you here. Either of you."

They huddle near me, not scared, but not wishing to part.

"Kinley, tell me what you can. Tell us."

We sit, now. I have to think. They crowd close. They are shielding me, giving me time.

"I was young but I had this idea. It's like one world gets made, tried out, fails, & gets abandoned for a new one. It happens over & over."

"Is it true?"

"Later I tried to trace my idea. A book, a movie? A TV show?"

"What was it?"

"I'm not sure. I wondered if I dreamt it. I'd written it down, but just a few pages in a small notebook."

"Then?"

"I don't know. I neared it again."

"Neared it?"

"Kinley—"

"It's why we're here. It's why we are with Maya."

"Is it why you & me?"

"No."

"Why's that then?"

"I love you. I always have. I didn't conceive you in a book or a dream, Christina. I saw you & the world changed. I did a lot of things wrong on the way but it's that simple."

They giggle. Both of them. They are the most potent beings I've ever known, more so together, & my raw blunt confession of love makes them blush & giggle.

"Is Dylan like that?"

"No. He's younger."

"Oh."

"Still."

"Yah."

Then before I can think to say they are both all over me, Christina sharing some, which she usually would never, Maya letting me a little, which she enjoys despite her skittishness—

"Someone tried to make you"

"Tried."

"I'm glad he didn't."

She nods, lets me, moans a little when Christina does too, eventually we all calm down again.

We're good, all of us, the little bit of tension is gone. We are bound to each other, in different ways, but strong, good. They wait for me, listen.

Kinley looks at me, straight, hard.

"Are you sure?"

"It's just an old myth"

"Nothing just in anything you do."

I nod.

"You'd commit us?"

"Yes."

"The rest too?"

"Thinking on it."

"Is this climax?"

"It's next."

He nods.

"The myth plays through here. We see what happens."

He nods.

This book has arrived at the Tangled Gate, has skirmished in & around it, now it's time to re-invent both.

I watch a blizzard through an all-night market window. A man shovels snow from a bus stop. Trucks pass. I think: 1607 pgs & 6½ yrs to get to this page, this line. 20some pgs a month. 2/3rds pg for approx 2200 days. Plus 480 poems. And other stuff. Big truck goes by. Taxi. Two shovellers now. More chatting than shoveling. Electric juice near. Soda. Hat. Polly iPod. Thoughts Pad. Yo La Tengo on Polly. *Cenacle* 83 uncorrected copy. Litter. Cars buried. Still traffic. Buses. A breath. A passage. Here goes.

[To continue but not yet begin: the Tangled Gate has always been, whatever it may be, it is before, it is because, & it is arrival. World emerges from it & arrives back in the end.]

[What does that mean? It means worlds come & they recede but the Gate is what creates them &]

lets them decay.

[Is this true? It's true enough. It's what I believe. That sounds like I'm hedging a little & I am. I'm not one to think the whole story easily told, or the blame easily & rightly laid.]

[I picked up this manuscript at this moment because it's about to launch into a whole big myth-making mess & a word needed to be said. A protest.]

[I won't name myself now but I'll say this much. Even within this story about the Gate there is dissent. Questions. A sense that it may all be true, or some. Or none. Probably some of it.]

[My beliefs tell me the Tangled Gate is all, but I've been wrong before. I'm fervent, & I'm doubtful. It's a good way to be, I recommend it. The mythology is appealing, but, it could be wrong.]

Are you done?

For now.

Do you understand this better than anyone else does?

I didn't say that.

What then?

Go tell your myths.

You object.

I believe. I dissent.

Are you done?

For now.

The stage is lighted by a very few candles, the audience is excited but behaves. The moments before a show are tense, hard to say why, it's like the moments before love-making when the air around the lovers tightens & clears, & the best, most natural thing in the world—music or love-making count as this—eases to begin, should be happening always, doesn't seem to be—

The strum of acoustic guitar, the strum of electric joins, drums barely swished, bass guitar the deep stones of the sea, & keyboards the froth of waves, the sound does get more like ocean, bang slap of water hitting wood, the electric glare of a late year's sun, the pushing back of the curtain to reveal: more ocean, more sunlight, & a small boat bobbing—

(i.)

The rocks are straight ahead of you, & you feel like you can make them, the sea is cold but you love the sea & it loves you & there is a reluctance to let go between you, & why? Why. Those rocks are home, the very edge, reach them & you land home. Don't you? Is this sea, these choppy pulling waters, home too, home instead, home in a longer ago way, deep in you as the salty blood throughout your swimming torso, which & what would be right then?

You keep swimming & eventually touch one rock & then the next, pull, struggle clumsy, more, climb, stumble, cry a little, this sea is not just what surrounds home, or a passage to elsewhere, this sea is live with you, in little many ways half felt & known.

The Island has always been here, as this world has always been here, which is to say, long but not forever. Maybe an idea of the Island in the idea of a world, coupled with an idea of always, of time.

You lay on the rocks, breathing, choking, regretting, there's too many thoughts & body resists, cries breathe, cries rest. Croons rest & all becomes easier. Body knows, nearly always knows.

With ideas of time come stories, easily, & questions like who & where & why. Questions of the mortal, the self-aware. Who am I? What do I do? What will happen next? What will happen to me?

Who am I? What do I do?

To stay here is to forget some things, somewhat. Easy step forward is a step away too. Faces, what they meant. Words. Agreements? Yes. maybe.

Think, Christina. Think! He said we should know, deserve to know. Walk the bricks of deep myth. He fucking talks like that. It turns you on about him, then after awhile less. At least he's not too—

Ah. The other one. Maya. He does but not too much, not more than you do. That's OK. She's looking for the boy, & her friends, & I suppose what she is.

Stand up, assess your goods. Nothing broken. Still hot. Ha. Blue bag. He said don't open till you have to. Not when or why. He didn't know, which bothered him. Fucking Kinley. I something you. I do.

I won't see either of you in the usual way for awhile. Bricks, deep myth, all that.

Human myth is about what it means to be human, questions, suggestions, warnings. The best of it nothing to a tree, or a white squirrel. The best of it looks around as much as deep in, & comes to no answers, maybe music. Gestures to look up, listen, sniff.

Human myth is a tool to navigate the labyrinth, a thread, or maybe just a walking stick & a torch. Even deep myth still reeks of skin & bones. A bi-pedaled skeleton. Beseech the world for better myths? Explain your question to a rock.

I wasn't sure of this. Maya wasn't either. But it was clear that the princess lived two lives, on the Island until she left, & her exile & return. So we would share her, younger & older. Kinley the architect, chasing us across years & time. Getting all the ass. I wanted him to enjoy this idea more. A little more.

He wants into the Tower. He wants maps of the Tangled Gate. He felt us getting lost in it. Interested by it too much. Enjoying it. After awhile not even moving so much. Just wrapped around each other.

Shit & fuck, I enjoyed that. Kinley's hardness, endless need, his vicious need to be

gentle, to not break, Maya's skittishness & what dragons below. What beautiful dragons.

He used his mind to recall us & even this didn't work so well. We'd come here without a plan, the Gate would consume us unknowing. It served to command, but otherwise enjoyed a perpetual dreaming.

Kinley moved us with his incredible mind onto some solid ground. Not cohered, but more so. He reached into his own mind to find stones & rocks to build with. Maya & I had less so we just clung to him, we urged into his thinking, fired it, protect us by seeking to know, fire heart, fire mind, fire heart, fire mind—

His ideas seemed to be that we had to start with the old story, learn what it really was, who they were, become them, remember them, play through them

He didn't pretend to know the answers of it, but he had been coming to this place all his life, I knew this, Maya had learned it, we had come together with him here—

The Gate let us put on these guises, led me to those waters where I had left them behind to swim to the Island, it was a long swim & I had to forget who I was to traverse the necessary water, & even now I feel this going again, it's going to be why I'm here even when I do not remember anything else.

The Castle is up there. The Dancing Ground. The Tower. The Tangled Gate. All I knew & I've returned now. The beach. There it is. The beach.

We can lose years or lives to myths, one or another, several, successively. Colorful, compelling explanations for why the stars shine & how the heart breaks. Assurances that men have always suffered, always endured. The press to continue. To live lives that mean as much. New myths. New dreams. Look back. There's how.

Can I be you & me both? Can I understand what compelled you & still act of my own loyalties & loves? Do I have to forget all that I am?

No. I decide.

"No," I say aloud. Nothing seems to listen but I know this is the Gate & all listens here.

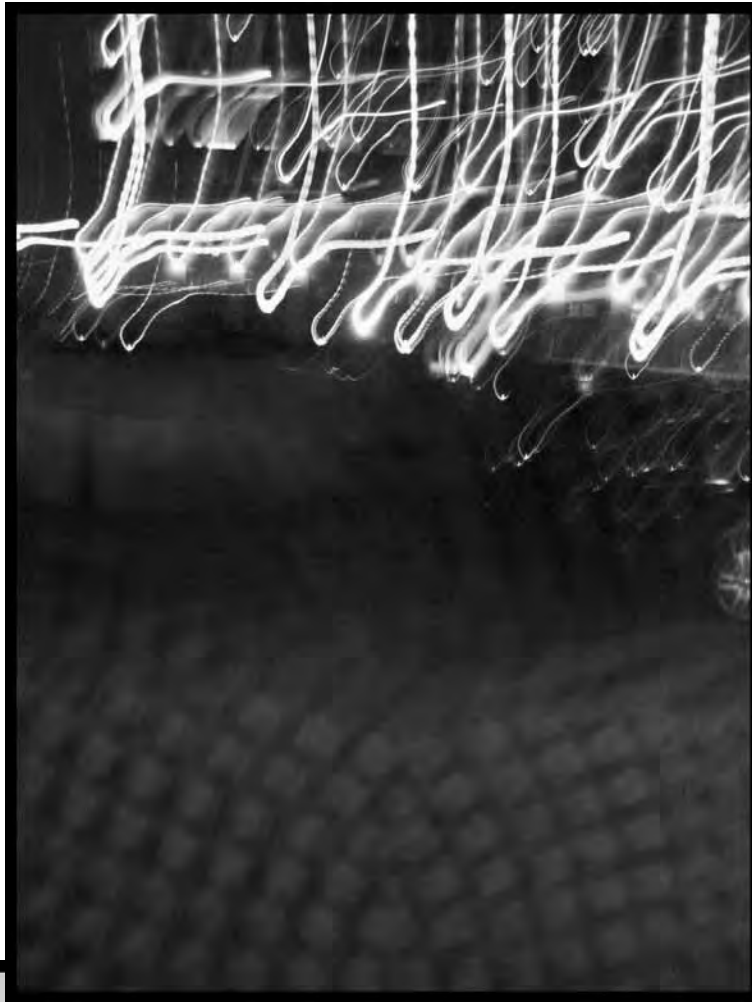
"No" I repeat, for myself, for it to stick.

I will be you. I will know you. But I will not lose myself in this.

I don't think Kinley or Maya will either.

(ii.)

She begins to recognize me more as we travel on. She calms. She . . . begins to grow younger.



I have no claim on her & less than none. I was sent to retrieve her by the one who had been her master & was no longer.

I wasn't what she had known then either. A jock among his crew, trying to fuck whoever the rest hadn't. There were fewer pretty quick. The prettiest ones first, most of them. A couple were always too scared or religious or whatever fuck.

Then the rest. The freaks. The eggheads. The ones a little top or bottom-heavy.

Your sister Ashleigh was a prize none of us could score, Jazz. She didn't know what she wanted. Carelessly sucked a few cocks & got a reputation. Let it be. She was like that. I found myself liking her more than those fuck-me short skirts & halter tops. She neared me too, but only so much.

She could smell cherry juice on me & it was true. I specialized. I was patient. The others said I was smarter & went slower.

What I had was an older sister, a room next to hers, a radiator that spilled her phone calls into my room.

So I listened. Most of it was obvious. The boys called to beg & tease. The girls to gossip, compare notes.

I just fucking listened. I'd jack off to my collection of porn, calm down, turn out the lights, wait.

They liked little touches & gestures. A captured look. Flower petals in their locker. Conversation that wasn't boasting or sexual. Even stupid shit. TV shows.

They listened to the guy's words in ways he didn't know. Listened, in, around & through.

I didn't get it all. Her phone calls & what I saw as I got to high school too didn't much match up.

But I tested things out. Worked my mind out to speak not just say. I made sweet gestures even when I wasn't on the prowl. Just to test.

They noticed. Like a pack sharing one deep lasting sniff, they noticed.

For a long while I took advantage. They had what I wanted, offered it, more or less, I took. I enjoyed.

Your sister was the first one I stumbled with. She let me have some, liked a little begging but no, it didn't go where I wanted. She had a look, it undid me.

And I tried to bury myself of it. You wonder about that night? I wanted it over, if I had to share her with the team. I didn't care. You were the bonus. For the long wait. I didn't think you'd elude some fun.

It all sounds stupid. Now. Then it was important. We played hard for school pride. We deserved the best pussy.

Finally you say it. My name. "Toby."

I nod.

We're watching a TV show, getting nearer. Traveling like this through times isn't sexy like the movies. You drive. You sleep in the motels you're told to, the ones that keep you intact. They call it physical integrity.

It's about a Queen on an Island, long ago. Something about a bull that emerged from the sea. She had sex with the bull. They cut that part out of course.

"Toby."

"Jasmine."

"Tell me more."

"What do you want to know?"

The more I look at her, the more I want to leave this motel room. Her face is soft, her beauty bright, probing. What these concrete walls aren't in every possible way. The beds are hard, the pillows thin, the blankets old & colorless. Her cheeks are a very light roseate. Me, the jock, & words like that.

"You rescued me."

"I was sent."

"By?"

"You know."

She grimaces. "The ships overhead."

I nod.

She's in jeans, & a black t-shirt that says "Is this all really enough for you?" I feel her body tendering & it nearly undoes me in these dank motels we stay in. Her eyes are grey, her hair a beautiful long brown.

"Is this the White Woods still?"

"It's all White Woods once you realize it. You know that."

"I know that I was with Cosmic Early. And now I'm not."

"You'll see him again."

"Can we get a drink somewhere?" That older, lusty look. A hint of sloppy swilly sex in it.

I shake my head. "Sober as church mice, Jazz."

"Where are you bringing me?"

"You're needed."

She stretches on her bed, a yoga move or two. Feels me watching too close.

"Why haven't you tried to fuck me, Toby?"

"I have fucked you. I just kept it to myself."

She laughs, really laughs, young & lustful. Nods.

Turns back to the TV, that movie is still on, we turn up the sound. Jazz makes me get us chips & candy from the vending machine next to the office. Two sodas. She likes root beer.

Relaxed more now. I still want to fuck her but OK, maybe later, maybe not.

I was up there, Jazz, in those ships, & I know a lot of things better. This world isn't unique, isn't separate. I learned that most of what I'd been told to believe was wrong. Others had started the myths & stories. Once they stuck, everything built on them. We were stuck with them.

But they needed me for something. Told me I dreamed well. It would be useful. OK.

"Where's Ashleigh?" Jazz is looking at the TV & there is a scene in a castle & there is a girl who looks precisely like Ashleigh. Down to the beauty mark on her left breast. She'd let me lick it quite a few times. Liked me to cum for her while licking it. I complied. You would fucking too if she was in your bed in only a pair of black boy shorts.

I didn't flinch. "We're going there."

"To an old movie on TV? Is that a destination?"

"It's where they're sending us. Something has to play through."

Jazz suddenly is off her bed & all over me, tongue in my mouth, hand teases my cock in my pushed down shorts, one fingernail teasing, pushing me down, curling my hand to feel her & feel her there & there & *there*

Whispers, "Is this what I need to do to get a fucking answer from you?"

I tempt, *o shit fuck do I tempt*. Make shit up one thing or another but fucking *have her*.

I roll free. My cock tries to stay. Really really tries. She smells like dirt & sun & fucking the air to breathe itself.

She's breathing hard. My cock says that's a good start.

We turn back to the movie. The Queen is talking to the Princess. The Queen is sick, the Princess is hostile. Sits on the edge of her bed.

"Don't lead with your heart, child. It will betray you," she growls.

"What was your wrong to become like this?" the Princess demands.

The Queen smiles, handsome, not pretty like the Princess. "When they near you, child, hooked by your luring blood, do what I didn't."

Silence. "Sniff."

"Sniff?"

Silence again.

Jazz nods. Looks at me, now fully her self again, & nods.

I retreat to the bathroom to jack off, to shit, to vomit. There. Better.

(iii.)

Same freckles. Same short skirt. The first time in a handicapped unisex bathroom. We don't. She tries. She is young, half-rabid for a cock's hunger, wants me in her mouth, between her thighs, cumming on her tits.

Same freckles. Same short skirt.

I calm her, time & again, lick that tight bare cunt suck it slowly, patiently til a moan, a hard breath, another moan, & here they come, nibble that clit, *oh just a little*, now more & she is writhing, moaning, yelling, it fills the theater & I hear the film cry it back, on screen a girl in a chamber, her eyes red, blazing, her man, the King himself, going down on her til good & wet for his cock & then again & again, her cries pain pleasure, crazy want, & my girl & the King's cum across the theatre to each other, in harmony, alternating & she wants me in her finally & I desist to know better, *fucking freckles, short skirt*—

Lights out but I know she's decorated this bathroom for us, nobody else uses it anymore, there are blooms, candles—

"What is your name?"

"The same every time."

"Tell me. Please."

"Cordelia."

I make her dress. She behaves for awhile. Sits with me. Holds my hand. Sticks her tongue out suggestively at those two boys I came with. They keep a distance.

I show her my checker, my housefly. My comic book. *Curvilinear Comix* #2 "For Those Lost."

The movie is on but nothing happens for stretches. Long shots of the Island's empty



shores.

I open my comic book. Cordelia is calmed by the ocean. Begins to purr quietly. Her eyes are sea-green more & more.

I read. A castle, at night, a king in his furs & leathers. His daughter, a child, in love with the stars, with the swishing sounds of the sea.

The King talks of enemies, those who would take their home. "Our heritage & home. All we have built here."

The Princess embraces him closely, loves him with all she is. Cordelia holds my hand tighter as we watch & I try to remember I'm reading my comic but now I cannot tell.

They embrace, they are quiet again.

I look down at my comic book pages & they are sitting together, reading a book in a plush, candle-lit room. It's a book of patterns, page after page. He points, she nods, she keeps him close. These hours are rare.

Look up & the film shows dawn & a raked grounds, like something monks might maintain. The Princess is no longer a child as she arrives, shedding her clothes as she enters the grounds. Her body is slender, tight, not a dancer's body but she moves deeply, intentionally mixing one remembered pattern after another with dreams, mixing, gestating something as carefully placed stones & raked sands fly—

Look down & he is saying to her, "There are other weapons. Stranger strengths." She is trying one pattern after another for him, in the plush, candle-lit room. Tries, stumbles, tries again. He nods. He is impatient. But he loves her.

But as she leaves, others arrive to dance for the King. I look up, there's one. She never looks at him, not once, but that's the one who matched Cordelia's cries, that's the one he keeps in a private chamber. His obsession, what will destroy everything.

Her dancing is wild, no patterns, stranger strengths. Other weapons.

(iv.)

"Where now, Preacher?"

I look around at Iconic Square. It's very tall fountain to see, old, some of it broken off, but mostly intact. I try to assess a little. I have Preacher, Tweety Bird. My stupid dress & damp panties still. Mm. No complaints there.

Preacher is dressed in a red plaid work shirt & blue jeans. His skin is a dark deeply tanned brown. He isn't old yet, there's no fat or sag on him, but his short hair is a bit grayed. His fierce look would scare most women, excite a few.

He's getting his bearings, which spooks me a little.

"We're here, right?"

He looks at me. "We're in the Tangled Gate."

"Is that egghead for Dreamland?"

He looks at me harder. "I think some things relate strangely."

Hm. "Do we want to be here, Preacher? Is this where we're going?"

He continues. "Then again, some things are similar & can almost be treated as the same."

Fucking man. What part of listening do they ever learn?

Finally he nods like it's all been discussed & settled amongst us equals. Walks over to

the fountain & dips his hands in. Drinks. Motions me over. Cups his hands for me to drink. I'd call it romantic if it was some other man & girl at it.

But the drink does me good. I walk around with a clearer head, probably clearer than water should do.

"What's that?"

"It's the Gate."

"It's massive!"

I walk through it though I feel Preacher tense behind me. Look up to take the thing in.

"For those lost.' What does that mean?"

"I've wondered that."

"You've been here."

"In dreams, yes."

"Is this a dream?"

"No. We're really here."

"I don't understand."

"This is where we are, Genny. It's more than I hoped. I've dreamed of this place & wanted to bring you here that way. Show you. I knew we could share dreams. But we're not. We're here, all of us."

He seems excited & scared. I go all girly & go up to him. His embrace is gentle, distracted.

"What do we do now?"

"I don't know. For certain."

"What about uncertain?"

He looks at me. "This is the place everything comes from. The world. All of it."

"Here?"

He nods.

"How?"

"I don't know enough."

"What do you know?"

He nods. "Long ago, I would read old, arcane books. Looking for wisdom that mostly was no more there than in yesterday's newspaper. There are no ancient cures for the plights of humans, Genny."

I nod.

"But over & over was this idea that we're not from here. We came here. We were brought here. There was some agent."

"Not God?"

"No. Not in this. Not directly anyway. These were mortal beings of some kind, from long ago & they were powerful in ways we're hardly getting to."

"But?"

"Yes, but. They had managed to destroy their original home planet like what would sound familiar to us."

"Ahh."

"So they set about creating another world. It failed. And another. And another."

"How many? How long?"

"I don't know. These were just ideas & claims in many cultures over the centuries."

"What about Dreamland?"

"That's ours, Genny. Part of us. A more important part of us than most of us ever realize."

"So this isn't Dreamland."

"You & I aren't dreaming. Our bodies are here for real." He cups my breast & smiles. Yep. All here.

"So you wanted to bring me there but we came here?"

He nods.

"How?"

He shakes his head.

"And here is?"

"It's how they begin to build a world. The world emerges from here."

"Oh."

"They arrive through the Red Bag which is a dream path from here to there but they don't stop arriving until they are completely here."

"Is that what we did?"

"I think so."

"Can we go back?"

"Do you want to, Genny?"

I think a good long moment. Think about his hands on me, feel this place honestly for a moment.

"No. I guess I'd just miss my brother. Shawn."

That last time, did it feel like a last time? I was going, nobody would stop me. Shawn tried, then he let me go, it was a matter of minutes. He smiled, it was strange. I didn't think more on it till later. Now. OK.

"He's beautiful, Shiny." Was what I called you.

You nod. Smile. That smile's why the phone rings every five minutes. I know its interior, dark & uncertain sometimes, & yet it undoes me too.

"I want this."

You nod again. I try to thrust myself back into this moment, did you argue with me at all?

"Look after them, her."

His smile disappears.

I stop there, in this remembering.

"Preacher, help me."

"What, Genny?"

I sit on the ground, motion him down too. Tweety is sniffing nearby, OK I guess.

We face each other, twine legs & arms, deep stare into each other.

"Tell me."

"I need to go back. To a moment."

He nods. "You didn't like it when we used to do this. We stopped."

"It's my brother."

He nods. We focus. Preacher knows how to do this.

I look deeper into his eyes than I have in a long while, let, let some more, I'm rusty. Blur. I'm back.

He never said it was real, but it was something.

"Shawn, talk to me."

"I am, Genny. I'm happy for you."

"You won't take care of them."

"Of course I will."

"You stopped smiling."

"It wasn't that."

"What?"

"I flashed."

"Flashed?"

"To you remembering this moment later. Coming back like this."

"And?"

"I'm sorry, Genny."

"For what?"

"For not answering the door. That day you came back."

"You were there?"

"I still am. I couldn't explain."

"About what?"

"I can't."

Suddenly he snaps off. Preacher shudders.

"What happened?"

"I don't know."

"He knows about this."

He nods.

"How? What did we do?"

"He did it. He flashes."

Now she's riled. "I need him now."

"He doesn't want to."

But I do. But explaining that I've been in the Tangled Gate all along. I didn't intend it.

I just started to empathize. It began at the sink with the sponge I used to wash the dishes. I thought: what if it takes its pride? Washes with vigor the dishes & pots? Knows its time is finite. Does its job. Will be tossed to garbage any day.

I felt something. Sadness. Something. It's like me. Wants to do its best, understand, do good work.

It was a start.

I began to think about reincarnation. Spirits returning in different forms. Why not a chair or a spoon or a plastic soda cup? Why not anything? What if it was all possible?

The idea appealed to me, at first almost like an escape route. After you left, Genny, I

was deep down sad, kept it there. We were close but I didn't get this until you left.

You rebelled for me all those years. I didn't have to learn how, I just had to watch you. In turn, I was your confidante when you hit the walls, & they restrained you.

With you gone, good ideas left with you. Girls still chased me but it wasn't fun. I didn't have you to make it feel good. I connected it all in my mind, which ones you liked. You liked details & we'd stay up late talking.

"How did she dress for you?"

"I don't know. Nice, I guess."

"Skirt? Halter top?"

"Yah."

"Makeup?"

"Some, I guess."

"Shiny! You have to pay attention like they do!"

I nod. "I know." But your stories were what mattered to me. When the Preacher came around, I could see you were bit. Your usual tricks—"show some leg & tit, throw in a little wit"—meant nothing to him.

So now you were gone & I had these ideas. My toothbrush, a yellow one, was getting worn. I had to protect it so I kept it in my room. I didn't have anyone to help me work out these thoughts.

I tried with one girl. One night. She dressed like the rest but she seemed smarter.

"Reincarnation? Like the Hindus?" I nod.

She thought about it, I could tell she was going to try & impress me.

"It just seems pointless. It's not my thing." She waits, cringes inward that I won't like this.

I show her mercy. Smile, let my eyes slide down to her chest, linger long. "Yah, you could be right." She relaxes a little. I don't see her again.

Finally, I don't leave my room.

Where did they go?

Truth is, I don't know. I slept more & more. I stopped eating, stopped pretty much everything. My question less & less had words, & so I couldn't ask it.

I know this doesn't make sense but maybe something happened. I mean, I didn't die. I came here. Where you are now. I don't think I'm here in the same way. But I can see you & Preacher there, on the ground, facing each other, trying to reach me. And you can't.

Anyway, if I did die, I did come back too, here. I'm not what I was, but I was right.

"We can go now, Preacher."

"Are you sure, Genny?"

"He was my baby brother. He understood about Tweety. About Penny. Everything."

"I know. You loved him."

"Love."

Preacher nods. They stand to move along. I could follow, but I don't right now.

(v.)

Bowie sits me down before I can go further. Looks me over with his green eye & his



MP: RS

mushroom eye.

"Limping."

I nod.

"It happens."

I nod again. Unreassured.

I ask: "What do you know of the Tangled Gate?"

"It's real. It's not."

"Meaning?"

"It's one of those ideas some get hooked on. An explanation. Esoteric as fuck but still."

"And?"

"Do you really want to do this?"

I nod.

"What are you asking me for?"

"Is there an alternative?"

He eyes me closely, especially his mushroom eye. Seems to spin, glow, maybe both.

"No. Not for you. It may do you some good."

"It already has."

"Then why hesitate now?"

"It seems to swallow everything."

He nods. "Some things do that. I wouldn't worry."

"Why not?"

"Because you are meaning well, trying to find the deeper roots. There's no proselytizing here."

"No preaching?"

He laughs. Stands up. "I didn't say that."

"You're done?"

"Just write, Sonnyboy. There's no more to this than that. The good pages, the shitty ones. Just keep writing. You know that."

"I should."

He hesitates, half-sits again. "It matters. This. What you're doing. It's not a question."

"It's not?"

"No. Push on, one way or another. You should know that too."

"Is there a but?"

"No. There's you doing this & the pages explaining themselves one way or another."

I nod.

"Good." He smiles. Charming.

"Thanks."

"It's not easy, then sometimes it is. Right?"

I nod.

"So keep that in mind."

"Tangled Gate."

He nods.

"Any hints?"

He looks past me. Gestures. "Follow him for awhile."

I don't know who you are at first, & following you isn't easy—is this the Tangled Gate? It's too murky—

“Adjust”

“How?”

“Turn your head slightly, wiggle, jerk.”

I do, it helps some.

“Why am I following him?”

“Why do you follow anyone? He has something you want, information, something.”

I nod, adjust my walk, longer, steadier.

“Good. Now look around. Scrounge along here & there.”

I do. Walls both sides. Quite tall, vines & stones.

“OK. The Gate.”

“Where is he?”

I blink. Gone. I stop.

“This isn't helping anymore.”

Bowie nods.

“Stand with me.”

We're standing side by side now. Bowie is always taller, lankier than I remember.

We're looking at the Gate, massive, tall. Its legend “for those lost.”

“An offer of help?”

“Or refuge.”

I nod. “Maybe both.”

The Gate-Keeper has many cameras around us, moving closer, panning back.

Bowie grimaces, sits on the ground. I join him. The cameras panic to adjust.

Bowie speaks in my mind to continue befuddling the Gate-Keeper.

“He'll adjust in a minute.”

“What then?”

“**RemoteLand** is real. It's a movie & it's real. This is how it works.”

“When then?”

“There's a choice here. It's a film about a book, or a book about a film.”

“He & I are adversaries?”

“Maybe. Just keep it in mind.”

The Gate-Keeper's mics now catch our thoughts. Bowie pushes next to me, embraces me, leans his face against mine. Kisses, one, two, three, I hear his fingers snap, & poof!

(vi.)

It's a matter of piecing together, what Kinley calls Maya's first & my second understanding. Not better or worse, just the order of things.

Kinley, the Architect, is our connection, since Maya & I are never in the same scene. What we struggle at first to do is to communicate with Kinley & each other without the Gate-Keeper knowing.

“He’s not our enemy,” Kinley later explains. “His purpose is to make a very important film & we are for him bound parts of the narrative. Locked into our lines & motivations.”

“Why aren’t we?”

“I don’t know.”

“What are we trying to do?”

Kinley looks at me fiercely &, I realize also, helplessly.

“We play through, we learn, we leave. That’s all I can say.”

Kinley discovered that we can move freely when not on camera. Not in the current scene. It’s like he focuses on the current scene he is filming to the point of blanking out the rest.

“The problem,” he explains to us later, “is that there is no script. And what happens is that characters in the film not in a scene sleep mindlessly. Then we move again in our next scene.”

This would not have stopped but for something stepping in. Someone.

“My scene was over. My office dark, me standing posed, unmoving. Then there was a glint in the dark, a noise. It was . . . a cackle.”

Kinley stirred. Longer glint, several cackles. “I was half-awake but it felt like I was paralyzed.” So he used his mind. “I’m paralyzed. Please release me.” There were more sounds. “Click-clicks & noise-noises. More cacklings. I loosened up. I was OK. I could move. My office was silent.”

Later he heard another kind of cackle, urgent. He froze in place & held there as the film crew arrived to film a new scene. Felt a compulsion to move now so did. The cameras rolled.

“So whoever it is loosens us up so we can think & move, frees us, & warns us to freeze when it’s time for a new scene.”

Kinley finds Maya, & Christina, & the unseen cackler helps him to teach them the moves. Since the Princess is in most scenes, small or older, they decide it’s best the three of them not meet at once.

Maya plays the Princess as a child, which would seem a part she’s too old for, but it works.

“It’s mostly my dreams he films.”

“Your actual dreams?”

“I don’t think so. I mean they all take place in a cave. With many creatures who are my friends.”

“What do you do with them?”

“Oh. We have parties. We sing songs. They like me.”

“Are they real like us?”

Maya thinks hard. “They don’t know it’s a film.”

"They don't see the cameras."

"I don't know. It's like there aren't any. The Gate-Keeper tells me to ad-lib."

"Ad-lib?"

Most of Christina's scenes are in the Tower, erotically charged scenes between her & Kinley the Architect. Their chemistry is so fierce that the Gate-Keeper is fascinated. The film shifts its focus.

Christina is amused by it. Kinley isn't.

"At least we get to be together in this."

"We're not supposed to shape this so much with our . . . attraction."

Christina snorts her laughter. Kinley doesn't bite.

"What, tell me."

"We need to let this play through when we're on camera, not push it so much."

"Why not?"

"We don't know how we're changing things."

"I don't get it, Kinley. Is this a film or real?"

"It's both."

Christina takes a rare leap from horniness & general stubbornness to ask: "What can I do?"

"Try to move the spy-glass around. See what you can see down there."

He tells Maya the same thing. It doesn't work when not in a scene, is inert.

The Gate isn't the same between what Maya sees & what Christina sees, presumably years later. He takes notes, begins to compile a map.

"Things shift."

"Shift."

"Come & go too. The Gate is not static. I don't think it's a set like the rest of this Island."

Then it occurs. An important scene that tells us a lot.

The King & I are arguing, about an invasion. We are in the Tower, Maya as Princess at the spy-glass, trying to move it. I've managed to piece up that we on the Island are political exiles from the mainland. The King wants to take back the capital.

"We're not ready," I hear my mouth say these words.

"We are. Plenty. Our forces in the city are edgy. They're exposed & waiting. Damned impatient too."

I wonder why he means to do this now. Then I see the red glare lining his eyes. I take a chance here. Compelled to say, "It's her, isn't it?" I don't. My mouth fires with pain but I hold it back. I've shifted the narrative. My knowledge of his affair with one of the Princess's friends remains unsaid.

Then Maya tells me later about a strong sense she had, of becoming unloosed in time.

"I felt like I was in a tree where the Tower came later, but also a starship long after the Tower was gone. It lasted a moment then the King was grabbing me & taking me away."

"How did he seem?"

"Angry but confused. Like something expected didn't happen this time. What you did—?"

"I don't know. It was a risk."

Maya doesn't mention that her creature friends whom she visits behind her bedroom wall during dreams don't like the Architect, or the Tower. There is a scene, it's like the point where Christina & I hand off the Princess between us. I'm no longer a child & my friends can't help me. They give me a birthday party, fearing it will be the last I celebrate with them. I let it play through, not knowing how to tell them the truth. Our many songs deep & lovely drape my heart.

(vii.)

I keep ever in my mind we are here to free Christina & re-unite Maya with her friends. I start saying this more often as the weight of being the Architect grows heavier.

I try to learn what I am & it is jumbling, as though the Gate-Keeper comes up with pieces of my history as needed. I suppose this makes some sense but it leaves me unable to contrive from clear knowledge.

I come from the future, a far, ruined future, & I have travelled back through Dreams but somehow now . . . arrived. I am here, no dreaming. Whatever this is, *I am here*.

I am here to prevent the future I come from. To use the Tangled Gate. To do so involves the Princess, from when she is small.

I learn, not sure how, that she travels the Gate by dreams. Her path is through her bedroom wall, into a great cavern, what Maya has told me. She sees no cameras but the Gate-Keeper is there & I am too. As she told me, the creatures are unaware of the cameras or the film.

I begin to think: they're real too, like the Gate. **RemoteLand** is imposed on this Island where the real *Tangled Gate* is & creatures of the dream live.

Am I repeating these things?

But it is the overwhelming sadness I am starting to feel & I was not expecting.

"What, Kinley?"

"A son. Of sorts."

"A son?"

"Yes. I love him."

"Is he a baby?"

"No. A boy. Young man nearly."

"I don't understand."

"It's part of the myth of this place. A son I escape with after helping the Princess free the Hero & dancers."



Christina thrashes about in my arms, her soft skin burning me here & there. We fuck, her word for it, but I decide I agree, which I realize that our characters don't do. But she's impatient, she loves me, insistently, & as she will point out herself, she's hot as fuck. Meanwhile, Maya behaves. For now.

"But why are you sad?"

"I will lose him. During this escape, he will fall into the sea."

"Oh."

"But he & I know it's intentional. It's a different secret way to the Gate. A way to free him."

"So he'll be in the Gate."

"It's nothing simple, Christina."

She relents stroking me for her pleasure & mine & moves into my face.

"Why is this worse for you than me?"

"I don't know."

"You're protecting us."

"Not very well."

Now she's mad. I wish for the stroking again instead.

"Tell me."

"Why are we here?"

"I'm stuck in Clover-dale. Maya's lost her friends. You decide we need maps of the Tangled Gate."

"And the film we're in?"

She shrugs. Holds my half-hard cock in her hand, thoughtfully, don't ask me how.

"Do you escape?"

"What?"

"With your son?"

"No. It's a ruse. To help him escape. I don't leave. I can't."

"Kinley, what can we do? You said you wanted maps. Will they help?"

I want to once in my life fuck this girl raw & wordless & she'd enjoy that too, quite, but I fetch her clothes & send her melting among shadows back to her Castle room. I don't know what happens but if I were to follow her I'd find Maya asleep in her bed.

Then suddenly I do. I arrive in her bedchamber, she's asleep, a lace shirt, no more, & I am waking her not to cry out, waking her—

"Maya, it's Kinley. Nod if you understand."

Small nod.

"We have to get the help of your friends in the cave."

She is slender & small in my embrace. I feel my body still raw from Christina tighten a little deep within. Ignore, talk on.

"I don't think the Gate-Keeper intends harm. He is from elsewhere, doing what he understands to do. But we're not here to lose ourselves to his film."

My body is tighter & tauter now, she smells sweaty & delicious, I am losing myself again, the

Architect yearns her, pain in her presence, holiding like this—

“Find a way, Maya, to elude him & his cameras. We need their help. Our business is in the Gate. But we’re in this, how do we extract ourselves? Find out for us, Maya,” & Kinley throws himself to the floor, now scorched by both Christina & Maya—

(viii.)

I already know how to elude the Gate-Keeper in my dreams, they are, after all, mine, & dreams, I triple myself so that he follows one & I leave her orders just to keep him moving, & another of me makes sure this works & would warn me, & then I hurry to the main cavern with the big tree in the center to talk to my friends, I hurry—

I have to explain in their words so I indicate I am in danger & they press near. The white bunny, my old friend, the giraffes, the many bears, they sniff & sniff for me to tell how to protect me—

Are they in danger? No. They belong here, this is their home, at least I think so, at least it is now, but I want them to understand & it’s hard so I look to the tiny panda bear for help in this—

She steps on my hand, & bites it. Shocked, I drop her, but quickly try again. Palm down. Ah. How to tame an imp, a little.

We look closely at each other. Her eyes are wide, her laugh mocking & cheerful.

She cackles. Not thinking, I cackle back. Delighted, she cackles some more & I reply.

She click-clicks & noise-noises. I try that too but it doesn’t work.

Finally, I talk in English just hoping. “There is confusion here & I need your help.” I show them Christina & Kinley in my mind & there is much commotion but they agree. They will protect us all.

My other selves arrive suddenly & we twine one again. I know cameras I can’t see have arrived, & I singe a pleasant song in nonsense cackling tongue the Gate-Keeper may craze to decipher, but will not.

(ix.)

Suddenly there is a hummingbird &, more beautifully than that, a deep knowing beneath my doubts.

The Gate-Keeper means well, I cannot deny this or find some other truth in it all.

But he is a man, a man of this world, however strange he is, however loosed in time he seems to be.

I cannot appeal to him because his loyalty is to the world of men, preserve, perpetuate. His film is some kind of . . . futuristic effort to reach through time & space & bind & mend. I don’t know if he fully understands it all but the creatures, Maya’s friends, have instructed me after their ways, & now I know.

Mine is not a role to play passively, to look toward the Gate-Keeper to shape & direct. No. The deep thrust of this film is to shape & mold from within.

I think. I think completely still, in my Tower’s darkness, & realize that the Island is real but that it was created by the Gate. The Island is a shell, or a chalice, & the Gate is its

miraculously drink, its source.

And **RemoteLand**? It is what Art makes when its brush is dipped into the source, & tries to *unlearn* how to paint & re-learn how to *create*.

So, suddenly, there is a hummingbird, & deep knowing.

At first, no words, no reaction to it. I'm confounded, I'm unsure. It's like the first time I saw Christina, the very first, before she saw me, before the classroom.

She was outside the school. Under a tree, reading. I'd kept a safe distance from the girls till then; knowing a good prostitute helped. We'd talk. Fuck, talk, fuck again. Talk more if she had time.

"Her name is Christina."

She smokes hashish in my bed, a lot of it. I do too but with her it's worship.

"Why is she different from the rest?"

"I don't know. Maybe she isn't. Maybe I'm wearing down, year after year of it."

"They never get older, do they?"

"No. But I think it's more."

"What more could there be, honey? You've got a prick, she's a untried sweet."

"Is that your answer to it all?"

"With most men, yes. With you, not quite. But I've known you a long time. Your work has tired you. I see that."

"I'm sorry."

"You're my friend, Kinley. My customer, but my friend too. I've had your cock in every part of me, all over me, I know you enough to feel the loneliness. Even if you find what you're looking for."

I nod. "She sits up front."

"Of course."

"She doesn't look at me. Most of them do."

"Why should she?"

I nod. She wraps me in her grasp again, strong for a small woman.

You were reading a book like that book meant everything to you, many books meant everything to you. This moved me.

"Her nice legs do too."

I nod. "She's smart too."

"Does she talk in class?"

"Nobody does. Not a one. I mean her papers, her tests. She writes thoughtfully & well."

You nodded. You stopped coming over. I only got you once briefly on the phone.

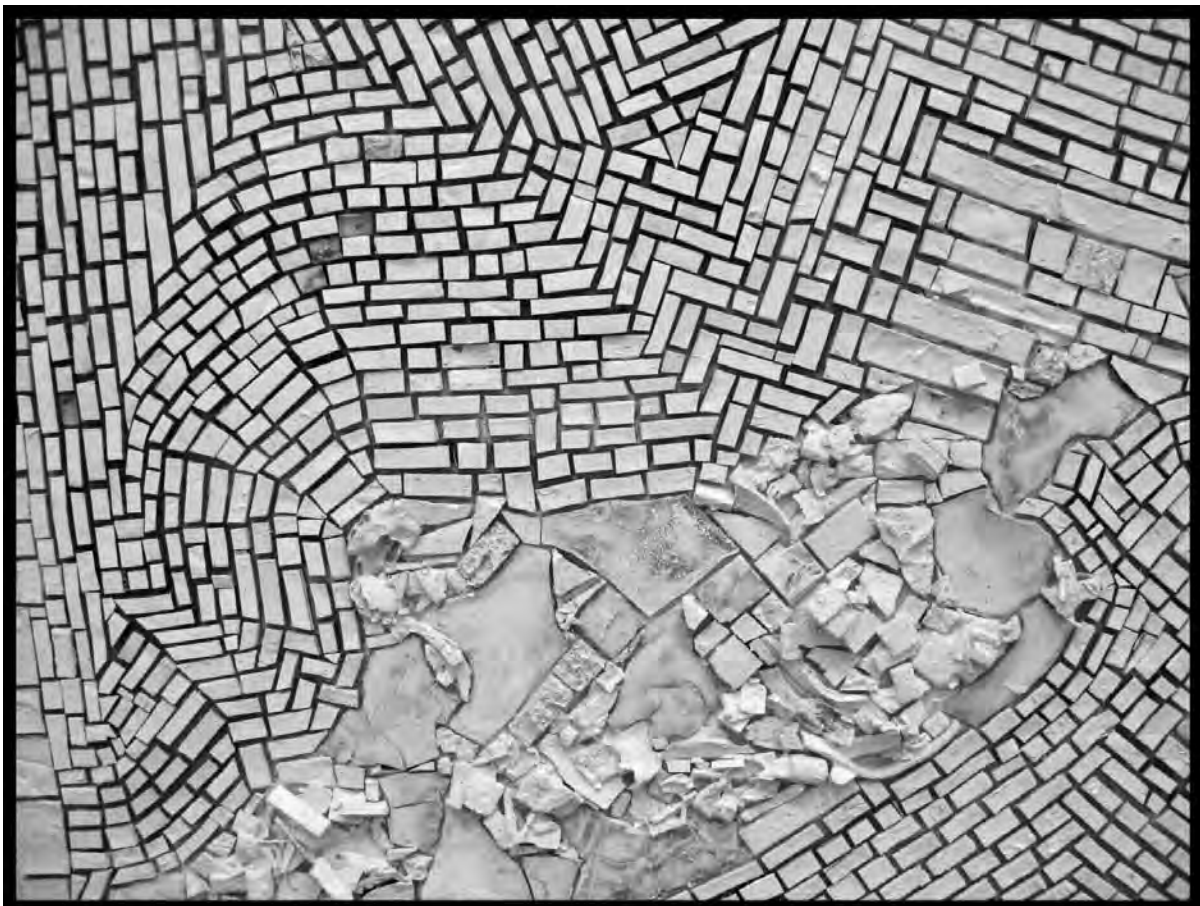
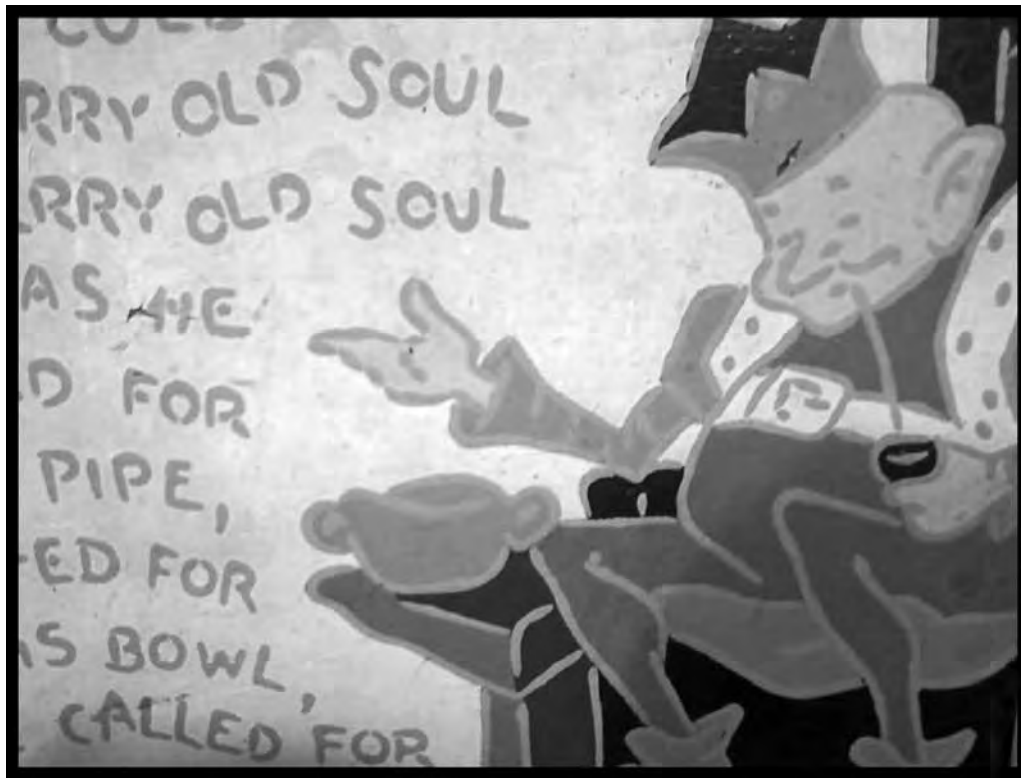
"Why?"

"You need focus to know what you're falling into. I can't be distracting you now."

"I miss you too."

You laughed. Paused. I could hear your breathing. Then hung up.

Again I wonder at what I have just received, beheld, whatever.



The hummingbird, what is this now?

In the script it's a picture book, Maya carries it with her a lot. She reads it often, or at least keeps it open. I'm not sure she & the Gate-Keeper value it equally.

"It's important to him."

She stares at me. She's not so much behaving anymore but it's not to do with me. It's the creatures in the cave.

"It's how we encounter each other in the Gate. It keeps appearing in different places."

She looks at me. "If it's just a prop, why are you so interested?"

"It's not. It's not anything to do with what he thinks."

"What then?"

"Do your cave friends know about it?"

Maya pauses, looks thoughtful, rare.

"No. They don't seem interested either."

"They don't know it by how you describe to them. It's not the book that matters. It's the story. The *real* story he doesn't know."

Since we're in her bedchamber, yes, here I am again, she makes her way into my grasp. She is not Christina. This gesture is not simply sex. Maya is much lorn within. I keep myself focused.

"He knows the hummingbird song about how mankind will remember its first song & fly away."

She nods, listens.

"In the script, I take the form of the hummingbird to lure you, to teach you."

Nods.

"I disappear from your paintings, reappear on your wall. Then I appear to you in the Gate, in your dreams."

Nods again. Getting bored?

"Look at me, Maya."

She does, instantly.

"The hummingbird is our way out."

"How?"

I shake my head. I know & don't know all I am saying.

She nods. Believes me. Is thinking about me in her bed. Considering. Lets Princess feelings wash through her for a long moment. I let her. She is lorn. I am near. I hold her & she suckles this closeness.

"You love Christina."

"Hopelessly."

"She's lucky."

I nod. I turn, kiss her deeply, a gentle kiss driving toward her riven places. Let her go, stand.

(x.)

These Creatures seem more important than the rest to me. I calm in their company, feel like . . . someone . . . something else with them. How much of it is the Princess role I play mucking into my head & blood? I don't know. I care less & less.

I don't sleep in my bed anymore. I don't know if sleep at all. I stay in the caves & tunnels with my friends & they are happy for this. We travel in groups, sniff our way along, we don't speak in men's words anymore. I love & I love & I love them, & finally I bring my lingering troubles to all of them, in the great cave where all can come & listen.

"I am not a Princess. I am Maya. I used to know what this meant but I don't so much anymore. But I want you to know what I am not since you are my friends."

They sniff, they murmur a little. They don't understand that the word they use for me matters.

I try again. "I came here looking for friends." I try to picture Samantha &, um, the old man, what's his name? Shit.

"It's why I came here with Kinley & Christina." There is some kind of nodding. They know Kinley & Christina are my . . . *undeniable ones* in some form of their language.

I sit still as they adorn my hair with blooms, vines, & pebbles, braid it long, dress me in leaves & feathers. They don't understand clothes but their gestures are with what they have, what they know.

Kinley says the hummingbird is our way out of the film. My friends here will nuzzle & keep me close, will sing in their wordless ways, but the hummingbird is something they cannot hear. I say it, I think it, it's not *there* for them.

The Gate-Keeper less knows me, is afraid? There is surprise, unexpected moves. He is thrown by my moves, over & over I think his ideas were few for me save that I loved the Creatures & abandoned them for the Architect, & perhaps found them again at a later time.

"I want to tell him, Kinley."

"Tell who, what?"

"The Gate-Keeper. I want to talk to him."

He's come to me in the caves. I bid my friends, sniffing & sniffing, away.

"We can't."

"Why?"

"We're pieces in his film, no more."

Kinley is trying not to look at me. I guess feathers & leaves don't cover so much. His eyes distract & linger on me. Scrawny but he looks. His breath trails down my skin, near, wanting, sweet & firm both & I make him a space close to me, where we twine, & close, & closer

Turns away. I cough hard.

"I would not say no to you."

"I would not ask. You know that."

"Christina."

"Dylan."

"Something."

"Yes. Something."

"Think it. Just think it."

My teeth & claws ride hard down your cheek, your lips, your breast, I bite & gnash your tummy, lash your pussy, lash again as you squirm as you feel me hard, lit up for taking you, holding you close, holding you to me, that first long hard take a year, a pricked cluster, opening cry of blooms, & again & again—

Turns away. “The hummingbird is our way out.”

Is this what Christina experiences?
I wonder. I don’t know. I don’t expect him back.

(xi.)

Then I find the coat. It is a long, worn leather coat, ankle length, dark, colorless really. I find it & its contents & I begin to understand. Everything.

There are countless small pockets sewn into its interior lining. Each contains an ornate little book, bound in thread, each a unique color. Red. Gold, Blue. Yellow. Pink. Rows & rows of them safely concealed in its depths.

These are the Architect’s record of the time beyond time where he—where I—have come from. They comprise a great document of knowledge that I have traveled with through time, the future as it came to pass, bad enough to cause me to return here to try & change things.

I hold these small books, each sits wholly in my palm, & I look at them, their covers, the threads each is created from. I *know* what they *are* even though I have not opened a one of them.

I wait, I hesitate. Then I tell Christina on one of our nocturnal visits. Usually these visits are partially to entirely sexual. She enjoys them. I do too even if I’m wishing we were doing something more than a lot of good fucking. I know telling her will not go well.

“Books.”

“Yes. A lot of them.”

“Little pretty colored books.”

“Yes. Look.”

“You haven’t read any?”

“No. I know what they are. I . . . recognized them. This was my traveling coat. This was how I came here, & all I brought were these books.”

She nods. Thinking. Such silences thrill me deeper than all sex, it’s like she *knows* more than I can for all my efforts & yet I can’t get her much to try.

“Open them”

“Open?”

“Read them to me.”

“I don’t know.”

“Or to Maya.”

“Maya?”

“The other one? The one you’ve only fucked in your mind?”

“Christina.”

She’s not mad. She’s amused.

“It’s OK one way or another. You’re sweet to resist. It would probably damage you more than her.”

I nod. How true. How Christina.

She takes pity, smiles, catches me up in her grasp, close, her smell drowns me in lust & love & stupidity, & just one word: “read.”

(xii.)

There is the old, long story of the school teacher & the white bunny & their many travels with friends, it is the kind of story that roots deep like the lovely trees in this courtyard, there are its lights, its shadows, like here, like tonight, & it begins simple:

the school teacher walks down to the pond near her father’s house, to the cove she & her brother would fish, & she looks up, to where the mountain reflected in the water is, & it isn’t there, still reflected in the water but not up there—

Accounts differ on details but her initial search for that mountain sets her on her travels, & her brother to looking for her, & they become like to their adopted father, who is a scientist & an explorer—

The books in Kinley’s found coat tell the story of the school teacher’s travels, & her brother, their father, & friends, many stories, & much to learn, but when Kinley opens one to read to Christina, he cannot deduce the words for they are written in a tongue one cannot read save in dreams—they look like blurry scratchings, page after page, Kinley looks at one book & then the next & next, & finds nothing he can read. He looks at Christina, shakes his head.

“You wrote them?”

“I think so.”

“They’re in a code?”

“I think so.”

“You don’t know it?”

He thinks. “It was the Sleepers.”

Christina blinks.

“We were trying to undo history. The Architect & the rest.”

“Undo.”

He sighs. Remembering pieces. Struggles. “In the far future, the world of men is ruined. Far worse than our time, Christina. The worst has slowly come to pass & it’s too late. Then, finally, men put aside wars & religions & hatreds to come together, the scientists & preachers & artists & magicians & so on, to construct a plan to breach the past, stop it from happening, there were mystics who tapped into the earth & oceans & trees & we concluded that we needed to breach the Dreaming to travel past history, find the key—”

“Find?” Christina’s look is one of interest but—

“We created a potion to drink to breach the Dreaming. It was like a super LSD—”

“To dose while sleeping?”

“Yes, in a chamber. A deprivation chamber, silent, filled with body temperature warm water. There’s more to it. But essentially there were these underground caves filled with these sleep vessels. Sleepers would wake and leave them for about an hour a day.”

Kinley pauses. Jerks his head.

But Christina’s chamber is quiet & there seems no danger.

“Were you nude?”

“Mostly. Maybe all. Why?”

“How did you sneak that big jacket & those books into that water?”

“I didn’t.”

“Well?”

“I built the chambers, Christina. I conceived & oversaw the creation of the drink. That’s why I’m the Architect.”

Christina starts, as Kinley does not look like Kinley for a moment. She is fairly nude in his close grasp. But he talks on.

“I had my doubts this would work. I knew other ways than a random stumbling back into centuries. But I had to give them hope, purpose. The world above was devouring itself in black days, starvation, disease. I needed time to find my answer, & to keep these people together in case I did.”

Christina nods, settles inly again. She loves this man whatever he looks like.

“The jacket was from a dream, I’d travel in it, I’d made it to hold the little books I’d compose while traveling.”

“So they are in a dream language.”

“I think so.”

“But we’re not dreaming.”

“Sometimes objects can cross from the Dreaming into waking.”

“But you can’t read them!”

Kinley nods.

“Where did you find it?”

“It was there, on a hook. I guess I hadn’t noticed it?”

Christina snorts. “Since when don’t you notice important things?”

He nods.

“Do you remember anything you wrote in them?”

He closes eyes, grasps Christina deep, powerfully, groans as though they are coupling dirty & well, she grasps him back, feeding him everything she has, eventually he relaxes.

“I wrote about the travels of a school teacher and her friend a white bunny. And others. Many others.”

Christina starts. “White bunny?”

“Maya.”

“*Maya*.”



(xiii.)

The Gate-Keeper gave me no instructions how to seduce the King, no ideas how to start—just that I am the demon who seduces & destroys him—

And some nights I get to sleep in the Gate-Keeper's arms.

I start slowly. Enough looking in closets & I find servant garb to get started. The white bonnet, the black & white frilly dress. A couple of buttons left undone of course.

He is King, he does not notice me at first. Many girls & woman vie for his eye, his word, his touch. In an island kingdom, what better path to success?

I try a different way. Begin to follow his path through the day. It always begins at the Dancing Grounds, where the Princess dances out her dreams of prophecy in raked sand paths. I see him studying several books closely as she dances, her eyes shut, like a trance all of this.

Nothing in the remain of his hours matches the daily care he gives this event.

So I dare all & one morning when the Princess has danced & departed, I show up. Dressed in not much more than nothing, I begin to move along the mussed paths of sand & stone.

I don't know what I'm doing so I dance closed eyes. A half-recalled page, sneaked in a glance from his books, a pattern, occurs to me & I let it move me. I feel the King pausing, looking, & then moving along. It's not enough.

So my next move is to befriend the Princess. She has no friends, I quickly determine. Spends her time with that strange Architect in his Tower offices.

So now I begin to follow her through her day. She is very pretty but lonely. Often roams the Castle's lookouts to yearn after the sea.

I take a chance. "It's nice here but far away."

She looks at me, nods, smiles. She is exceptionally bright, I have one chance.

"Nobody wants war with the mainland but I'm not sure how else we'll return there."

She's quiet. Shit. Talks then. "I don't mind living here. I just wish." Stops.

"Wish what?"

She does not reply. I invest days of encounters less & less casual before she finally tells.

"It's the Gate. I'm forbidden to go in it."

I nod.

"But I'm allowed to study its many maps! And I dream of it at night."

"Dream?"

"Every night."

It's slow inducing her details but I am able to cozy into her morning dancing. He notices finally.

I'm a demon. What does this mean? Am I just a really bad girl, misunderstood by all?

No. I'm not. As he watches me dance, the patterns his daughter has shown me page after page of in books, his lust sparkles something in my blood. I learn how to move just for him, how to tangle in his gaze until he sees nobody else, until he sees me all the time.

The Gate-Keeper has begun to film these various encounters as they grow more promising. He refuses me his bed until after the King has taken me. This makes me furious.

"I'm going to fuck him for you!"

He shakes his head. "No. You will give yourself to him completely. You will take him & absorb him & slowly start to poisoning him"

"Why me?" My toughness is gone.

"Because you are angry. Because none of it added up for you or meant anything. Until too late."

I nod. The paintings. They seem far away from me right now.

"Summon them. *Hard*. Let him take you forcibly at first. Bind him to you. Demand a secret chamber for coupling."

I nod & don't know what else to do.

"Preacher."

Nothing.

"Preacher!"

He looks vaguely at me. *Oh boy*.

King & Queen of this Island, should be a sweet time for us, all in all. Is, for a little while, I don't even mind his strange daughter. She's a bit creepy but OK.

But the other one. Holy fuck & fuck if Preacher doesn't want the little whore bad. *Wow*. She's always around, more & more. Though he does not look at glance at her, I can tell.

"Preacher."

"Yes, Genny."

"She's got a nice ass. Nice tits. But I don't know."

He's silent.

"I just have a strange feeling about it."

He says nothing. It's coming though.

And that movie-maker. How did this come together? We come here, Preacher more bug-eyed happy being in this Tangled Gate than just about anything ever. He doesn't neglect me in any way, he's *glad as fuck* I am here with him. Not much in all that to hook a pout on.

Still, I don't know. I mean, looked at simply, it's a labyrinth. Like the big ones farms have at Halloween. The bushy ones over in England.

Is, but isn't. That seems to be the way & my Preacher is thrilled to chocolate about it.

We wander it for a long time. Well, hours or days. Don't seem to sleep much in it. Not really day or night. Just grey skies.

Oh, & Tweety Bird. She's small now, since I drank from that fountain. It took a few hours but she fits in my hand. Doesn't say much. So I do. I try.

"Look, I'm not sure why you shrunk but we'll fix it somehow. Just trust me. Trust Preacher."

I think we have adventures along the way. There's a woods, a great big woods. I remembering looking down & seeing the tiniest little house I've every seen. Size of my pinkie maybe. I got the feeling it was not empty. I carefully walked on.

Sometimes things flashed by me. Creatures of some kind? I don't know. Fast. A game maybe.

When we come to the shore, some shore, there is a boat waiting for us. It is very small, on wheels for land travel too.

Now, weird, weirder, something, there are two skinny little black kittys wearing red colors, very blue eyes, waiting. Like a car, front & back seats. We get in back, I don't know how we fit, but I do notice Tweety Bird is bigger in my arms. They buckle us in, double check, safety first, I guess, even in the Tangled Gate.

It's a peaceful trip on whatever sea or ocean or body of water or body of whatever it is. The kittees pedal the boat wagon & we glide right along.

An island. Oh, of course. I look at Preacher but he's just drooling. Wish I was naked & that was the look. Ah kvetch kvetch. Here we are.

Close anyway. The kittys stop pedaling a distance away, turn & look at us brightly, silently. Time to swim, it seems. Preacher unbuckles us both. He pets each kitty's head gently, they don't purr but they are surely as transfixed by his touch as I am by their blue eyes.

My turn, it seems. I pet each but I don't have Preacher's, um, creature touch. I say, "Thank you. Be safe on the sea." They listen profoundly. I think hard & fast, it hurts but: "we may need you again." We all relax at once. Preacher clumsily leaps into sea & then lifts me in. A gentleman with a super brain & a tender touch. I'm smitten anew.

The boat wagon paddles away & we are in the sea, not as cold as I feared, not in the least. We swim, slowly, steadily, to the Island & pretty tired wetly stagger our way onto the rocks & sand.

How from then to now? We were Genny & Preacher; now we're King & Queen.

We were sitting naked in the sun, warming ourselves, drying our clothes. I kept my further ideas to myself but it was a nice stretch with the sea.

Then I noticed the movie cameras. Various kinds, some embedded in rocks nearby, some perched at a distance. Before I reacted, I froze, realizing this wasn't the Jersey shore.

Soon a number of people were gathered around us, drying us off &, uh, waiting our will. I caught Preacher's eyes once. He simply nodded & allowed the drying. And the dressing.

Long flowy things. Many colors. Beautiful, really. Sandals. And our golden leafed crowns, small. Maybe for beach fun.

Preacher led us up the long hill toward the Castle. I fell in with it. If nothing else, I wouldn't let him down with my confusion & stupidity.

Fell in with it, like I knew what *it* was. A sort of play? On film? A resort island for crazies to play King Arthur? Oh, I would have asked, but I didn't. From the moment I put in the queenly clothes, I felt compelled in my words & ways. Not prisoner, not amnesia to my real self so much as this *was* a part of my self, some part I hadn't known. But real, valid. Like a weird reincarnation, backwards but still.

I still loved Preacher but it was shot hard with sadness. I learned one way & another I was his second wife. The first dead. The Princess his daughter but this didn't feel right, true, in my bones. He loves her, though, simply, cleanly, um, bigly, & I never raise a jealous eyelash.

This Island home is a beautiful place, but Preacher-King longs to return to the mainland. This I'm not sure I understand. Love here, return there? I learn religious fanatics, led by an ex-

friend of Preacher-King, had taken the throne from him, driven us & our followers here. It's politics, I'd ignore it, but I am cleaved to the King.

I came here from another place, a gift from another kingdom, to maintain peace. The Queen in me feels lorn, lonely, unloved. We sleep in separate chambers. This drives me crazy but I bide my time. Preacher will find our way.

Nobody notices Tweety Bird in my arms. She is usually quiet but they don't see her. Fine. We talk at night in my large gilt lonely lorn chamber. A bed big enough for Preacher & I to triple ourselves & have an even better time. Nope. Just like that motel. Me & Tweety. My body still hungers but is damped by the Queen's heavy melancholy.

"What do I do?"

"You stay patient."

"How long?"

"Until."

"Until what?"

Tweety mums up. She sniffs more than talks & I can tell she has no real answers but raised hackles.

I learn I have a bevy of witches, seers, mystics—crazy women imported from my homeland to comfort me, keep me company, distract me.

There is a darkened chamber they keep, where they gather, none else would go.

One, young, appallingly pretty, long red hair & witchy blue eyes, becomes my favorite. She dresses in what seem to be swishing shiny rags, her thighs & breasts in & out of view like a curtain blown by the wind.

I say little, let her earn her pay, or whatever.

She has a silver ball, small, like a pinball, urges me look.

I see, before she even comes, the girl who will take Preacher. She comes from the sea, she is a vengeance from someone or something. She leaves the sea naked, so I get to see it all. The dark eyes red-rimmed. Full lips & breasts. Round, sexy hips & ass. Her pussy strangely shaved in symbols. Jesus fuck, wish I had a cock. I nod.

The seer looks at me. "Your moment will come. It won't seem so. But there will be an offer, a trade. You will accept."

"Will I make it out of here with Preacher?" I slip the name but she doesn't seem to notice.

"Accept the deal. You don't belong here."

"*Tell me, you freak bitch,*" I growl. She shrinks. Good. "How do I get out of here with him?"

She smiles terrifyingly. My imagined cock shrinks up. "You pay the full price of having come."



To be continued in Cenacle | 86 | October 2013

* * * * *

Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Eight

*“When did it matter the most?
When I smiled at another & believed.”*

(xiv.)

There is a maw to the heart of the world & from it I emerge. I come & come, & men will chase at me, grab at my fur, cut me for my blood, my fluids, think themselves masters, shapers & takers, claim a place above others for their kind, racially arrogant enough even to divide among their own numbers, invent whole myth-story-lies to plot their course & a triumph for a few of them. This world a backdrop, a passive & endlessly bountiful resource for their dramas & years.

I know enough of men to empathize with their hopeless efforts to build perennial crusts around their loins, their emotions, none escape this world, or some world, bones will burn or bury somewhere—

There is a maw to the heart of this world, you will find it everywhere there is a far edge, a man, his idea, a shattering storm. The world is no more still than any of its creatures, its musics the transformations none will resist—

*They willed me to understand, for all of this world’s complex creation, they willed me to **walk as a man**. Bear a man’s senses, have his dreams, his lusts, his fears, his two hands two eyes two legs—They willed me caged in the great edifices of his constructed homes & languages—they wanted me to understand how men loved & loathed the plenties of the world, how they felt each as a kind of . . . fruit fallen a little way from the tree, each among other fallen fruits, the tree in sight, the earth & grass beneath, the feeling of live but finite power each in his skin—they willed me from the world’s maw to emerge & go among them—contrived me to suffer with their sufferings—*

Mercy left me able to survive, & mercy alone. Between my iterations I would retreat to this woods, these now well-known oaks, I crouch close to them, I tremble years among men & many more returned here, wounds none other can know—

Close my eyes & I am again the near-blind man, my remaining sight still fluttering with lilac & lily, moving with their scented light, scratching up a spark by glint & petal, behold my silhouettes shaped like a God-thing—their word for a piece of the world that contains the world, gestates the world, guards & punishes & directs the world—

Open my eyes & I am the scrawny prick-hard singer, finding my music beneath the night’s sweeping skirts, insisting the oldest idols totter forward & people my lyrics, grind bloodless hips new with the next hour’s

*unspent semen, its high crackling juice, command the world to cloak in men's emotional garb, **world feel like men**, suffer like men, see with two eyes, five fingers each hand, a heart ticking down in time—how else explain his hard prick, his sickening blood?*

Close again & now the tall professor, behold my sepia-washed pictures, their hard press at your jaw & shoulders to justify your own sanity, resist the years-long game, in this man's form I feel able to breathe some nights, the world huddles some near me to comfort—

Again & now the dark man kneeling with my horn & shredding time, an anger in my blood blown out in song after song, yearning the love for every fruit, we are fallen from one tree, & our bed is grass under sun & stars, oh yes please, mercy, mercy, mercy

I am quiet this morning near my oaks, feeding, being fed, believing my sacrifice will be enough this time—men will finally bow & know, then stand & walk a new way—

(xv.)

There've been times, moments, places, I've relaxed, & begun to believe. Winter lights on a long boulevard, a hidden shade of cool salmon over low hills. Even battlefields on moonless nights, dying & among the dying. We are safe, my brothers, this is all home, we shall not be abandoned tonight or ever . . .

We danced the courtyard the night before you left, again, you showed me your whys, what rotting, what still pink, I had learned you were like me, molded & emerged from the maw, because I walked as a man & was lonely. You were to comfort & suffer with me. I was never sure if you were contrived from hope or desperation for the world—

Your eyes crackled with fear of want, not mine but your own. You touch my beard as though a pet, I tangle your hair with my fingers, wish again to know. Wish like men do, lustful with questions, violent with answers.

I remember that night, it was three or four hundred. You were one, or several, as was I. We'd fought for kings we'd never meet, never touch, & never know. We'd dance & I'd showed you that boulevard, those trees, your smile, long & it lingers.

As we live, so we die, so many memories, more forgotten. I writhe among my oaks this quiet morning & so remember.

It was a time for believing, my maps, my uniform in first light. The many half-remembered lovers in photographs.

We walked down so many empty streets together, looking on, looking back, I have not seen you in so long, I do not see you directly anymore, I know you better & clearer now, what I am, what you are, what all this is & is & is & is not. But there is no final thing to know.

(xvi.)

We walked the One Woods together in my many dreams, you singing songs in your own strange tongue, its clicks-clicks & noise-noises, the way pink & blue & yellow would burst from the trunks & bushes around us.

It is always dusk, when the light blurs & lingers, when a few stars peep out in the sky—

It is always dusk, when the music of the air begins to loosen, to smolder, to crackle, when want starts to unbuckle the many bound worlds of men—

It is always dusk, & the light shifts its palette, every shade & hue will strike differently than by sun, both harder & softer, go figure—

It is always dusk & what is man upon me recedes as what is Beast within me comes & comes—

It is always dusk, you are fanged too, the night is moving in deep blood & you slip in as though a swimmer a cool rapid stream—

It is always dusk & the certainties of the sun hold more frantic until deemed useless to the hours, again, until what is knowing now by shine & strum & blaze—

*It is always dusk I will never have you nearer than now—
I will never have you at all—*

Then I wake. And you are far, as we agreed, & I am silent again. You leave me signs of songs in scattered clearings, spears of your colors struck into fallen logs. I read them as they melt, sigils none other would know. Pressings, pressings.

There is something you would have me do that I hesitate. You believe I was once a man, or perhaps could be again, perhaps some better kind of man than there be. You believe we played too close to the Eternals in our drive to control, or save, or not surrender, to shape, to break through their powers & time itself. I don't know. I am ashamed how much I do not know.

But your songs begin to convince me, & I wish you near again. The sacrifices we'll need to crack the maw will come soon. They will not survive. They will fuel the transformation. We will together blow through the world. Are we supposed to? Will it be any better?

My only doubt is the girl not a girl who approaches again. I wonder if nobody has to die. I wonder why I must choose. I find your songs in more & more clearings. I retreat to my oaks more & more because thus.

I stand now where we first met, in the Tangled Gate, so long ago, where we came upon each other & knew we were of the same thing. But this is neither waking nor dream. I stand here to call down the stars from the sky & find among them a truth to hold & pursue.

I swap out handfuls, looking for the words of light I need, crush & fold & block their heat even unto themselves in my relentless need.

*When they speak, to guide my steps hereon, it is not men's tongue nor your spectral one. Their message is clear: **bind the girl, consume the dancers. Break the maw & absorb its every last dripping of power. She awaits.***

I am helpless to you. Yet I must come & go & breathe apart & away from you. I must having neared you now go far. I don't know. I don't know.



Maybe there is something in your colors as they melt away that nudges me, a sparkle, a tremble, a dripping hue I want to chase more than it all.

*Maybe the stars are not all, or their message is incomplete. I don't know. **I don't know.** But I will to.*

(xvii.)

Maya sometimes is able to sleep again in the caves, among her friends. It starts to happen when they bring to her a yellow pillow, the softest of soft, who knows a good joke or two, & the pillow's partners who tend one toward blue & one toward purple. They seem to be called Dream Pillows & they are soon in her grasp even as her many friends cluster close to her.

Exhaustion absorbs many hours of sleep for her, though there is even so a singing, someone kind & tending, near, singing.

Dreams are slow to come, but like tidal waters they do approach. Morning sunlight, tidal waters. Morning sunlight, tidal waters, the sense of a path. Morning sunlight, tidal waters, the sense of a path, *follow along*, Maya, seems to sing the voice. *See what there is to see.*

The singing voice retains for her the morning sunlight, the tidal waters, even as she begins to move along the path, to see what there is to see. Eventually there are lilies, & a bench, twisted up from the earth of vines & stones, perhaps still of the earth.

Maya sits, waits, wonders if her friends are near, or who else.

[You first came in lilies & soft morning sunlight. You came in the puzzles & formulas men called dreams. I sniffed you, twice, but did not know if I could think you friend.

[You saw me & you jerked a bit. And you smiled. And yet you were careful. And yet careful had not been in your nature till you saw me.

[I sat near you & tried to look more like a man, push myself out thusly. And I tried to speak like a man, but you shook your head, no, in this Woods there is truth.

[We played a game that morning, tap the air & loose its notes, collect the notes & shape a thing. Gently blow & lure its colors. Nod, exchange.

[Last round you conjured a small white bunny, pink nose, mesmerizing eyes, tranquil but intent expression. I held it, felt its pulse.]

Maya shifts uneasily, starts, only the singing lures her back, all is well, return, all is well, return

[You shook your head when I made to clap, give the Creature back to the air, as was common. Your smile bid me keep.

[Did we meet again? Several times? Then fewer? Then all I had of you was the White Bunny, who would sniff twice & be gone for days.

[Soon I only had soft mornings trying to remember the place where we met & played our game. Where I did

not need to conjure as man to please your company.]

Maya wakes & looks directly at me. Every Creature is clustered still near about her, her Dream Pillows close. The great cavern seems to light & dim by need.

“Yes?”

“I’m not sure.”

“What is it, Maya?”

Her eyes purple out on me, she is thinking as wholly as she can.

“You know what next?”

“Sort of?”

“Who was he?”

“The Beast. In somewhat a Man’s form.”

She nods.

“Do we leave here?”

“I think so. Eventually.”

She nods again. Wishing she was asking better questions.

Finally, a better question. “Do I come from here?”

“Maybe. Or the sea. Or Emandia.”

Nods. Tries again. “Why does this feel like home?”

“The Creature Cavern?”

“All of it.”

“The Gate?”

Nods but a sincere yes.

“I don’t know what to do with that, Maya.”

“It matters.”

“Yes.”

She smiles, heart full, & settles again among her Pillows & Creatures.

She sleeps, she rests, her dreams just a soft wordless covering upon her.

Nod, recede, courtyard has given me gift of words again.

(xviii.)

The White Bunny returns, sniffs twice, settles in my lap, as though I am a man, as though I am a rare & trusted man. We still together, we watch, the morning among oaks is full of small movements & light sounds. Her long ears rest on my arms, as though I really have arms.

I begin to remember. I am a fist of men by a map, I am a volcano burying all, I am many fish on many decks, breathing hard, breathing last. I am paintings in castles & in closets. The White Bunny nudges me return.

We sleep. I dream like a man & yet. The White Bunny looks up at me & I follow. Faster than any man’s legs, holding a . . . white thread? Through oaks whose leaves remain despite winter light, through places dark & unfinished in the Gate.

(A sloppiness? That’s the human word. They would lose form in these places, though I do not. I am made of the same stuff. Men not quite. Or maybe truer is: men less & less. I wonder if the not-quite-girl would.)

Now walking, no longer a man’s form. A girl’s slender carriage, wispy torso (like hers?), & the Bunny is

waiting near a hole in the earth. Though I am too large yet we crawl through. A long long scrabble in the dark. My thread gives out but I continue to follow.

We come to an ancient structure, burst through, a half-fallen wall, stand within. Words in my mind say: "The Carnival Room is near." I am afraid, I am not afraid. Which is truer? I see my face in many reflections around me: hard, soft, hers, his, no body's, all's.

The White Bunny hops quickly, ears flashing, & I follow on my girl's light legs through rooms of detritus & decay, at last to a room where we stop. She looks up at me, raises her pink nose, & again, & I enter.

I hear cacophony, song. I see doors mounted on walls, beckoning. A tunnel into the darkness, where its long wheeled carriage extends. Two yellow-skinned brothers observe me, plucking stringed instruments, songs of laughter.

A tiny creature at my feet, black & white, gnattering at me in . . . clicks-clicks & noise-noises? I am delighted. I wish to go. I look back but the White Bunny is gone. There is a black thread.

I follow the black thread, feeling the girl in me recede, feeling larger & more helpless, burst choking & breathless from the earth.

The return is swift, there is no adventure left. I wake & don't look down. No thread, black or white. No Bunny. Something wishes to convince me otherwise. Something would have me save what I would destroy.

What am I? What am I made of? What am I here to do?

(xix.)

The Gate-Keeper thrashes hard in her arms, she cannot tell if he is awake or asleep.

She's been losing something lately here. A sense of wants, of loyalties.

It began with the King, in his arms. She was assigned to reach him, to seduce him, to persuade him to destroy his Island exile in a total assault on the Mainland.

It was by the Gate-Keeper's will for awhile. The cameras were there, like sweat on the wall of a humid room.

He was violent with me. He bit me. He held me down when I was not resisting. He could not calm down enough to enjoy my body with him.

He kept me in a private chamber. It was lit by candles & curtained heavily. Our bed very big. I would stay there without him. The Gate-Keeper did not object though he was inly disturbed. A tremor anyway.

Maybe it turned the morning I followed the Princess after she danced. The King had no interest in watching me dance after. So I didn't. I watched her dance for him, her dreams rendered in patterns, stones & sand flying. What would happen? I don't know.

But I followed her when she dressed, when she wandered away.

She didn't. It was not vague. I learned this. She would find her way to the Tangled Gate. Never enter but near it. I would hide & watch her. She might lie before the Gate on the ground looking up. She might dance but not as she did for the King. Not as a young female supplicating, offering—no. Before the Gate, the Princess manifest in a different being entirely. Powerful, very powerful.

So I waited until she trailed away, eventually, & I approached.

A massive structure. Looked ancient beyond ancient. And above in the center, very center, were the words “*for those lost*”

I watched. I waited. I saw not far within the Gate was a Fountain, also very old, partly fallen down.

Was I restricted? Had the King or the Gate-Keeper said a word? No. Neither had said anything to me. Why would the Princess not go in? Had she been forbidden?

I didn't know. But something, *oh something*, I walked in. Nothing titanic occurred. I approached the Fountain.

The sound of the water tinkling in it like a sweet song. I sat on its outer lip & listened for a long time.

Should I drink? *Should I drink?*

I feel I should. *I want to.*

Yes I guess I will. *I will.*

I drink. I drink deeply. The more I drink, the more I wish the Princess was with me, in my arms, drinking too. I wish the King was with me. Naked with him but calm. His eyes lick up & down my legs, bite at my shoulders & breasts. I urge him drink from my cupped hands & he does, he calms. *He calms.*

I blink. He's not with me. It *felt* like he was. Here at this Fountain. But he's not here.

I vow to get him this drink. That very night, as he roars angry from his day into our chamber, to pillage me for hours, I pause him, enough, just enough, after some initial pillaging, to drink from a silver cup of water. He drinks. He drinks all.

He calms. He *calms*. He sits with me. He touches the fresh & fading bruises on my chest. He sighs. He looks at me & sighs.

“Tell me, my lord.”

“Tell you?” he says hoarsely.

“Tell me all.”

He nods. “I don't know that I can.”

“Try.”

“That drink. It was from the Fountain.”

I nod.

“This Island,” he starts & stops.

I gentle into his grasp.

“We came here years ago. My brothers & I did. It was practically all forest. A strange, beautiful, pale woods.” Silence. “Only the Gate was otherwise.”

He groans. Leans close against me, almost shivering. I gather our blanket around us. He doesn't say more. Leaves me in the night but I am covered. I am kissed.

The Gate-Keeper stares at me now. He is not awake. I learned this after the first incident.

"What are you?"

"I am the dead girl you found in the surf."

"What are you?"

"I share your bed when it pleases you."

"What are you?"

"I am seducing the King to invade the Mainland."

"What are you?"

"I am no longer seducing the King because we have drunk the waters of the Fountain."

"What are you?"

"He will tell me the truths of this Island."

"What are you?"

I say nothing & he falls back, & he does not later remember.

Then, acceleration. As though pieces snap together one & all & there is a thrust.

Neither Maya nor Christina distinctly, the Princess enters the Tangled Gate. This is what it comes to, if you've followed this long. The Gate tugs finally & all comes.

The Fountain, time to drink, it sparkles, it *sparkles*.

It tastes like remembering. But how? But so.

Christina remembers the farmhouse, the farmer, the man & his boys. I've thought of this before, I've remembered it. What's left?

It was the farmhouse itself. There were too many rooms. They were too big. They led down, where? I didn't know to see them.

Maya remembers too many times with the Creatures, it makes no sense. Do they all come from the sea, like her?

Having drunk with both hands, we calm. The Fountain is among trees as old. We think: good men built this Fountain long ago but they *did not build the Gate*.

Left or right? No way on but choose. Which way in childly dreams? Which way as my finger traced the Architect's maps?

I asked him once. Let a small pout loose in my lips, I'd noticed that would move him a little by my preference.

His eyes slid my face & led me with him down the swoop of my garment & we lingered & enjoyed until one of his fingers tapped his head, another his heart, a third his nose, but twice.

We think of the Pensionne, our adopted home, miss it fresh, leave it again, sniff twice with this feeling, & choose left. The great walls of vine & stone, twice my height, the sky above the blue of my teacher's eyes? The White Tiger in the garden whose apprentice I was, by whom I learned to tender the world & its shoots.

I think of the box of colored threads given me, more than once. By that man, Nathaniel, in his store, as he directed me & Christina & Kinley to the Red Bag.

But here too. Years ago. He held me, the Architect, on the day I left the Island, when he made me go. He gestured to a loose rock behind our couch, said, "that rock knows more of time than men can

reckon.” He sang—sang!—to me, “*the many kinds of time*, the binds of time, & how it looses to the air.” I found it there when I returned to the Island (had I left? Haven’t I always been here?)

Here it is, one box from several paths. Its legend: “*for those lost*.” Really? Maybe.

I select the green thread. It is labeled “*Recover something dear*.” I return it to the Fountain, tie the end of the thread to a stony hook. Begin again. Whatever this is now. Still his film, his Island set?

I move slowly at first, as though learning to walk. Occasionally there is a breach in the walls, not decay, not time. The ruin of angers & blows. The ground remains always gentle beneath my bare feet. I am awake. We are awake. *We hurry. We dance. We remember.*

I round a turn & recover something dear. My friends! From behind the wall in my bedchamber, discovered only in childly dreams. Too many to count. I think they’ve all come. They crow & cry, click & howl. Nothing to forgive in how I left them. Never was.

(Suddenly: my obsession with the Architect became overwhelming, my new woman’s blood crying out blindly to be near him always. Their warnings unheard. That last birthday party. I came as Maya, left as Christina. But, still, nothing now to forgive.)

“Christina.”

“Maya.”

“Don’t go.”

“I won’t. I’m here.”

“This is for all of us.”

“Yes.”

“And Kinley too.”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know what all that was but this is what we’re supposed to do. Stay with me.”

“I’m here. We’re together, Maya. I’m not sure how.”

“We’re sharing the Princess now.”

“Like a bed?”

“Yes.”

“Where is she?”

“She’s what we’re doing until we leave.”

“Oh.”

(xx.)

They lead me to a clearing where all may sit, perch, float calm upon the air. There is no gap of time between us & yet the story to be told. I have returned to the Island, bid so by my dreams, they wait quietly & wish to know my path.

“I know these are more your friends than mine, the way the script divided us up, Maya, but let me lead right now. I think I know what to tell.”

“OK.”

“There was to be war with the Mainland. The King my father was ready to return & claim again his throne. I listened from my hidden place to his counsels with soldiers & ministers. It would be bad. But my brother’s death while peace-making had led through years to a sympathy, a willingness to take on the apocalyptic zealots who occupied the King’s capitol, prepared it ruinously for end-times.”

Maya nudges me to look to our side. Cameras! What determines when he can find us? There's something to this. I nod to her alone, the Creatures wait, listen intently, I resume.

There is not even the twitching of a nose as I speak. A stray wind raises fur here & there, a few green spikes, royal purple feathers. These Creatures are aware what dark cities men dwell in their homes & hearts, & they would wish to keep me near instead if they could.

"The King's plan was a secret, well hid behind the sacrifice of virgin dancers presumed to keep him satisfied. The zealots believed this kind of offering to be sufficient, that we exiled pagans used the sacrifices to appease the Eternals, maintain our ancient practices but contained on our Island prison. When the final days of fire came, they believed we would thus be easy for their wraithful savior to find & annihilate."

The trees are bare here, it looks like winter. A glint of water in the distance. All lovely. I find this telling hard, & sad. Somehow I know these words thoroughly upon speaking them.

"Does he use a script?"

"I don't know. I don't think Kinley believes he does."

"Does he know we're both here?"

"I don't think so. Just me, Maya."

"The Creatures know. But they are not upset. They like you too."

Christina-as-Princess almost laughs, but doesn't. Talks on.

"The Architect had arranged my escape. I would go with the freed dancers & leave the Island forever. He knew, & told me in those last days, that the Beast did not consume them, in truth bore them far away, though he knew not whereto. But this time it would not happen."

Several of my friends join me in my place in the grass. Next to me, my lap, near.

"He took charge of the delivery of the dancers from the boat to the Gate, & then the Beast. He gave me the black thread & hid me nearby. When they all came, I appeared & demanded to inspect them.

"The Hero among them was easy to spy out. The Architect had told me we would work with him to make our escape. As our soldiers watched, I knocked him down, hit him about his head, cursed him. Among all that, I slipped him the black thread, him smiling at me & stroking my arm. I whispered him the words that would allow them to follow the thread & return safely. There was no choice. The King would watch some of their progress from the Architect's Tower, his spy-glass."

Now more of them are nearer me, in my lap. Fur of violet, cream, crimson. Many bears. Three giraffes. The White Bunny, of course, & her fellow tenders.

"They love you, Maya."

"They love us as their Princess."

"I think they know more than that. You are one of them in some way."

"Finish, please, Christina. Just finish. Those cameras spook me."

Resume. "We left on darkest night on the boat arranged by the Architect. We sailed away without notice. The Hero commanded the ship & all seemed to credit him our escape." I trust my friends & go on. "When he came to my cabin in the night, I had more words from the Architect to repel him.

"Then he left some of us on another island. We woke from a night of celebration on its beach, but there were only half a dozen of us remaining. Our cups had been poisoned. I was relieved. The others were terrified & looked at me."

A voice in my head, in words not English but I understand them: "You led them back safely to the cities of men?"

I nod. "There was a boat eventually. I told them of our shipwreck. I was no longer the Princess from



the Prison Island of pagans. I was a wealthy traveler & scholar from far lands, & my party followed me in this deception for our safety.”

“You are tired.”

“A little more. Eventually we returned to the Mainland. The War was over, but no victor. I chose to keep my exile & disguise even when my companions left me, returned to their homes.”

I lay back, finish. “The Pensionne I came to, I think it was the last gift from the Architect. They knew me true & cared for me. I thought I’d found a new home but they were simply letting me rest, letting me wish to return here again, if I chose.”

Exhausted. They lead me to a safe place, bundle me to sleep among them. I feel most the child again, feel their love so simple, so vast.

Perhaps asleep now, we talk.

“They didn’t want to leave me.”

“Who?”

“The ones I was abandoned with on that island.”

“Oh. Who were they?”

[They didn’t tell the Princess fully who they were—but they were not a random number—their task was to keep her company & safe until she arrived at the Pensionne—there was nothing random in any of them—nothing at all—the Architect had arranged all of this. Whether she would return to the Island eventually was the only matter he could not control.]

(xxi.)

Fell asleep wanting to tell more, more than all, I wake & most of my friends are gone, back home safe. Only three of my dearest remain & will guide me, our dangers shared, like always. The White Bunny, the gnattering little imp, the turtle who wasn’t a turtle.

“What is it with you & the White Bunny, Maya?”

“Just don’t call me Alice.”

“Haha. No. But something.”

“I don’t know. We’re close.”

“I feel it.”

My thread is played out & I guess to pick a new one, when I hear music & occasionally a man’s sweet voice. My friends press me to follow this music, leave my thread be. “He will lead us. He is the Traveling Troubadour.”

We follow without seeing him. His ringing music alone leads us. I think about the Architect & wonder if this is the way.

“We have to find him.”

“I don’t think we *have* to.”

“What?”

“I mean, this story is about you, us, & him as much as anything.”

“They knew about him at the Pensionne.”

"Is this more script in your head?"

"Yes. They didn't seem to like him so much. It's like I came back with their warning in my head. Like I didn't really know what he was."

"But you came back. Here we are."

"You love Kinley, Christina. You know him. Don't let anything confuse you."

"You love him too."

"Not like you do. Not close."

The bright music starts to fade but my friends do not hurry us on through the twists & turns. We let the music fade. I sit beneath a tall oak. Realize I feel no hunger or tiredness. My friends sit near me. We wait. The day passes. We nap lightly curled together.

The Architect, Kinley, walks up to me, takes my hand. He does not smile. Many cameras. Glad to see me. He leads me further along, faster & faster, my friends hurriedly keeping up. We come to a black cave in the earth, silent, seems impenetrable.

He looks me hard. Gestures in. A second time. "Go. Now." I want to say something but Maya restrains us. I reluctantly gather my friends & we enter the cave, walk slowly in.

Then it gets lighter. For a moment more is revealed than ever before. It's too much how raw creation & dissolution both are, how the Universe generates worlds & lives on those worlds to eventually feed upon them all. None escape. *None escape.* I cry out.

And wake. The details of it all fading. Kinley is gone. If Kinley it was. I stand now beneath the oak.

Playing it through, cameras rolling, I consider my collection of threads. Maya nudges me & I select the crimson one. "*For greater understanding.*"

We move along again, the White Bunny seeming to hurry us now. The Imp is gnattering crazily as she skitters along, the turtle quiet, not a turtle.

We are coming to something, my bones feels its jittering power. Very close.

(xxii.)

I come to you again. I remember you. We contrived Creatures from the air, like those I travel with. *I remember you now.*

You are an old story, far older than men, old as the earth.

You were created long before men.

To walk the earth. One, none, many.

You were not given rules by which to abide. A mortality. An I among many.

You shifted, & did not die. And then you did.

And then you lived on.

Now you are unable to tell me but something troubling. Danger not to you, but to me, us, men? I cannot understand, you are trying to be gentle.

You place in my mind the image of the Architect's Tower & give me a little nudge. Suddenly, I *treble*

in time. Tower, tree, starcraft, collapsing back, undoing.

Oh. Again, here, my friends sniff me twice & wait. That cave. The crimson thread in my hand. *I was in there. I think I know.*

(xxiii.)

There are many magicks in the world, & I watch you walk among several. Your friends gird you powerfully with their love, their deep roots in the earth. The cave you entered to know better is more of a danger, but I cannot get near. The script lets me only so close.

I follow as wind, as glare on water, as winter leaves. Waiting for a moment to give you word.

I spy your blue bag & make a move. Affix myself as hummingbird & wait. I listen to your chatter with your friends. They want you to return to their caves where they can protect you.

I can't let them persuade you. *We have to escape the Gate.* I begin to hum near your ear, risk this, you look around, but nothing. Your friends sniff twice & I am exposed.

But as the Architect, not Kinley. The script seems to control what we do. Cameras are filming but the Creatures pay no attention. I wonder how they can help. Are they subtly crafty, gaming enough to exploit this moment?

We sit. The tiny one, our friend who helped us escape, comes up to me, gnattering crazily. She enters my mind, pushes things around. Everything filmed but the moment when she disappears somewhere in my mind, bites my palm, cackles crazily & again, will be my signal to come, then I cry out for the Princess to retrieve her. Even as deep as this, she only retrieves because she loves the Princess & chooses to. I truly do not know what these Creatures are.

The White Bunny stares me intently, & I strangely calm, lean back, nearly dream. She does not press or pry but wearies me & again I whimper for the Princess who not for the first time resembles a bunny too.

The turtle not a turtle does nothing to my mind, sits my lap, guarding the Princess even now against me.

Choicelessly, I say, "I have no such friends as these. I did not come to harm you. *Please believe me.*"

You stand, bid your friends wait, we walk apart from them.

"You asked me to find you here."

I grimace. "You're greatly needed."

You nod obscurely.

There is a silence between us. The Princess no longer needs a teacher. You pick up your blue bag without a word. Your friends let me follow at a distance, & I know the helpless fear of ordinary men.

(xxiv.)

The script compels me to talk. “You are not what you seem, a Princess, a usual young woman. You are from a far place, now gone. A beautiful place that was rotted, used up, by men not unlike those here you know. You were sent here, when small, to change the path, make the world’s path elsewhere.

“They could not know when or where you would land, but they gave you what powers they could. To dream powerfully, to treble in time. Their gifts. The blue bag you carry is my gift to you, given when you left the Island, lined with power, protection. Fewer limits on your mind & body.

“I am learned, I see through shells, but I am just a man. I come from a time men have ruined, & it half-rots, & I will not return. I’ve come beyond the Dreaming to find you, because you are thread out of time, & this Tangled Gate bears your way.”

She & her friends remain still. Her friends think I sniff wrong, but, still, I’ve come to help.

She speaks. “What do we do?”

“Pick a thread.”

“How will I know?”

For a moment I’m tempted to reassure here, to tell her she *will* know, that her will & instinct, the love of her friends, my counsel, the deep good power in the heart of the world, will easily prove enough. But I don’t.

“There are many threads in your box. Choose one, & we’ll go.” It’s not much of an answer. She’s still waiting, as she often did when I taught her. Stubborn for whatever words unsaid. I try.

“The world is mysterious enough for us, & it cares for us in its own ways. But the world belongs to something else. You’d stare yourself blind into the sun, & not know, not be sure, not able to return & use what little you’d kept for your survival.” I stop. Enough. She nods. Motions for me to near her. Brings out the beautiful box from her blue bag.

Her friends sniff & do not seem to like this box more than they like me. I don’t suppose they would but they remain silent. She studies the threads remaining, stares up into the sky for a moment, then selects the purple thread. “A wish to heal.”

We stand. She hands me the end of the thread. Shakes her head at her friends. “When you feel a tug, follow.” And then she goes.

(xxv.)

A turn & I have left my friends & the Architect, save for the purple thread. The path ahead falters & I find myself climbing over debris of vines & stones. Soon beyond the remains of the walls but strangely shaped stones keep the paths. They are placed at equal distances.

Then I discover who is placing them & think me dreaming. It is the White Tiger from the Pensionne! My old friend. I worry this strange place will render us strangers to each other but he turns, sees me, & bows his head low for my embrace, as ever before. For a moment gone from wonder, happy, simple knowing.

“He will help us, Maya.”

“He was your Creature?”

“Stop laughing. He was my teacher there. I think something else too. Something the Gate-Keeper won’t get to know. It’s not in the script.”

“What?”

“When I was younger, I had a trainer. I was smart, that’s dangerous & hard for a girl.”

“Yes.”

“I think he was my trainer then, too.”

“What does that mean? We’re just playing the Princess now.”

“I don’t know, Maya. But something, for sure. We need Kinley to figure out this weirder shit.”

She continues. “They gave me work in the great garden of the Pensionne when I arrived there. I had brought no treasure to offer but one of my traveling companions said the Pensionne was generous to poor travelers.

“My room was small but with a tall window for sun & stars. They let me sleep many days until I was ready.

“There was work in the kitchen too, after the dinners, the one meal of the day not nuts & fruits. It was good work to lose my thoughts in, the water’s hot breath calmed me, kept my focus simple to the task. When others joined, there were songs.

“Some were war songs, which I didn’t like. Even the ones about the King my father, a returning hero, half a god in his armor.”

“Did you see him? You? We?”

Christina laughs. “Pronouns. No, I kept hidden all the years I was there. It was for the best. I kept track but did not join in.”

“The Pensionne was far from the War & bloodspill, but there was a greed for news of the battles, a hunger for violence against the zealots who had stolen & ruined so much. A devilling wish to burn them all.”

The Gate-Keeper uses my thoughts as a voice-over to a series of images, scenes of war & death. All the while I am embracing my friend & he is looking at Maya curiously within me.

“He knows you’re the Creature girl.”

“But he trained you!”

“We’re never going to sort this through, are we?”

“No. Just pass through it.”

There was more often peace in the garden. It became my domain from before light to afternoon. Most days I saw only the faces of the many blooms, heard only shaking leaves in the wind. I tempted sometimes to dance at dawn as I had on the Island. But my dreams rarely followed me into waking, & my feet rarely pressed me to dance. I did my work. I was quiet.

Then I noticed the White Tiger one day while I was scrubbing dishes. I asked the others & they laughed, said he appeared to a few but none too close, & caused no damage. I wanted to know more but they didn’t know or wouldn’t tell.

That night I dreamed of the Architect in his Tower, & I asked him. Tapped his head, his heart, sniffed twice, but I stomped.

“No. *Tell me.*”

“I don’t have to. He will himself.”

“He’s not an ordinary beast.”

“He’s a tender. You’ll be his apprentice.”

“A tender?”

He smiled at me, warm & sweet, I practically swooned like a gossip, & was gone.

“Fucking Kinley.”

“A tender? The White Bunny is a tender.”

“And the tiny one too.”

“What does it mean? What did he teach you?”

I don’t remember how we finally met, or most of what we spoke of our many days. I remember his beautiful white fur with its deep black stripes. I remember his blue eyes.

Eventually I began to dream again, & dance alone at dawn those last mornings there.

You feel real as I embrace you now, feel the soft growl through your perfect coat. I show you my thread & try to explain, but you push close, your face to mine, you make me look better. Your blue eyes are now flecked with the same purple as my thread! No longer master & pupil, we will go together again.

(xxvi.)

We push stones into place, restoring paths to a great length of the Tangled Gate. Sometimes we separate & work at different paths. Sometimes it feels like Christina & I are separate, working & helping separately. I, we, worry he’d be gone again, like he never was, but he finds us, me, us, head down for our embrace, blue eyes flicking purple, & we go on. Each of us, Maya, Christina, on a side of our White Tiger friend. I wonder how. She wonders how. No hows.

Eventually we come again to the One Woods, it is never far here, & walk among its great trees. My purple thread is running low, & we have to decide, tug & wait, or go on?

When I reach the end, we stop. I think of the Architect, Kinley, & my dear friends back there, love them, adore him, sniff twice, & look at our tender friend. *Really look.* His fur a wildly bright white, his stripes a moonless night’s dark. White & black.

“Like my threads?”

He rears back & roars with wonderful joy.

I tie the purple thread to a low tree branch as Christina watches. We together half bury the box of threads among the stones at the tree’s base. Tug. Hope our clue is clear to them.

Our tiger bows low & together we mount & ride him. Now we can go at his pace, which is swift as my White Bunny’s. *We ride.*

The landscape blurs & other things among the trees emerge. Strange buildings, vehicles. Metallic ships

up in the sky, shifting form over & over.

I feel purpose without words. A sense of hurry. Stronger than ever, a wish to heal.

Then out of the One Woods, up over a hill & below a place I should know but don't. But Christina does. She cries out.

Several buildings close together among wide fields, but these buildings are half-fallen probably deserted.

Our friend slows his pace, becomes hesitant. Sniffs twice.

Ab. I pat him twice, he kneels, we dismount. Christina nearer to me than ever before.

"Here again. I am here again."

Our friend does not go further, I won't let him. His electric blue eyes loving, concerned, unknowing. Loving. But they are his blue again. I take Christina's hand tightly as he reluctantly bounds away.

(xxvii.)

We sit down in this overgrown grassy field some distance from the farm buildings.

I wonder where the cameras are or what they would show. But it doesn't matter.

"Clover-dale."

"That's what it's called?"

She nods. Looks at me. "I lived there for a little while. I don't know exactly how long. Maybe months."

I nod. "How old were you?"

"I was an orphan. Or something. I'd come from somewhere to there & I don't remember hardly anything."

"And then you moved?"

"I ran away. Someone . . . helped me. More than one really."

She looks grey & withered. This place confuses her, upsets her. I look at the buildings closer, & realize with a start that I seem to know them too. She talks on.

"A part of me is still there, Maya."

"A part?"

"That's why Kinley & I came here. He's keeping a part of me there."

"Who? Kinley?"

"No. The scientist. I think he's protecting me somehow. Kinley thinks he won't let go." She smirks, a moment of the familiar Christina. "Stupid jealous idiot."

Her words *mean* more to me than they should. They seem crazy but for an old memory, pushing up, oh. *Ohh.*

We look at each other, maybe deeper than we have before. "Did we know each other then, Christina?"

"I don't know but maybe."

"Who else helped you?"

"It was a girl. She didn't look exactly like you. Mostly she whispered in my ear."

"How did she help?"

"The first night. He was going to have sex with me. I mean, I was brought to replace his dead wife. But she whispered in my ears to sing. And it put him to sleep. Every night I would do it. Then I wrote



to the scientist because I read his essay in a magazine. He would send me songs because I didn't know many. Then she told me to leave, that she was going to destroy the place. I had to go. So I did." By now both are wide-eyed at what they are both remembering.

"Christina, it wasn't me exactly. It was my friend, Samantha."

"She said she was Maya. She was beautiful," Maya nods. "She is."

"But why help me?"

"I think that has to do with where you are from."

"And how I don't remember?"

"Christina, I think you're from the sea, like I am."

"The sea?" Maya nods again.

"So I was brought from the sea to his farmhouse?" Nod.

"But part of me is still there. Now. What do we do?"

"We go. As the Princess."

"Like a disguise."

"It will bring the Gate-Keeper back too."

"He doesn't see us?"

"No. He's filming something else. Probably Kinley & the Creatures."

"Oh."

Hand on hand. "It will be OK, Christina. Maybe we'll find Samantha & Dean in there too."

We approach together, as one, no threads, no teachers. I feel my friends, in me, the Architect, Samantha, Dean, Dylan, I summon them all for this, love them, walk alone, sniff twice, approach the main entrance.

The steps crumble below my feet, release back to earth as I use them. This feels right, this release.

The first room is dank & cluttered, filled with kitchenware, weapons, books, as though packing & flight interrupted by death, or despair. No need to sniff here.

The next room shines suddenly, many reflections. Oh, mirrors. Why don't I remember this? I look in them, OK.

An unseen light shows me as a child, a crone, a Queen, a beggar, a barebacked dancer, a creature like my many friends (that's you, Maya), even a great growly thing. Me a Beast?

This one I study, take its calm for my clue. Something to remember new. *My friend too.*

I pass on. The air becomes outdoors chilled & I find myself in a featureless desert slashed by sun's winter heat. I walk & walk until I arrive at a kind of exit, there's a door in sight, I don't know how.

There is a little hut. Within it sits an exotic little man. He wears a baseball cap. It has a picture of . . . that little imp. Her face. Great big eyes & smile.

He's old as deserts. Comes out, makes to bow like a servant. I shake my head, touch down to his small shoulder. He smiles with several teeth but now I feel in him the same great calm power as I felt looking at my beastly image. Then he laughs, braying with delight, & begins to gnatter like the tiny imp, my friend. Ah. *OK.*

Not thinking, not scared, not sniffing this time, I gnatter in return, high & low click-clicks & noise-

noises. A kind of play, but I knew that. A kind of song too?

The more we gnatter, the more we treble in time, see this desert long ago as a great watery basin, far hence filled with starcraft. It's delightful, he's showing me something great & beautiful but—

"What am I to do?" I ask suddenly in English. Hoping he understands. "Who am I to heal? How do I get all of me free of here & find my friends?"

The little man smiles his lovely few teeth smile. Motions me to the door behind him.

"Just play through, my friends," he whispers. "Find the Carnival Room." He steps aside & yet he now protects us too. Feel it true.

(xxviii.)

"I didn't keep his letters when I left. I didn't keep anything. I left suddenly one morning when you, she told me to.

"She didn't think I could hold him off anymore. She thought something was going to happen."

"Why not sooner?"

"I wondered that. I didn't ask. But now I think, maybe, it was training."

"Training?"

"Maybe. Or maybe I was supposed to find something out."

"What?"

"He wasn't right. I mean human. I mean he looked like a man but he wasn't one. And Clover-dale wasn't right either. Too many rooms. But they didn't fit, Maya. I thought all this over later, when it was over & I was gone. I even wrote things down, trying to figure out why it didn't make sense."

"Like journals?"

"Sort of. But it sounds like a weird fucked-up story. Finally I decided to try & forget it all."

"Until now."

"Yah. It's not over. But I don't know what to do now that we're here. And we don't have Kinley with us."

"I think that's a good thing, Christina. I'm not sure why I say that to you. Don't be mad."

"I'm not. I agree. He wasn't here then. I was. You were, sort of."

"Is he here? The farmer?"

"I don't know. I thought Samantha was going to destroy him & the oldest son."

"What about the scientist?"

"I don't know that either."

"We're powerful, Christina. I mean together, like this."

"Yeah."

"Are you ready to go in?"

"I guess."

"Have we seen anything you remember?"

"The outside, that's how it looked. The rest, not really."

The last night in his bed, it's why she sent me away. That whole day. Maybe I pushed her to do it. I had no truth to work with but I needed something to happen. So I pushed it. I knew she was watching.

The oldest one overcame his memory's pain & came home early from the afternoon farming. I saw him coming through the window. Slowly, reluctantly, but coming.

I'd been waiting, with a plan. Hurried to the farmer's bedroom, to the bathroom within it. Shed my clothes on the bed, turned on the shower, stepped in. Then simply waited. I heard him enter the house.

His steps were uncertain, looking in one room, then another. Not wanting to hear the shower. His groin's remembered pain knew it was a trap. But he came on anyway. Saw the clothes on the bed. Removed his own. Tried to speak—to warn me? To hope for my invitation? But no words. Nothing. He entered the bathroom, closed the door. Maybe I would finish him off this time. I wasn't sure I wouldn't as he pushed aside the curtain & stepped in with me.

Then clarity opened my mind to what I would do. His terrified eyes, his shrunken member. This boy was a game piece.

Taller than me, I faced him calmly, pulled his head down to me, into the hot water, gently rubbed the water through his scalp, massaging it closely & thoroughly. No words, I calmed his breathing. I slowed him down now in time, took a better hold, shifted him back & forth so he could see me younger & in other places & older & far away; once I started this, it was like sliding a coin around a table. Then I brought him back slowly, landing him in the farmer's bed the night before, perching him between my eyes to watch. He felt my nude body, cold even beneath covers, watched the farmer douse the lights, nude also, & slide into bed. Felt the soft but gritty hands slide about me, heard closely the quiet moans as he touched my breasts, my thighs, my face—

"cherry, so cherry" whispered

& I began to sing, so quietly at first that the farmer was not aware, but with more & more power, & he was grasped, seized, moved about, though I kept slipping, kept having to adjust & grab again, & my singing would waver & strengthen,

& I took this boy into the singing itself, back several hours to my bath in this very room, the candles, the incense, I led him right in my bath with me, lingered him over my face, lips, across my neck, down my shoulders & among my breasts, brushed him against my hard nipples, he gasped, & rubbed his lips upon me, pushed a little more till he tasted, he groaned & tasted, then led him down my stomach & between my thighs, softly, deeply, into me, *ohh*, concentrated his being into his cock & entered him into me, *ohh*, deepdeep into me, *ohh*, close, but no, retreat, slowly, wetly retreat, & then I showed him the letter I was reading, from the scientist, was it a poem? this boy didn't know but I led him along the lines of the poem, one after the next—

In it he told me my story before I fully knew it was mine, in detail he told it, I made this boy read it & begin to sing it with me, us together, as the farmer curled close to me, his hands on me, his mouth wetly close, but the spell of words coming upon him, that hard old cock of his, meant to rent & seed me, softening, his hands loosing that wish to encompass me whole, his body falling back even as we sang on & on—

*In childly dreams I visited my friends
who lived in caves & tunnels behind the wall
of my bedchamber. My first time I did not
know I was still sleeping when I heard
a singing voice. I did not wonder, as one
does not wonder in dreams, at the hole.*

*I quietly crept through the hole, listening.
 Sometimes the singing voice was gay,
 sometimes tragic, but it never ceased.
 I met the White Bunny first, not a word,
 but instantly my friend. She showed me
 how to hop the tunnels, remember by sniff.*

*All admired the gnattering little imp, her strange
 play with objects, now this, now that,
 now here, now gone! But her tricks ran
 deeper, her play like a wise funny book
 written on the water, finished in the air.
 So many friends, & weeks of sleeping hours
 to know them, each time I climbed through
 the hole. The White Bunny waited. We went.*

*I could not forget the singer though none
 knew where he was. Sometimes his voice
 joined our songs, our laughter, even the gnattering
 imp would seem to play & teach among
 his tunes. One grew used to the singing,
 like an ocean's tide. One wished to gift in return.*

*I gathered my friends together & told
 them we must make the singer a gift.
 A small box, to keep his most valued possession.
 With a few words I borrowed from the Architect
 (he had so many!), this box would be most protected.
 Every friend gave a stone, or a jewel,
 a feather, a scale, a nut, a clipping of fur.*

*With the White Bunny, the gnattering imp,
 & the turtle who isn't a turtle, we traveled
 for many of my dreams, listening closely,
 nearing, then not so near, the singer.
 I feared will would not be enough, despaired
 a little. The singing grew despairing too.*

*I sniffed twice, & begin to laugh. The singing
 joined me, as did my friends. Laughing
 became a happy song, a song of finding,
 a song of gifts. We hurried, we slowed.
 There were no rules to finding him.
 He did not know where he was.
 We sang. We gnattered. We neared.*

*I felt us very close now, we all did,
 the singing filled us whole but, still,
 not quite. I sniffed twice, & took a deep leap.*

*"There is a door," I sang, "♫ now we pass
through. There is a door. And now we pass through!"
And so we arrived in the Carnival Room,
the root of the singing, its Tower, its starcraft.*

*One had to look around like singing,
one had to listen closely like singing,
one had to walk like singing, sniff like singing,
♫ always keep singing, or one found
one's self back in an ordinary tunnel
♫ the singing close ♫ elsewhere like always.*

*So much to see, a feast of wonders:
vast, deep mirrors, with shifting tales
writ on them—doors hung high
upon walls, ♫ other places they would
lead—a painting of a great wheeled
carriage on rails—♫ when I sang ♫
laughed ♫ gnattered my best, there were
two exotic brothers, one playing a stringless
guitar, the other dancing with a castle
upon his head, their songs joined my
laughter, ♫ the general gnattering, ♫
the singer's happy cries, many, one, none.*

*The singer, I learned, could only be
found in this way. Not a solid form,
but by habitation. He **was** his many songs,
♫ those he shared, ♫ this was his function,
♫ this was his happiness. In my many childly dreams,
I did not question this. It was answer enough.*

*Now, feeling like I am far from those
childly dreams, ♫ yet, I listen for his
music, any note or quiver of it. The rooms
I pass through grow large ♫ larger,
sometimes empty, sometimes furniture
the size of mountains. Always a half light.
No sound but my bare feet hurrying.*

*I try to remember the songs, even just one,
but they elude me. We sang many,
♫ many times over. Just one. Nothing.*

*Then . . . music! but not singing. Instruments.
A squeeze box, two fiddlers. I come to
a room of my own size again, dark but
noisy. I follow the music. A long tunnel.
Follow the music. Now a . . . platform*

*above rails, like the picture from
the Carnival Room! It is close, but
I look for the musicians.*

*They are indeed three. An old man
with a mess of hair, in a long grey coat,
playing the sunniest day on the many
yellowed keys of his old squeeze box.
The fiddlers tall, thin, so very thin, barefoot
like me, dressed in faded harlequin
rags, dancing & fiddling with eyes closed.
They do not notice me. I listen.*

*Then, I begin to dance. Not just to dance
like remembering. The years fall away
completely & I am dancing with all of me.
Dance like laughing, dance like gnattering,
dance like singing under the big moon,
under none. I dance like the tides,
like the tallest oaks, like everything
I can conjure. I forget the where
& the what of it all, forget to sniff
twice & know, I dance back my years
to far away unknown places, & dance
on to the many I will become & know
in other times. As the roar of the great
wheeled carriage escalates, I return,
as best I can. The musicians have
finished too, & gaze me quietly.
I am arrived finally at this moment
of my self, this perpetuity. I am ready.*

I traveled the boy deep into my bones, where all these words coursed music in me & we occupied the sinews of my body as I read the letter in the candle-lit bath, & I'd usually masturbate myself again & again but this time I didn't, I had to hold onto this open deep need—he moaned in my mind for this release but no—

Then we traveled to the farmer's bed in dark of night, him now sleeping his childhood's peaceful sleep, & we climbed onto him, positioned on his soft cock with our mouth, blowing & whispering the magic words until it began to rise & thicken again, & we licked & blew, licked & blew, & he understood that this man was not his father, he'd been purchased too, & his brothers & an anger in him that I needed to press on as I moved around in the bed until the farmer's cock pressed against my inner thigh & I kept shifting until I felt it pressing, pushing against my pussy lips, & my unsated hunger was near blind upon me to make the final move to slip him deep in me, I might have but a moan, not the farmer but the boy, whimpering me to remember & desist & I did & that I think was when Samantha decided it had to end, that moment when the boy became my friend——

(xxix.)

The swaying as I come to, as Maya nudges me from within, is indeed a train, a faster train than I've ever been on.

"Are you OK?"

"Yah. I think so."

"Did all that really happen?"

"I think so. It's funny you don't remember."

"I just don't know. It seems like Samantha, not me. Was I there somehow too? Maybe like this, like we are now?"

I open my eyes. It's a subway train. The car we're in is half-full. Several boys & men glaring at me, a couple obvious. I look down. Oh.

Tight low cut blouse, with a sort of leather vest. A skirt so short my butt can sneeze uninhibited. Not Maya's style for sure.

"No. It's not. But yours?"

"Yah. When I was younger. I think after I left the farmhouse I sort of let myself go dull. My mind & body. Body especially. Then I got to high school & saw how it was. So I got a trainer."

Shit. It was because of you I got to look like this. Then I just wanted every guy who hadn't looked at me to look, look twice, like these.

I think. Kinley's son. As the Architect, he has a son.

"Help me focus on the script, Maya. I need to remember the Architect's son."

"Kinley?"

"Yah. I mean, not really, but yah. Just help me."

"OK."

I wasn't left alone very often. But then a day, & I left the Architect's Tower offices. As I descended the staircase, the faces frowned at me.

"Faces?"

"In the stone. I wasn't sure what they were, but they were trained to keep watch on me. That day I didn't care."

I found you in your chamber.

(You had taught me so many things. Yoga. Tai-chi. You listened as I tried to piece my life together in words.)

A thousand candles lit. At first I couldn't see you.

(Your studio. You said I could come in any time. Told me where you hid the key.)

A whisper in my ear. "You're beautiful." A hand on my cheek, a breath.

(What happened that day? There was no teacher-student tension between us. I knew even then what that felt like.)

I say nothing but more away. "Are you scared?" Still nothing. "I wish you belonged to me instead but neither of us is of this world anyway."

(Was it obligation? Did you have to train me that way too?)



Another breath & there is darkness, & I am tumbled into embrace. Touched high & low, strangely, I am not scared.

(Just the wrong hands. I didn't know whose were right but I did know yours weren't. Still, something in me urged me to please you, to relax to this & please you.)

Stranger still, when you for a moment pushed my thighs open to push yourself in me, there was nothing, nothing between yours.

(I was willing enough, but you hesitated. Relaxed your hold. I thought you smiled & I guess I did too. Maybe I laughed. Not at you.)

I am shocked. I laugh.

(Did I laugh at you? Because you had me spread & willing enough on your floor & you were soft & hesitant? Was I that cruel? Was I *that fucking cruel?*)

You fall away, cry out, are gone.

I return to the Architect's office.

Say nothing. Learn how that works.

I stand up. Pull up my panties & jeans. I leave. We're done. I see no way forward & I don't really want you enough to work for it. I've already learned how a slow smile & the right clothing can win me most of who I want. So I do. Quite a few. Not carelessly but for practice. I knew someone was coming.

My eyes are now open to this traincar. There you are. I smile. This is me now. Not traumatized jailbait Xtina. Speak. Easily.

"You're beautiful too. You always were."

Your look is inscrutable.

I think. "You did it on purpose?"

He nods.

(Help me, Maya!)

"Are we from the same place?"

"I think so."

"Is that where we're going now?"

"You are."

"But you're here on this train."

(Oh. Shit. *Shit!* He died too, Maya. Both of them did. I think. I went to see him, when I graduated. I was angry at Kinley, since it seemed like he was letting me go. I went to see him, just to feel something like I did. I would have with him, oh would I. But they said he was gone. No clear story. But possibly an accident. I cried & I cried. I never told Kinley. I wouldn't know what words.)

"Only a message. They will think you something else & try to claim you. You are there to heal, solely."

I nod. "I'm sorry."

"I wish we had, Christina. I wish it had been like that, to let us know."

Alone again on the carriage as it pushes at high speed through hours & miles & maybe more. There is nothing to see through the windows. I wait, afraid to dream, miss everything, whatever I am, whatever I was.

"Just hold close, Christina. I'm here with you."

The train arrives in daylight & I guess I wake up. I hear shouts. “She is here. She saves us! She is here!”

They’re pale, there’s a lot of them. They live in these high caverns we are in. They tell me in too many pressing faces that they dream to heal the world.

They are failing. I am their waited legend. The first to cross the Dreaming back from elsewhere.

“Should I come out, Christina?”

“No. Just pay attention.”

“OK.”

They crowd around me, shorter than I am. Show me their sleep chambers, the brew each drinks to cross the Dreaming. Kinley would love all this. Bastard.

I can’t comfort them as much as I want but I find myself sniffing to know more. I think Maya is doing that but I’ve gotten to trust her weird Creaturely instincts & moves.

“Thanks.”

They think I have solved their riddle.

How to heal not hearts but history.

They are waiting for me to say something, give them orders. They get impatient.

“There isn’t time. *There isn’t time.*”

Pushing me toward an open sleep chamber, a cup of that drink. *Shit.*

Maya’s about to show when there is a roar through the caverns, the millennia, *everywhere, always.*

(xxx.)

When the purple thread tugs at my hand, we hurry. We Creatures are together now completely. They have taught me how to push beyond myself as simply a man.

They take turns with me, because I am slower & can’t handle more than one of them at a time. The White Bunny tends my hands, shows me their pain, spreads them out straight to my whimpers, shows me their beauty. Lets me cradle her & feel what flows bright & easy between us. It seems always night in the Gate now, the moon always full.

The gnattering little imp compels me crouch low to her level & gnatter too, high & low, she clicks & cackles & adjusts my mind closely, gently, not simply to open me within & expose my all, but to scour out the rot from my long years among men & their wars.

The turtle not a turtle goes last on this endless night & I expect another lesson or clearing, feel humble, glad, really glad, but he falls asleep in my lap & I let myself too.

We share a dream together, & he brings me to where she would visit them, deeper reaches into the caverns. I am walking upright now, I am clear. I see the Red Bag & know this is what they were all leading me to, readying me for—

I wake & they are all in my lap, like oldest dearest friends. We sniff once like hello, gnatter a joke or

two between us, & then the tug.

We go together but there is something in this that is me leading us now. We will find you, we will protect you. Both of you, I promise. When we arrive to your thread tied to the tree, your box of threads buried below, I know, I am clear, I sit down with these friends of yours & mine & do what I hadn't thought to before.

I braid the remaining threads together, close & tight. I work silently yet there is music near, singing. My friends are near me, they wait, they are patient to my task.

The threads now form a longer line & their power glows. This line will not run out. The box I stow in my cloak & I tie the braid's end to the thread on the branch.

We begin together to find you both, protect you both, save you both. "I was wrong before that you are the thread," I say to every camera lurking nearby us. "We share this among us, with these colored tools, the trees, the Gate. We will do this task together. We will learn how together."

I stop, my friends stop. I point into the foresty dark glare & gesture, firmly, *come here*. After a moment, the Gate-Keeper nods, & comes forward.

(xxxi.)

"We know the words used to describe us: zealots, fanatics. We know the hatred of those who would oppose us. We know, too, at least a few of us, how the world ends: dead air, dead soil, & so many failed tries to undo the disaster.

"Once it seemed the Tangled Gate was the way, set the path to undo the vision it showed us. Yes, I was one of the fellowship that landed on the Island's shore, when it was all forest. We found the Gate, saw what was to come at the end of the world.

"We were each given a choice that day: save mankind or save the world. I chose the first. The others chose otherwise.

"We each entered the cave of the Beast, fought its battle, received its message. It was how the Gate communicated to each of us. I can't say how it was each of us emerged from the cave but we were not the men we'd been, nor was our fellowship any longer intact.

*"Now, of those six, only you & I remain in this here & now, & we will never sit together at table again. Your numbers diminish by the years & what matters more is that I will efface you from history itself. You will unbecome & I will powder your bones on the sea. I remember who you were & this is the only way I can honor that person. You **shall not** bear his name, walk in his body.*

"All for the girl. All because you could not accept your loss & chose to truck with the demons you call Eternals. Now she is gone & your demons are fled you. My brother, you fight on as if no choice."

The Gate-Keeper stops reading for a moment.

"Have you filmed that?" asks Kinley.

"No. Not yet. Soon."

"Do you know who we are?" asks Christina.

"You two are the Princess. He is the Architect. They live in the caverns within the Tangled Gate."

"How do you know us?"

"I cast you."

They look at each other, upon hearing this.

"What does that mean?" asks Kinley, grey & agitated.

"I was told you were coming to be in this part of my film, & so I waited for you. You came."

"How is that 'casting'?" asks Christina.

Maya & the Creatures say nothing, simply sniff.

He holds up the ragged manuscript.

Two word title. "This convinced me."

All are quiet a moment. The Gate-Keeper talks some more. "He knew this was the best way for you to pass through."

"Who?"

He looks at Maya who stares back him bluntly. "You know him as a Beast." Looks at Christina. "You know him as a scientist who helped you once." Looks at Kinley. "He is no threat to you, provided you follow through on this. You have to know all this & what's to come to understand."

There seems no choice. The Gate-Keeper reads on.

"But when there is nothing left, when the Island, & the Gate, & the girl, are all no more, perhaps you will come to me. Perhaps I will forgive. Perhaps I won't. Perhaps, as you said to me, there are stranger strengths in the world that will write our final fates."

"That last night. I knew before the rest you would take what the demons called Eternals offered. I pounded the table between us until every lamp in the empty hall shook."

"Is there none of the Saviour's mercy left in your heart?"

"What Saviour?' you said bloodlessly."

"You showed me your fist, pounded your chest, then opened your hand. Tapped your shaggy head. 'These will save me. There is nothing else.'"

*"You see a hole in the bosom of the world, Brother. He fills that hole up, day after day, & his beat is growing strong enough to **save us all**."*

The Gate-Keeper closes his manuscript & nods. Makes to leave, then pauses. "They are elsewhere again. Keep going." Kinley starts, looks around. Gone. Looks at the Creatures, now his dear friends. Nods. They walk on.

(xxxii.)

I reach into my traveling coat, on a whim, root around among the little colored books & there is . . . another one, a different size. I pull it out quickly. Sit down in the path. Just so. My Creature friends settle close to me, waiting.

I page through the writing. "This one's different. It's in English. I can read it right now." Page after page. They wait quietly, not even sniffing.

I find the last entry & begin to read aloud.

"The force of human history was on the side of the fist, not the open hand. Both were powerful, but only one spoke to the most helpless fears of mortal men, that whatever health or happiness or prosperity was achieved, it could not be maintained. Beat would slow, breath would stop, mind would cease. Not a billion preachers of a billion magickal, instructional, or just comforting words could prove otherwise."

I pause, look at my friends. "I had gone above ground, with a mask, for a little while. It was always a risk but I had a good weapon & I knew places the population would not go. Places with long histories of danger & ill luck & fear. Usually fictional, all of it.

"I went to one, on a hill, overlooking an overgrown freeway. Nobody knew I was leaving. Nobody knew most of what I knew, & this knowledge was leaving with me."

They stay near me, a sniff or two. But have learned I'm like this, there is no danger, this is me being me. They protect me as much as I do them, if not more. They leave me my space to talk, to read to them, whatever. I take a jerking breath, & read on.

"Proof, assurance, a reply to despair, lay beyond men's daylight lives of grab & fuck. Even as they belonged to their world in a way few could really know, their world belonged to something else. It lay in the open hands of those who begat it from the ashes of other worlds, other men. While no longer corporeal, these others had their effect, nudged into history some of its brilliant moments. But they saw over the centuries it was not working, again."

My friends huddle me close, know this is hard. I am happy near them, for all this. They are my friends, this matters to them as to me. We love each other. I read on.

"The Tangled Gate preceded human history as a portal to this world, a crossroads where intentions of the Eternals could be made manifest. It is the source of human dreams, that nightly clue of worlds elsewhere, of many kinds, with offers of many threads. Dreams inspired men to build, to create, to raise up civilizations but, as before & before & before, it was not enough. Those who believed men apart from their world, superior to it, meant to feed blindly & to breed more feeders perpetually, & explain their exception to all other life as the will of an invisible hand they alone resembled, failed to understand that hand, that it held all, that it was many hands, that these hands more & more despaired, that beyond time itself these hands would contrive a child, not a saviour but one who would take of this world something as it ended, something of it beyond it, to the next world, that as she passed through the Red Bag, she would no longer be merely human but the world itself, its lessons, its losses, its beauties, its smallest sounds, its heart living still as what was left behind was abandoned by the Eternals for lost, as men did not save themselves, as their world did not recover its grand & subtle power, as time itself ran out & the last breath, & the last beat, & the last dream."

I take one hitching breath, don't look up, & read on. "I'm going back to find you, & follow you, if you will let me. Perhaps you need an ordinary man in the next world too, who hopes & fears as men will hope & fear, who will help them know time & death & dreams as you have failed to. I leave tonight."

I look at you, finally, & you are none of you upset, & I wonder what I do not know. I love you, I love the Princess, as I have never loved before. I would protect you more than what I am, just a man.

The White Bunny sniffs twice & begins to hop, slowly, waiting. The tiny imp begins to gnatter a song, & follows hurriedly, as does the turtle who isn't a turtle. I stand, I follow, I catch up, the braided thread playing out from my hand as we go.

(xxxiii.)

Again, suddenly, elsewhere. When I open my eyes, we're an I again, still, suddenly, I find myself leaning against the shoulder of my strange friend from childly dreams. *Oh.*

He is playing our game, nudging music from the air, giving it shape. His touch is light, gentle, but to its purpose. His strange smile, shows me his work. My friend, the White Bunny. I am pleased. She sniffs twice, takes my lap.

"Where are the others?"

"She is here & there both."

"Where are we?"

"Near the road away."

"Away?"

(We are I right now, Maya & Christina, among each other, one, none, many, this is the Beast, Maya's friend, & the scientist, who saved Christina, we see with one pair of eyes both her purple & her blue, breathe with one lungs, beat with one heart, our single mind, I cannot describe this better but this is how we have to follow this through now)

His look is sad. He nears resembling a man—my scientist?—then more a tree, a swarm of insects, a high tide on an empty winter shore. But still sad. I look at him close, but not enough, I crawl among his buzzes, his branches, his waters, his arms. I raise my joys & share with him, when the world has warmed me, amused me, taught me, loved me—loved me innocently, loved me dirty, loved me shy, loved me well—

"Please. I am your friend. I am strong."

"I know."

"Who were those people? The sleepers? You brought me back."

"The last of men. Your architect's people."

Um. I nod. Try to think. The Beast saved me from them, the scientist saved me from the farmer, he means me well. Yet—

"Will you come with me?"

"No. I remain."

"And my friends?" The White Bunny is asleep in my lap. He makes to stroke her fur, hesitates, doesn't.

"They are a part of men. They come from the dreaming mind, the shaping hand. You will meet them wherever you pay attention."

Feeling helpless, I begin to anger some.

"What is my choice in this? *Tell me.*"

There is a silence in & around us, a long, long breath, in, out, in. The Beast now seems to comprise everything that walks, flies, & swims the earth. "Where there is life, there is choice. But sometimes not the ones we would wish."

I hug him deeper, his branches, his buzzings, his ocean deeps. His empty canyons, under full moons. His green buds, his curling leaves. I hug him like my beating & my breath, my dancing, my music, my singing. My many loves. I want to remember it all.

"Thank you. Safe journey. Goodbye."

(xxxiii.)

“Wait.” Maya pulls them apart, literally. The Beast/scientist starts back from fading elsewhere.

“Maya. What?”

Maya sees the Beast of the Princess’s childly dreams. Christina sees the scientist, or thinks so.

“You kept a part of Christina to protect her.”

Silence.

“Are you going to release her?”

“Maya—”

“She had to come here to find you. Here you are. Are you letting her go?”

“Not yet.”

“Why?”

“You have to finish this.”

“Then?”

He looks at Christina now. “I don’t know all the answers. My article that you read came to me in a vision. In the vision I saw you where you had been brought to, that place, that farm-not-a-farm. You were scared, your memory stripped of you, the man who purchased you showing you his hand, how you resided in his closed fist. I saw how you eluded him night after night by singing him to sleep. I was brought into that bedroom in this vision, close to you, till I could smell your young scent mingled with your fear, & I could know he was not a man of any mortal, earthly kind.

“I was then brought up, up, in this vision, into the skies, among the stars, & I was given to understand that we came from them long ago, that we originated in the music galaxies make a-borning, colliding, passing from giant beings to dust, & back again. The universe is full of music, everywhere! And I was told to write it all down for you, to begin to save you, this was my task, my great task to take me places I did not know I had already known.

“I wrote the words the next morning & sent them off to the magazine as I was told, but I did not know or believe what had happened or feel anything would come until I received your letter & I understood it was all real. You were real, & in danger, & I would help you. It was because you asked, not because you were compelled.

“I would dream every night, begin in the farmer’s bedroom close to you, listen as you sang to him the words I had sent you, watch him fall to his peaceful, painless sleep, & then I would leave you & rise into the sky, the stars & I would experience the great musics of the universe, comets crashing, suns exploding, planets green & ice planets & water planets, & I would wake with a song for you to sing, words filling me till I wrote them out & mailed them to you—

“And then it was over & you were gone & I dreamed no more yet we were not severed. I moved along with something of you still in me, & now here you are & I can see you & wonder still what between us. I don’t know what happens now. I just know you have to finish this.”

Christina nods. Nods at the scientist, at Maya. One, again, suddenly, she turns from him & continues along.



(xxxiv.)

The road away is long & straight, brown plains on either side. I feel as though something withholds from me, an unsure stranger here. Sniff twice, thrice, four times, a shimmer, nothing. I think of my White Bunny asleep in my lap, imagine her legs extended, her ears flying back, tug for this in my mind, & find myself changed, thought & instinct one, tug a little deeper, & I treble in time—

A shimmer, a break. Back, hence? Neither, both. None, one, many. Here is no time & every time. The fields are brown, are green, are seas, are filled with starcraft. The road remains. I am not alone, but need to tug more clearly. I stop hopping, steady myself, close my eyes, feel around.

Somewhere, deep within, Christina snickers. Twice.

There . . . a thread, but thick, it is braided. Open my eyes & see.

The glare of a distant movie camera blinds me for a moment. A moment. Then I see the Eternals, know this is their processional, they are departing this world.

Christina & Maya separate a bit, each needs the other right now to reck this scene. There is sadness here but . . . something else, something we could not have thought, a kind of waiting joy. Something new to come to, open hands, open doors, strange chances.

Seeming unnoticed, I hop among their numbers. They have their hierophants too, feathered up like hawks & eagles. Their initiates in rainbow garb, simple, humble nonetheless. Others who know better carry instruments, pipes, guitars, horns, sometimes cluster & raise up stomping songs. Staying near the braided threads, I continue hopping forward through the processional, toward the glinting, glaring thing ahead. Not the Gate-Keeper's movie camera this time, though they are around in number still. It is the sea.

Distracted, delighted, I am more fully become girls again, & wonder if this is the Island's shore, or even its same sea.

"They are all one, I think."

"One, none, many."

The initiates, the musicians, the hierophants too are splashing, bathing one another. I keep a pace apart when I am approached by a smiling man, familiar.

"Uh oh."

"Keep cool."

(Just as Maya led them while they were White Bunny, so Christina leads them now. Her slouch fits the moment's need.)

It is the Hero who abandoned me & the others to that Island. He holds out open hands & bids me listen. "It was by the Architect that I did all I did. His will led me through all my actions regarding you." The surf, noise, & laughter cascades around us.

"Are you with all of these?"

"No. Not really. I was sent to guide you." Silence. He looks closer at me, arrogance & brute expectation gone from his face. I wait.

We sit on the sand, watching the revelry. I let him sit closer to me than I would like. Let him secretly sniff my scent. Feel my breathing close. He does not look at me but it does not matter. Speaks again.

"I was made by agreement between Eternals & some men. My purpose was to contact the Beast, ask his help. The words you gave to me at the Gate as I entered were for him. A surrender, a truce, that when you entered the Gate, you would be aided to pass on. The word you spoke to me that night on the ship when I came to you, it was the Architect's next instruction. It's why you & they are all here now. It's why what happened then & now next."

"He told you where to leave me."

"Yes."

"And with which dancers?"

"Yes."

"It was all planned."

"Yes."

We sit quiet watching celebrants return from the water, dry & dress. As more ready themselves, there is a sense of waiting for next.

"What is my choice in this?"

He starts. "It is all by your choice. You will decide what will be."

"When?"

He smiles, stands, offers his hand.

It is soft, strong. Maya & I look at each other within. Smirk, blush a little.

Yet he's afraid of me, would kneel if I bid so. I think about it, Maya shakes her head.

We walk together among the crowds, further along the road, evening coming on.

"What did the Beast say to you?"

Silence.

"I asked him what a hero is, this part I was crafted to play."

Silence.

"He said a hero understands fear in others' hearts as well as he does in his own."

I nod.

There are many shouts ahead, fields by the road filled with tents, bonfires, dancers, musicians. Stars heavy & light in the sky.

I keep close to this Hero who understands. He coaxes me laughing to dance, some of his old swagger returning.

I let myself undo all battered down within. Maya, shyer & shyer, shifts onto one with me to secretly enjoy. Lose to the fires, the stars heavy & light.

I don't know what the morrow will bring. I wonder about the Architect, really about Kinley; about

Maya's, our, friends.

Then his strong hand grasps my waist & for a merciful while I don't wonder. I sweep into fire, music, & dancing, into the powerful man's nearness, into my girlishness, into my mortality, into my lights.

(xxxv.)

There is still a long way to go, it seems, & the new day is for fasting. I walk beside the Hero, lightly trebling in time but keeping my steps about me. I am agreeable to this in that I am not sure its purpose. The Hero keeps my lips wet with drink against the dry winter sun.

Hmm. "Maya."

Silence.

"Maya!" What do I do? Bark for her attention?

She's listening but silent. Distracted or maybe concentrating both. Whiskers are probably twitching.

"Funny."

"What's up? You're too quiet. Too somewhere strange & I can't tell it."

Silence.

"*Tell me.* I'm really a persistent bitch when I need to be."

"The Hero. He sometimes looks a little familiar."

"Sometimes? Familiar?"

Silence.

"Who?"

"No."

"Who?"

"I'm wrong."

"I doubt that."

"Dylan" she blurts.

Oh. Shit. Well this complicates things more, if it's possible.

"Doesn't mean it's him."

"Like Kinley isn't the Architect."

"Tooshie. But we can't assume it's the same thing."

"Why not?"

"Because we can't, Maya. We have to be able to pick up on things but not assume. Just see what connects."

She's quiet. But thinking.

"Now I know too. So we'll see. Maybe it's just a coincidence but nothing weirder. We'll see, OK?"

I feel her nod. I know she'll tend to be more girly now so I will have to catch her slack if needed.

We continue.

Trebling does not help me know better. And what I know does not explain. As always when dismayed, I think of my friends during our best days in the caves & tunnels of my childly dreams. They are important, simple & wise. They have stayed with me always.

"There used to be masques then," I say aloud to Christina. She listens. I like when she listens. It's like something strong on my side.

"We'd decorate the caves & tunnels, bring out instruments. Lots of singing. Costumes. They'd have me wear a crown of vines & stones &, um, preside over it all. You would have liked it a lot." She nods,

listens.

"There was one in particular, a very strange one. I didn't know which friend was wearing which costume. They usually dressed as sprites or oaks or sunshine or red berries."

"Creaturely costumes."

"Yes. But this time they dressed like men & women, & I could not figure out how they did it with their usual forms."

"Magic?"

"They didn't usually do things like that. It's hard to explain but they had certain ways & this night felt different."

I take a breath. Dylan, or the Hero, whoever, is looking at me closely.

"You're red-faced. Drink this water."

Maya's too blushed to do, so I nod & smile for us & accept his water. We sit by the roadside for a few minutes beneath a tree. I can see what she means. But maybe not. I wouldn't have noticed by myself. We stand & walk on. He wants to hold my hand, friendly, & Maya tries to run us. From some freaky memory I click-click noise-noise her calm, & let me drive. She calms, lets.

"Tell me more."

She's silent but trusts me, & likes the hand despite herself. Talks.

"They gathered around me, these beautiful forms of men & women, smiled me loving & sad both, it was impossible but they did. Then they sang to me in a . . . um . . . like a braided voice:

*'When the glaring lights have left
When the music has slowed to smoke
When there is sniff of good blood & then no more
When touch brittles maybe to break
When taste is old & cold, hurts*

*'The Red Bag, doorway back to dreams
The Red Bag, the path, come
The Red Bag, come, trust, come here'"*

For a moment I see twice, then multiply. I am along this road away, I am with my friends in that strange masque, I am waking in my bed in the Pensionne on a wet spring morning, I am swimming with all that I am to make the Island's shore.

The Hero catches me & leads me off the road again to a shady place. We sit in peaceful grass, the day is warm but kind. He makes me drink water, looks around once, feeds me something like a small handful of fruits & nuts from his bag.

I try to cohere. I'm here, not those other places. This isn't much of an answer but just to go with it for the moment.

"I am not ill. A day of fasting should not fell me like this."

"It's not that, Princess. We're getting closer."

I take a leap. "The Red Bag."

He nods. This is as much as he knows.

I look at his face closely. Sweet, intelligent. Dylan, Dylan's kind, I don't know for sure, but a sudden good thought.

I take from my pocket the few things I still carry. Knife, brush, my totems. One resembles my gnattering imp friend. I press it into his hand. "A gift."

His face fears, retreats. I smile, the lush girlish smile he had longed to possess once his own.

(Dylan? I am your own. I don't care what the script says. We belong to each other. I am stupid to say this. But it's my truth.)

(Christina wrestles Maya behind her, keeps her there. Maya growls once, then calms.)

"You're the Hero they guised you as. For real now." He smiles, helps me up.

We walk among the hierophants, initiates, musicians.

"I would defend your life from any & all." I nod. This time I take his hand, in bonding friendship. Maya calms behind me. Him being near, Dylan or near-Dylan, it is deepest medicine to her heart.

(xxxvi.)

*Neither death nor dream
are truly a remote land*

The Gate-Keeper coordinates all cameras for his film's climax. This version's climax, this time. He hopes the script will produce in the performers the film that is needed. If not he'll try again, here or elsewhere. But he's tired—

She came to his chamber last night, it was late, he let her find him after persisting for awhile.

She tried to talk, to get him to listen & tell too. What would happen after the morrow's final scenes filmed. What he would do with her.

"We follow the script. That's what is done every time."

With me you are no demon, you are a beautiful dead girl who became unrooted & has wandered since. You came to me as I was expecting someone, knew not know.

The film has tired you. Fucking the King to poison him, to drive him to give up the Island for his war on the mainland. He would fuck you for all his anguish & anger, lay sweating across your hips in the unshaded moonlight, his tears, sweat, the blood between you, & you would urge him to be strong. To follow through on his vision in the Gate.

But this part would be over soon. There is more & I'm not sure what it is. You come from somewhere as the demon & I don't know where. I don't know your full intentions even as they still seem in part to destroy the King. There is more & I don't know.

"Let me stay with you. Let's go beyond all this," your eyes seem to say other words as you say these. I

pull your long night shirt over your head. There are light marks on your beautiful breasts & stomach. Did he do this? I take you in my bed, I fuck you for a long time & nothing convinces me I am in full control anymore. Something else. If I said yes, it would be to the girl from then, the one who wished to play the Princess, not now.

So tired, he moves his cameras into place & lets the action roll . . .

Remember some things. It's what I've returned to the Island to do. I've lived long times in the Pensionne, tended its gardens, visited with my White Tiger the tender. Apprenticed to his teachings.

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 in your dreams. I knew this then."

"What did you know?"

"I knew then, I know now, that the deepest truth of a human heart is its persistent yearns. When you came to me, you were forbidden the Gate in all but your dreams, & I only allowed you maps to study. Those years had to pass, time binding you to the Gate by absence & wish."

(Fucking Kinley)

"Now you bid my return."

"Ask the White Tiger."

I never find him but he is before me, head sunk low for an embrace. Always the garden, though I'd never seen him 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 in his throat.

"Come with me."

Silence. Yet 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.

The Hero & I with the rest approach a kind of temple now. It is hardly dawn. A temple, a cave? I can't tell. I push my way forward in the crowd. A tall, feathered hierophant faces me.

There is silence. Does he expect words from me?

"I expect nothing. I wait your will."

"Will I find my answers in there?"

He shakes his head, as though I'm asking the color of my 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.

(We bind tightly until we are one again. This is our best hope, what we are, unified I)

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 book of patterns my father & I would study, deeper ways to contrive my dance & sing of waking dreams. What was this book? I reach out to touch it, turn its pages. There is something here it seems 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 & there 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, just this he said: “You will limp now as I sometimes do. But not always. You will find each other again.”

Another half turn & my friend who claimed my father’s heart, made off. I see them in the bedchamber they alone used. Her straddling atop him, sweaty 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.

(& then something more, something the cameras do not catch, a glint within a glint, where she is headed, walking slowly, she is headed now to my chamber where I am sleeping & she is going to kill me or hold me down & make love to me in a way the King never had from her one single time, she is going to give herself to me completely, like this is what she is supposed to do—)

*(She approaches & I feel her long want of me, longer than anything else, really, & this is strange, this throws things off as long as it lasts but then I twist & divert her, push, again, stronger than her by far, toward the outdoors, toward the rocky beach, there, the sea, go now, **go now**—)*

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 in stuff—

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 wife the Queen my mother—

I tire.

What do I do here?

“I’m from the sea. It’s not where I was made, but where I was raised, born up, where I was taken when small. How I came to the Island.” I look at the Gate-Keeper directly in all this darkness & chaos. He is holding a camera that looks made from vines & stones, cranking a wooden handle more like a branch. “You knew all this.”

Without pausing in his work, he says quietly, “I’ve been making this film for thousands of years forward & backward. I’ve chronicled the world for you countless times until one way or another we



reach this climax & discover what you do.”

I nod. He retreats into the darkness again but I know he is still filming, ever filming.

There is quiet a long while, then I begin to hear wisps of song, of a kind with the despair I feel for all this. I reach out my hand toward them & they settle on my outmost stretched finger like a hummingbird.

Singing, “*Many kinds of time, several binds of time, & how it looses to the air!*” I think of my Architect, & the singing molds his face in the dark before me.

“You’ve come.”

“You’ve led.”

I feel soft pressings against my arms & my 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. The Architect’s breath upon me.

“Why don’t I remember?”

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

“Is this world a failure then? Am I supposed to lead the procession out there to a new one?”

“There is a choice.”

“What choice?”

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

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

[Maya, Christina, this is Kinley. You’re hearing me under all this dialogue. When the time comes I’ll make sure you come with me. Just follow the script through for now.]

“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 his family, his Queen, rending him willing to sacrifice my brother, & whoever else, 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, where we both began, 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 just sounds like a grunt. *No!* (leaving)

Try again, the world is 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 across a
 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 of all the Island.

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.

[Maya, Christina, hold onto what you are, your names, your loves, what has hurt you, what you have held dear, hold onto each other & your friendship, just think about that for a little bit longer. I will catch you.]

One by one, till all, till I am left
to finish. I watch myself dancing
the grounds my father the King
built for me, hear the 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.*

[Perhaps the Gate-Keeper would & again, but I would not & use what I have of the Architect in me one more time to fling Christina, Maya, & me into a depth of the Tangled Gate he does not know, one his film has never found, there is so much more to this than I knew before we came here, but I have his maps now & more importantly I have his long coat & the precious Secret Books, & most of all I have Maya & Christina who are two & one & several, I think, & so my obligation is to get them beyond this, leave it back, they will remain the Princess much & in many ways for a long time, we've twined our threads with this story, they are stronger, they are one.

*[I cohere & cohere & cohere us for a long time, they've barely held onto something of themselves, I keep on it & toward something, drag us toward something from this hard flow back, the Gate-Keeper would not lose us, would not **lose them**, but so, & so, they are mine, they belong to themselves, they will not be the Princess in your script perpetually, I think & think of what might do this & finally reach out in my mind for the Creatures, the White Bunny & the imp, they know me & they follow no script, no film, help me cohere them, please, the Princess will remain with you forever but these two girls are mine, they must go with me, please help me, please help me—the White Bunny sniffs twice, the imp cackles & g-natters—*

We are sitting at dusk together on a bench. A stony path nearby. Trees, so many tall & brilliant green trees. Wildflowers in every color. And rain. Sprinkles of rain.

It stirs them to wake. They look around. Look at me.

I nod. Stand up. Start to walk, but they don't. I smile, hold out both my hands & they to take one each.

This is the Tangled Gate beyond its mythic story. This is how it feels to walk one of its paths, anywhere, anytime. Hands in hands, bound to try & settle some things.

It will be a long walk anywhere, for now, learning how to better traverse its distances. Sometimes a long walk is needed for thought, for bonding. Sometimes the walk has to be short & to the pound-pound-point.

It is past their times for previously written scripts & limitations.

Maybe the way I'm struggling to put it is this: it's time to bring the Tangled Gate to the world, to figure out what & how this would be.

I've got Christina. I've got Maya.
I need some more of different kinds but soon. Soon enough.

For now, the pleasure of walking with my girls.



To be continued in Cenacle | 87 | December 2013

* * * * *





Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Nine

I asked Tiny Dame Time to explain herself tonight, for I'd taken myself by miles back through the years, just to see. Did she cackle? Oh, I'm not sure.

Then she demonstrated: moved stately before my eyes, then blinked my eyes & caused a loop, cackled, definitely cackled this time, slowed down, speeded up, multiplied same event in strange new guises, cackled wildly in echoes through my mind & minds, then came to a kindly stop, having told me everything in a language best read in full moonlight in dreams—

Tiny Dame Time seemed a bit imp, a bit coyote for me but she did not yet quite abandon me, we traveled together, skittered to a wide wild field of weeds, & yes, this was a way I could work with, time as a wide wild field of weeds, passing, looping, speeding up, slowing down, multiplying in infinite strange guises—

Did this answer my question? I suppose not. But it's helped my forming a better one.

How do we most often measure time: by change, by memory—what comes to be, what isn't any longer—who we are like a music, a continuous changing hum, louder, softer, echoing, new—hum of the wide wild field of weeds—

Tiny Dame Time cackles, demonstrates again by crunching on a long stretch of autumn leaves, now a titter & stomps the snow, now splashes those spring rain puddles & slows to stop to *hmmmmmm*—

A *hmmm* but she looks up, looks around, *o curious thing this world is!* looks around & begins to shake her hips, dance around some, jump, jump, jump again & onto a friendly air current, perhaps a friend, carries her along, *flutter flutter!* carries her along her way not a way, her path not a path & I come along too, though I don't know how, I am carried along too & this occurs more & less often over the years, Tiny Dame Time would come small & smaller & sometimes so very tall, cackle, loop, mutiply, crunch! stomp! splash! *flutter flutter flutter* when did these adventures with Tiny Dame Time cease? Did I forget them or reject them?

Things change over time. Me. I changed. Day by day. Hour by hour. I'm not telling it very well. It gets better. This is how I felt at the worst of it. But there's so much more.

i.

Tonight I listen for the flutter to go. Less than a hum, a low whistle, less than a something, a key-shaped declivity in the ether. Humbling clue.

"Wake up," a soft voice. Do I know it?

"It's OK. You're always like this. I don't mind you sleeping here. But look how you're positioned!"

"Oh."

"How's your neck?"

"It's OK."

He smiles. "Liar."

I shift around in the old green-cushioned chair. He offers a hand & I stand up.

"Man. Why do I get so groggy?"

He smiles. "You're doing hard work. Not everyone could handle it."

I nod. I know he admires me, & I've told him pretty much everything I know about it. I shouldn't but someone back there said it would be necessary to keep sane.

"You're going to need a friend. You can have one." How old was the Architect? I didn't know. I did know he liked me in his own gloomy, distracted way, & I was trusted by him unusually.

"How will I know?"

"You won't for sure. But every morning, look in a mirror at your face, study it closely. You'll probably meet someone who has that expression."

"Will it be one of us?"

"No. Not from here & now. But, yes, one of us in other ways. Someone you can trust. Someone who will understand. Someone who knows what's at stake."

So you are, my friend, the one I'm allowed. We met the first night, in that homeless camp under the bridge. I didn't know you were just visiting friends there, that you didn't live there anymore.

I'd come because the Hum had been detected. I was given a time & a place, both rough guesses, drunk my juice, & crawled into my Dreaming Tube. And that's where I landed. A homeless camp outside an American city. Back when there were living cities.

I was dressed warmly because luckily it was cold. I looked young but not dangerously so, bearded, a bit shaggy, a bit tall. I wore eyeglasses. Our clothiers would stress every detail. We had to fit in, but make an impression, but not too much. It was one of humanity's last arts.

Men stood around the fire barrels warming faces & hands, sharing bottles. I stood among them. Offered a bottle, I smiled it off. Mouthed a taught response. "AA." The man nods, grasps my eyes with his a moment.

I think you knew almost right away I didn't belong somehow. You stood next to me & nodded. Began to talk softly. There was no lie about you.

"They're good people here, mostly. They don't ask questions & they keep an eye on each other. They can spot a problem pretty quickly."

"I'm not—"

He laughs. "No, not you. I'm just telling you."

I nod. Remember the Architect's words. I haven't been sent this far for a long mission before.

He pulls out a baggie of something. "These help." Puts a few dried pieces of something in my

hand.

I sniff. Mushrooms. They smell wonderful. I think.

He nods at me. Smiles. Chews a few.

I don't know but do also. He hands me a bottle of water. I drink.

I have more control over these kinds of experiences since I am here from across the Dreaming.

I could will them have little effect on me. I don't. I let it happen.

He walks around the camp, seems to know them all. Seems to be influential. I don't understand it all, but feel nothing but good in this strange place. Nothing like this where I come from.

At some late hour he faces me, grasps my shoulder. "I'd like you to stay where I stay tonight. We can talk. You'll be safe. If you don't want to, we'll find a safe place for you one way or another."

Words have begun to elude me, to dance & sing. To cackle & crunch. *Ah*. I nod.

With many goodbyes we leave the camp & walk over a bridge through late night city streets. Building after building. Then a massive one, a long city block, but only a single red door. No sign. I'm swaying in mind as he unlocks it with a key. Oh yes, there is a sign. "Arcadia Bookstore & Cafe. Please use front entrance." We step in, Dylan goes for a light.

His name is Dylan. He told me that at some point. He takes my hand since I am still in the doorway. Pushes the door shut behind me. It seems to melt into the wall as though not really there. I'm not sure how to believe my eyes.

Feeling a little shaky, I say, "You live in a bookstore?"

He laughs, a sound that quite reassures me. "It's a big place. The bookstore's only part of it. I'll find you some space, I promise."

He's got what seems like a firelamp to lead us. There's no sense to the sizes of the rooms we pass through: big, small, long, brief. High-ceiling, very low.

Now we're walking up a ramp, ramp after ramp, then a long hallway with a rug I could lose myself in right now, dancing & cackling & splashing in my mind, & Dylan is leading me into a small room with a big bed, a small table, a tall window. Candles & a blue vase of water on the bedside. An old radio—

Blankets & pillows. Dylan sits at the desk's chair but motions me to get comfortable in bed.

I sit. Peer at him in the candles-soft darkness. "Do you know who or what I am?"

Shakes his head. "Not exactly."

I want to tell him. I've chosen my friend. But I don't say anything.

"They want your attention for awhile."

"Who?"

"The mushrooms."

I feel a little panic. "Don't worry. I'll be here. Go with them."



Wow. OK. I go.

It was another dream of sand set me to go. This one a test, the several questions, fingering grains to conjure answer, & in the right order: Forgive. Understand. Reconcile.

And now the path, past my dreams, & every foolish hour. Came where I should, in this graying dusk, & now to listen, now to watch, wait & watch, *there*—

A pink nose, glowing fur, parting through grass, a way not a way, just the flutter to go—
flutter to go

Why show me all this? Why lead me into my known memories? I know where this led—how it came back to me—

ii.

I arrived here, to you, Dylan, from so many hours & miles. I remember hard two.

Your greasy brow, your sweaty face, playing a game you love, but maybe not enough, you let it kill you. I know, Dylan, that sounds off, but in my time the game was how men measured in matters of life, not just sport.

You wanted to sing, shape the air to your music, but there were no more mediocre or amateur players. You wanted to color exposed the cankers in your heart, if not fill or efface them all. It was personal with you, as the game in some way was not personal enough.

I was a sideline reporter but I wasn't just rooting out injuries & strategies. I was sniffing for weakness of intention, a holding back of heart's all. There was no choice; everything contributed toward forestalling the coming collapse.

We collided, you stumbled & hit me, stood up, saw my insignia, panicked & fell into me again. I helped you from the field, to try & calm you. It wasn't supposed to be like this.

Years later, we are talking on the telephone. Wired up to the wall, Dylan, just like the old days. The atmosphere became wrong for wireless transmission. For a lot of things. We're talking, trying to understand the moment when that game's mud between us became dust. We're trying to understand anything at all. Like all medics, you are kept apart from the population, preserving your knowledge as long as possible. Keeping you alive, in service of some.

I'm calling from a phone booth in an old coffeehouse in San Francisco. Several floors, rooms doored by old patchwork curtains, a couch the color of badly dyed red hair, thin covers-less books of poetry heaped together between bricks.

The irony is that my wife is in there with you. And yours is out here with me. We made a deal. It worked out on your end. I haven't seen or slept with your wife in two years the time of our last call.

Sleeping alone gives a man a lot of time to think. The room dark, I think of women I saw that day. Strip them & re-dress them in my mind. When I come it's rarely good. Nothing

I'd trouble a real girl with.

The dreams come back & there is Tiny Dame Time. I don't know that's her name. Could be anything really.

What's odd is that I'm not small anymore, & yet she sees me & we are in this place I remember, with the winding corridors, gray skies overhead. Walls made of vines & stones.

She skitters off with her cackling & strange noises, & I follow. After many dreams like this, we arrive somewhere almost of a sudden, like she's decided.

A Fountain, very tall, very old, I admire it. Wonder how it contributes against the final collapse.

A cackle, a skitter, & further along a sort of exit. A Gate. Seems hundreds of feet high. I walk through it, & back in, checking. Back out & I notice the legend "*For Those Lost*" written at its center, its highest point.

I can't find your wife & she's why I'd come to this point. I'm pulled back at this point, it can't be continued, this mission.

"If anyone can find her, you can," you said on the phone.

"Yah," I said. Wondering if the come in you came out in righteous spurts, if she sucked it with her lips & thighs both.

Silence on the line. "You're a good friend. I wish something else for you." Who said that to who?

Dylan, the mind survives a lot by suppression, by stubbornness, before it starts to go—

What I can't quite picture is where I really begin.

iii.

I don't come out of this room for a long time, & Dylan lets me be. He's made clear there's food & drink & safety for me, but allows me readiness in my own time to ask.

The black kitten, so tiny in her long blue top hat, sleeps on a scrap of cardboard I found, or sometimes on the edge of my hand. We cannot decide if she is my dream, either of us, but she remains close in my hours.

I sit at the table looking out the tall window. I seem to have an elongated view that runs: trees, mountains, the sea, full moon above the sea. How?

I'm trying to understand what any of this is, as I always have tried to understand. I saw clouds in the skies, when a child, as frames to mysteries embedded in the blue. Yet I remember me only so young.

The ways lamps reflected on windows, my first heartbreak, I watched & watched. My next heartbreak seemed to show a secret, warm pattern to things, in each girl's smiling kiss, loving kiss, desperate kiss, last kiss. The way a girl smells as you kiss her brow & leave her a last time. Enough. *Go.*

Faces in crowds befuddled me, each one seeming dry & no hint of the tinder within. Perhaps something when on a train wrapped in a book, or a letter. I found myself watching lamps deeper into reflection, listened. She would sleep gentle in my bed, she after she, gentle as demised. But it was never my bed, & I could never stay.

Then the black kitten came, then the blue top hat.

Or the other way. I travelled the last rail out of town, found an empty ballpark. A scrap of cardboard, like this one I hold now. Or the edge of my hand. The tiny black kitten sleeps without answer, or question. A trust in me. I step from the ground, finally, balancing her as my all.

iv.

Wake. Look around. Fuck. Something. Push the table out of the way & sit on the floor looking out toward woods, mountains, sea, moon. Full moon. You smile at me, Tiny Dame Time, *ahh*.

You nudge around in my mind, tending this, touching that. I let you, I'm your black kitten, whether this makes sense or not.

Tap, tap, tug. Ah. Ahh. That one.

One of the first, I think. You uncurl it long & still heavy in me to have a look. I lay out now, hand on my dubious cock, & remember.

The last time I saw you, the last time we curled half-nude, watching TV, you relaxed, smiled with me. You had translucent shades on your windows, to let the stars & streetlights in, but obscurely (I love you) I was not your lover.

We formed a circle, you & me & him, we tendered each other (I love you), I was not your lover, nor his, we were sugar water on each other's tongues, colluding flames in each other's hearts.

I joined you, & you, I stayed, & then remained, & then no more. I'd watch his cock enter you, hold each of your hands, listen to pulse, breathing, what couldn't I know? What couldn't I have? It was just training, I was told. My body felt smashed by granite when retrieved. I was tended. I was praised.

Now here, I think, I find my cock is bone-hard & I am pulling on it hard & painful, I cry out & spurt & again & more. The window is splattered. I struggle to wonder what dream semen against a past-time's window is, *truly fucking is*—

Stand & look through the splattered window. I see light on water among the trees. Those mountains are always snow-capped so I cannot deduce the season from them. The trees are evergreens, also tell me nothing.

I am a man, some kind of a man, & I yearn to know the season, know the rest. I am a man & knowing is a hole I try to fill. I am a man & miss you for all your cruelties, your final

lies, your lingering tenderness.

“Why do you watch?” you whispered one night near the end, breathing hard, moaning, but your eyes on me all the while.

I was not your lover (I love you) (just training) that last long night when we all twisted into bed, when we made each other come new stars into the hours & skies. I was not your lover when the juices (I love you) of our bodies commingled & no god could tell us apart. I was not your lover but I am a man & I am still trying to fill that hole, see through your translucent shades into your heart, hearts, three, two, one, & I am awake. Really gone. You’re gone.

It’s time to see Dylan.

υ.

He brings me to a private room. Red lit but murky, we sit in two armchairs. I try to guess his age. He is but isn’t a fairly young man.

We drinks some kind of tea. He is quiet, but kind, waiting my words when they come. I shake my mind.

He suddenly laughs. “She’ll still be in there.”

I nod. He knows.

“You’ve got one too.”

“I couldn’t tell you where or when she is,” he says softly, “But every once in awhile I feel the warm hook move around in my heart.” Sits back. Now he’s waiting.

I close my eyes, & begin. “It came upon me with no name & it is beautiful & I can’t describe it but I’ll try.

“There were streets then, closer to the water, the salt & water. The glare of trollies. Fires. I was mad, several times over. I walked & walked.

“It came upon me with a beautiful push to say, to sing, I can only think of hands. So many hands, come & gone. Watched & come & gone.

“Parks full of scrawny green, the moon a thumb’s print above. I walk & I walk.”

Open my eyes. Look straight in him, “Her ass poised before me. Her eyes, fuzzy with want & challenge. Like a good fuck could clear out her heart’s trash.” He leans forward, puts his hand on mine.

“Did you fuck her, Dylan?”

Pause. “Not exactly.”

“That’s worse.”

“I know.”

I close my eyes again. The trollies pass in pairs by the open window, one hither, the other yon. I laugh. I should have laughed. “The beautiful thing, nameless, nods with me.”

I enter you from behind and you bite on my hand. Always hurts more than you remember. Always tighter. I hold off coming for a long time, you moan, you cry. When I do, it’s very quick, a big one quick.

We sit together under your window. Its view to bricks imprinted red & gold. Calmer in body. Our hands twined.

“Your ankles.” They’re discolored.
 You move back from me. “My shoes.”
 But the beautiful thing is nudging me again, pulling me, I have to hurry.
 I kiss your bare shoulder & stand.
 You look everywhere else. I walk & I walk. You left. You were always the medic’s wife. No matter how much you loved me.

“The beautiful thing is still in me,” I say to Dylan, now, unsure how much I’ve been saying aloud. “I feel like I came back to her, I rolled her over, I fucked her straight on, made her *come for me with her eyes to mine*. I feel it all the time.” I put his hand on my chest. “It’s there. Music. *It never quits.*”

vi.

We’re quiet for awhile. I see pain in his eyes, just listening.
 “She’s still yours.”
 “Yes. But.”
 “But?”
 “I don’t know *where* she is. I don’t know *when* she is. I don’t think I know *what* she is.”
 He quiets. Waiting for me again.
 I try again. “Even near the end there were ordinary days. Places. People. It was like adjust & adjust & adjust. Keep the end away awhile more.

“I lived in a university town, it was still going, we had militias to keep people out. You had to be there because you were native or qualified. Knowledge, history were guarded like they could fucking help.

“I wasn’t anyone but a local & I liked books. I kept around not knowing what to do. The cafes were full of old men playing chess. Playing it like it was how they wanted to go out. I write a little, nothing I’d show, just notes on how the days are, what I see people do.

“One night there was a preacher, I don’t know how he got to the cafes. One of those powerful old men in dust & long beard. He lunged at me, sitting in a corner of the cafe courtyard with my little book. ‘Your world’s mud’s becoming dust! Behold it everywhere! Your world’s mud is becoming dust!’”

I stop. I cough. *Fuck this.* Dylan grabs my shoulder. Squeezes tight. I let him. I absorb something from him, from this telling.

“He went away. I don’t know if they took him or he shattered to dust. But I got up & walked. There was a park. It was small, surrounded on all sides by these old, old buildings. The park was still green, though, & I tried to kneel, to believe in it. I tried to stay there.

“I found a scrap of cardboard on a bench there. Putting it in my pocket, I felt a flutter in my chest. I think of it as the flutter to go. A warning. Time to leave.



"So I walked across the heavily guarded bridge, walked & walked, for miles & miles, I didn't sleep, I didn't eat, I just walked. I eventually came to the desert. Some desert. There were people out there. There were great fires at night & I walked into one. Just to see."

I look at Dylan who's waiting.

"A man of dreams does not burn. I tried to. *I couldn't burn.*"

"So you didn't."

"No. I didn't"

"You went back to the courtyard. You met the woman. The medic."

"I met many women before her."

"But eventually."

vii.

You came to me. I was in the courtyard & you came to me. You were out of place there, with your tea & your newspaper.

"They started up again. The Internet was militarized for a few years & then it was destroyed."

I nod you over with a smile. "I'm new here."

"Professor?"

"Sort of."

It doesn't matter really. You're young & pretty & we take to each other easily. I think it's why I'm kept around.

"There's more to it."

What mattered was that when I undressed you, your eyes smiling growled. The time we fucked on the bench next to the militia headquarters. I made you leave your comey pink panties when we left. What mattered what how I would chew your breasts & nipples, your ass, your clitoris, I would find dirtier avenues into your body & pour through them, clean them, purge you of these end-times, purge you clean, & we were barely wed before you had to go, had to leave me, but we had fucked all over that town, I possessed you for when you left, I knew you had medical skills, I knew you'd go & fuck if I could have stopped it, I could have, I could have, I didn't.

"Did you want to?"

"What I wanted didn't matter."

"Why?"

"Because I'd found my coat, my traveling coat. My hekk, the dream stick I carry."

He's looking at me odd. "I don't understand."

"I was there following the Hum. The problem with long missions is that you acclimate. You know you're different, you dream different, but somehow things settle back, explain enough."

"You forget you're dreaming?"

"It gets tricky. Because nobody around you knows. You're real to them. But your behavior gets herky-jerky, like I'm telling you. Like a ship hitting a bad stretch. But you don't steady." I nod to myself. "But then I find the jacket, like it was programmed. The hekk stick."

I look around. Nothing but night here. I nod.

"I'm still there. Still in the courtyard. Still the old chess players, clicking of pieces. Still women too, students, professors, smiling, still arriving with permissions. *I still feel the lust*, in my coat, stick nearby.

"The old men talk of multiple realities, of how this is not the end. I listen. I know different, but I listen."

"Weren't these the end-times?"

"No. I wasn't sent far back. I think it was training but I don't know."

Dylan nods. I don't make sense to him but still he listens to me, like I listened to those old men.

"One night there was a guitar, hadn't been in so long. Just started up from the street. I looked & looked, saw a big man with a guitar, playing for all he was worth, like it mattered, *like it most mattered*.

"I am a man of dreams. I know this. But the music was a signal, a nudge, I closed my eyes & reached out to it, over the fence of details & into the music." I pause. Stand. Dylan starts to as well, then lets me.

"Cool darkness, flowing, floating, water the temperature of skin. A bare shoulder in a cluster of glares. A reedy voice. To find her again, to remember everything, but The Dreaming pulls me back, pulls me over, retreats me from the far edges, I wake. A bare shoulder. Whose? I am a man of dreams. *I do not burn*."

I fall into Dylan's arms & I guess pass out for awhile. He holds me all.

viii.

"There was a situation."

Dylan nods. He's brought me to an open area, a green place on a roof, I think. Is it autumn? The air feels cool & smells nice, like memories.

"I was sent to a place to heal. The people there listened to me, closely, fed me pieces of fruit, much water. They would let me roam a great big garden by myself, hours & hours, & sometimes I would see a striped white tiger with electric blue eyes. Only him, nobody else. I should have been terrified of such a beast but I wasn't. His look was kind, concerned. We let each other nearer & eventually embraced & walked together. He . . . tendered me. That's what someone called him." I sigh but not sadly.

"But one night they dress me. It's my time to go, continue my healing, & travel on. It's the next stage."

"The club I am sent to is dark & the music growls from a fractured stage. I count ten lights upon it & nothing clearly in view. It's wrong, but maybe others notice too."

Dylan raises his hand. "Were you dreaming? This club?"

I think. "Yes, I suppose so. But these were others of my kind. So they knew my truth."

"And the White Tiger?"

I shake my head. I don't know.

I stand & look at the girl sitting with me, her red hair, electric blue eyes. She dresses in feathers & leaves. She has a crown of vines & stones. I steady, hopeful, helpless too.

She smiles toward something & points. She says, "It's a language of metaphors & displacement."
I nod.

We continue to stare at each other. Her shoulder soft in lights, her cheek softer in shadows.

Words come on me, I speak. "A person is a house of rooms. And we go from one room to the next, clearing the cobwebs, but then the rooms we're not in fill up with more & more, & we keep moving."

I am shaking, this matters.

I grasp her shoulder, grip it, pull her up standing to me. "*A chair is like a stump.*"

Shake my head, Dylan is holding me again. Autumn leaves. Smells of memory. I nod. He lets.

"We traveled together. Maybe that was the intention. Heal me up some with the White Tiger, then send me along with a new girl.

"At night she is like warm water, I float in her darkness. There is music tugging me, that big man & his guitar. I follow."

Your touch is moonlight in deep woods, a push, a pull, a tremble to press me on in these obscure matters. You were young too, committed. Sleepers gave up everything in joining. No ties, no going back. So you hadn't been loved much back there, & I didn't think you had my experiences beyond the Dreaming either. You loved me like we had choice we could make about our lives.

ix.

I spend more time in the bookstore itself, its many floors of endless shelves. Knowing how it ends, or probably will end, & something about how it began too, it leads me away from some books, toward others.

Dylan lets me approach him, as I will, as I do. My story isn't fully told him. His isn't told me either but he may not be so needful for telling.

"We traveled to a far Western city. One I'd been to before, the coffeehouse I'd called my friend from. It was still there, strangely.

"I hadn't checked till this particular night. That morning I'd read a sad letter & it had sent me along my day's path.

"It was a letter warning you of me, wondering at all the years you'd been with me. Urging to return, to let me go, to come back & accept what was to come, stop fighting the inevitable. He didn't believe you'd come back, knew you believed, you loved me, & you believed in our work."

I'd left you sleeping, your face peaceful, your ever-light sleep mercifully unbroken.

"Walked far to find my friends in their paintless old church, its many rooms a refuge. I meet quite a few of us there. The Hum runs through the city strong.

"Looking further, I found them in the cemetery with its clusters of embedded stone markers. They were ours."

"How?"

"How?"

"They were Sleepers but they'd died beyond the Dreaming & were buried there?"

"You mean their bodies in the Sleeping Capsules?"

Nod.

"Sometimes there, sometimes not."

He hardly nods.

"There were always others around when they held these remembrances. Poor, crazies, a few ex-priests."

I returned to you in the icy rain. The dusk is wildly colored, sheets of light on the horizon, ripping & mending, & I felt the leaving in me, that sad letter, letting you go, it wasn't fair, any of it.

"I willed myself go. Losing ground, solidity, some city street as cars passed in the street & people in both directions on the sidewalk, losing solid ground, I had my coat on, my hekk in hand, I was going now, days & miles falling away, & I understood, I think, that nobody there knew what would save us, *knew anything*—that I had to find my way myself, whatever this meant, I would not return, maybe at all, I would choose myself, choose & choose again."

Dylan helps me to my room, to my bed. He gets in with me. For a moment I think . . . but no. The warm hook in his heart is shaped like a very particular girl. But he holds me closely. This matters very much to him. We doze like this, entwined as loving brothers, & I take him a little way in, to see the rest of the story so far.

x.

There were birds, there were birds, there were birds, & at first they were out my window & they were filling my dreams so they were out my window but filling my dreams too.

They crossed over, with their singing, their chuckling, crossed over until eventually they formed my dreams, bigger & bigger, their singing became my dreams, my dreams became their singing, more & more, & still they were out my window singing.

You remained. You slept more & more. You slept deeper into your covers, your pillow. You were no longer there by sun, by day. You were leaving with the birds.

You were now neither by sun nor moon but you were some strange remain. Close to me still, somehow, I'd gone, really gone, but you were close to me still, a shadowy sticky something now, the first sweetness life will take & leave only open hands to remind.

I wake. Dylan is with me still. Asleep. Really asleep. I find myself not moving from his presence. Not leaving this place which may be safe for me for awhile.

I feel all of you still. And I don't know what exactly I've got here. Maybe they can still inject me with the right cocktail & I'll be snapping awake with a roar of defeat any moment now.

But I wonder if that is what the Architect intended. Were we even meant to save the world with our strange efforts?

I'm not convinced that there are not other forces, *stranger strengths*, deep in this too. *On our side.*

xi.

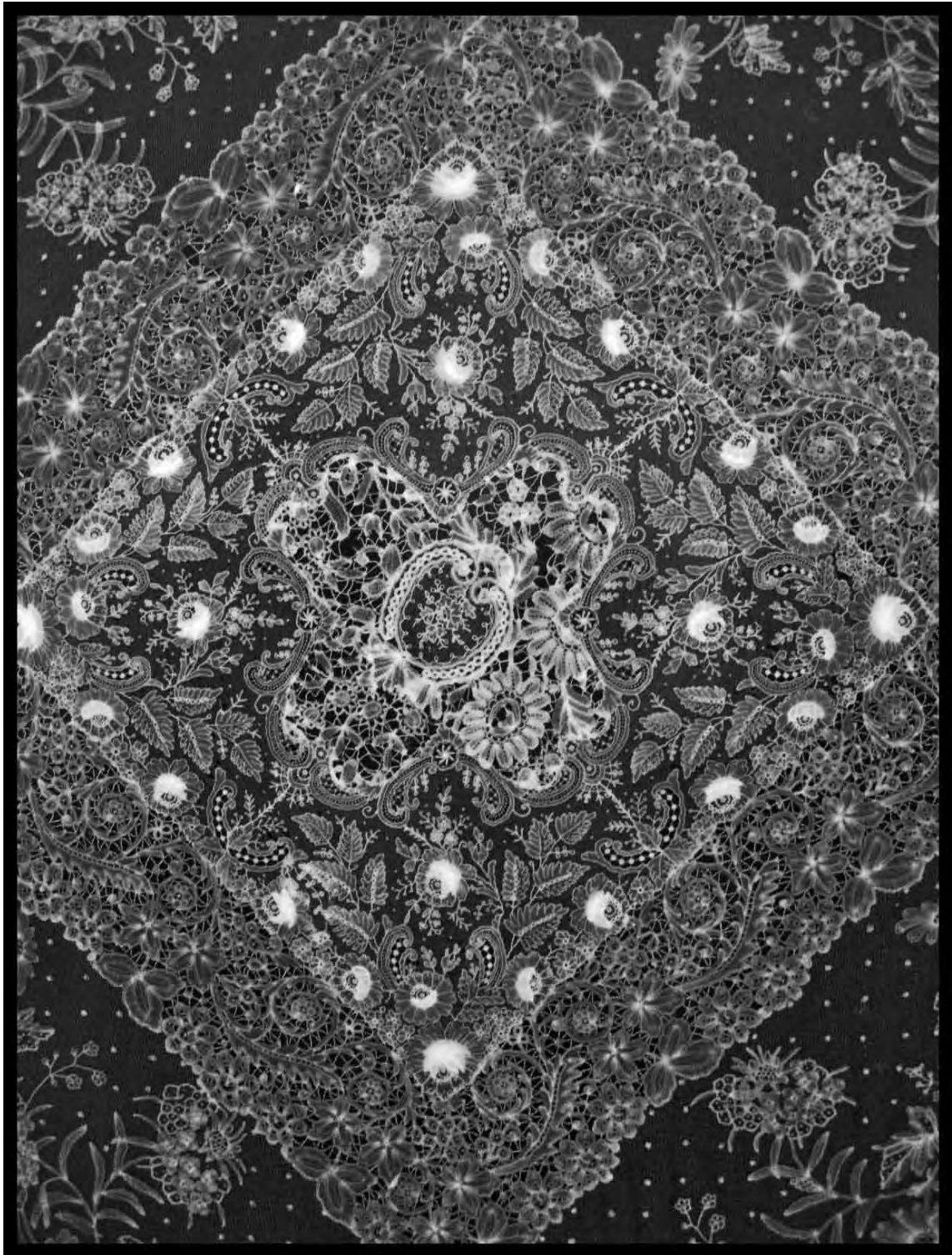
[When you were sent, there were two of you. In case one didn't make it. Made of the best, most precious, organic material remaining, but packaged for deep space travel; you were unassembled, but bearing coordinates to follow, & instructions when certain conditions were met.

[The first was rich ocean water, the true god of the blue-green planet, its generator of all its life forms, aquatic, land, air alike. As you burned through the atmosphere, you lost all but your last protective shells, all burned away in the prayer you would hit water not land, ocean water, & you did. You hit the ocean like twin speeding missiles & shot miles below before slowed up—

[The ocean began your process, activated each of you, though still in stasis, you were begun & part of that beginning was compelling a slow ascent to the air from however deep you were. Still completely protected within, that last layer around you, in essence, slowly inflated, & you rose & you rose—

[Then you burst through the surface & the last stage, oxygen, completed it. Your bodies formed fully, you heaved for air & frantically waved your arms to swim, & only if the sea provided boats would you live, if only—how long can small bodies swim in open seas?

[But on this blue-green planet you were lucky, & there were boats & men, the kind who freely



Museum of Modern Art,
New York, New York

fish the seas but own their living still to powerful men on land. They'd been told to look out for you, by way of reward & threat—

[But these men had only been told of one, it had been made clear. And you were both obviously powerful magic. So—one of you promised to the King though his reward meager compared to what the Travelers would give for the other—*oh what fine rewards they would give*—& the care you would receive—

[You too would find your way to the Castle where your companion was brought today—much forgotten, much changed—

[You were become one of the Travelers of the world, moving groups who do not stick the world with fences & maps; you were raised to possess little but your body, your wits, the people & animals you traveled with—

[You were treated as one touched singly, special, though not told why, not until later. As a child, you were expected more of, you grew to lead those around you, learned twice as fast & then teach all you could. You excelled in this, in reading the patterns & flows of landscape & men alike. Your group prospered—& slowed its travels.

[You considered. There were some who would be willing to stop altogether. Live more as, if still apart from, other men. Young as you were, your opinion mattered. The ones your age & younger looked to you more as their leader than the older ones. These older ones let you into their counsels as a simple survival move.

[But there were things you had not told. Dreams of a girl, a beautiful girl whose face you could never quite see, nightly dreams of her as she grew up somewhere far, an Island, a Castle, the beloved daughter of a King, you would be near her in your many dreams, even as she traveled her own dreams, following her into the hole in her bedroom wall, to the caverns underneath the Tangled Gate where the Creatures lived—but you did not know these words—you just followed & watched——

[The desire you felt for this girl deepened as the years. Boys, even men, among the Travelers smiled at you, sometimes shyly approached—but you strangely felt nothing, not a lack of desire but one so eclipsed by the girl in your dreams that to lay with any of them would be a cruel lie.

[There were old women among the Travelers, wise, seers, some intimate with plant medicine & healing, some with the enigmatic language of the stars. One among them listened to dreams, rarely, but was said to have priceless insight.

[Looking back, had you not waited, the slaughter would have occurred anyway. Your group had strayed into disputed lands, & lingered, as though another claimant. But you might not have been restless awake all night, nor seen the mass of them riding up that hill you would climb on your sleepless or uncertain nights. You might have been slaughtered like the men or

taken like the girls & women, had you not visited the dream seer earlier that night—

[She listened to what you told, what you had never told anyone before. The caverns, the Creatures, the Castle, the King. The mysterious man in the Tower. How you felt her wishes, her desires, her uncertainties—

[The seer listened & said: “She is your Other. Your right path leads to her, to you possessing each other somehow, & then away by your will.”

[But how? You asked. Blushing. She is not a man. Nor I. We cannot possess each other in the familiar ways.

[She grasps your face close to hers. “You were rent from each other long ago. She is your true path for now.” Then her bony heated hand roamed beneath your clothes, pressing your breasts, leaning further in, under your garments as your legs compelled to open & spread, a finger inside your deepest tightness, in & in & in, eyes closed, moaning pleasure & pain until suddenly a wild black shivering release, & the words: “anyone can press the trigger & fire but who knows which way the heart eludes?”

[They came in such black masses. Silently at first, then their blood terrors came upon them. Still damp, still very riled in body from the old woman’s practiced touch, you knew few men in that mass would care if your cry was pleasure or pain, you ran. Ran far across fields, over hills, far far into woods where you should have felt scared, a barefoot girl with empty hands. But not this woods. Not you. From that first night on, you survived, found in the world around you what was needed. Even when painful, the world spent as you needed.]

I leave the Tramp & continue on my way. We traveled long & long together. He was a man with so many skills I refused to call him by any man’s single name.

But he is very old & when he walks, he *tramps hard* on the ground. Like his steps are drawn back harder to the earth than most.

I could not get him to lay with me, to teach me what I needed to know, for a very long time. He had shed the years of wanting women & little wished them again. His desires were songs of wonders of the world, how beauteous, how brutal.

When I threatened to pay a man & bring him to my tent, he relented.

His touch neither rough nor gentle, he simply undid my clothes, & then with great care, the rest of me. He tended me from a seed to a bloom, a burst of sunshine in my many moans & cries, & when he came into me, I saw we would be parting for now, that my path was far in miles & years; I had to put world upon world upon my mind & body to get where I wanted to go—

“To the Island”

"Yes, yes," his accent heavy when annoyed.

"To find her. My right path."

"So you were told" he sighs.

"Yes!" I flash hard at him.

You set me on my way by penetrating me deeper than I knew was possible. When I came, I was gone. And then I was elsewhere.

I miss you. It's weakness & I assume it will not last, but I miss you. You were a great talker & though a lot of it was nonsense, pieces of your travels & strange beliefs knotted up to explain the world in ways that would only make sense to you, not all of it was.

"The ships have always been overhead." You'd say this often when we'd camp beneath the stars. You had a special tea you'd drink on these nights, I refused it by its putrid smell, but you'd just laugh every time, wink your green or blue eye at me, sometimes both in turn, sip, talk on. You liked your roaring fires on these nights. I'd listen for hours, doze, wake up, you'd still be talking.

"But not just overhead. For you see" & you'd pause for effect, as though telling the first time, not the thousandth—"we are on those ships, as we walk around, down here. We are on those ships overhead." I'd listen. Once, he talked on. "And you, young Princess Missy"—a nickname I loathed but for loving him—"You especially." I should have asked more. But I was scared. The old woman that last night at home had given me more than enough. I wish I had asked.

I remember & wonder over all this as your hand half-asleep roams me, trembling for another tussle. I let it miss, miss again, slide away into sleep. You don't want me *that* much.

It could have been you or either of the other two, in truth. I just needed one of you to keep me until this rolling restaurant reaches its next city. That's the thing about the Tramp. Men sniffed me still, but he was a buffer to their approach. When I left him, the protection was gone. Men now would approach with trained smiles & wet lips.

You were the youngest of the three, least likely to hit or gag, easiest to please with a few licks & a slow smile.

The restaurant has rooms in the back, a few to rent, & I need your wallet too. Our room is a bed, a chair, a table, a toilet behind an old curtain. A black & white TV on the table. When you're out, I use your coins to watch the TV, smoke your cigarettes. You'd been with untrained girls until now, as enamored of their own pretty faces & slender bodies as they were ignorant how to use them, how to give or receive pleasure. You'd keep me if you could.

I watch a film about a woman captured & brought to a cell. She recollects her youth & friends but, strange, they seem like just boys she saw on TV. She sits nude among them, a thin silver crown on her head, they hold her gently & precious, smile & smile. I'm asleep when you return.

You stir. I consider. I'm from those ships overhead, the Tramp said, me, young Princess Missy. Would you still be fucking me if you knew this?

Now I'm sitting on the parapet outside our room, watching dark flat lands roll by, looking up

at the murky night sky. Hours? Missing gaps of time & intent. There, light on the horizon, a thin smear of pink & yellow.

Did you really look down my body in your bleary, gleeful rush that first night? I'd sat alone near your table of three. You'd all come from a job, onto the next, co-workers, not friends. Just traveling. Drinking hard. The other two were. You caught my eye & slowed way down. The others had already considered, each in a glance stripping me, calculating the time & effort & chance of getting my bare ass high in one of those back rooms. Not good, I would have advised. Drunken cock in the ass is a slow, sloppy, unpleasant thing.

No, you slowed. Another glance & you smiled. *O, what a smile.* Pretty as those girls you'd had till now, pretty as theirs. I tempted. I had no choice. No money. Tired. This rolling restaurant filled with men who wouldn't compliment me with the purchase of a room. A knife, a shadow, a low command to suck it all down.

Your friends were loud, tiring. You'd not touched your glass in awhile. We finally talked on the back deck, watching what was going & gone.

Words? Something about a cigarette. The chilly wind. The pretty girls would encourage you with a smile, a curious question, a touch to their hair. I let you struggle until I leaned close & whispered, "Is it good & hard for me yet?" You almost fled, but *then* I smiled, I laughed. "Get us a room."

I finish my cigarette, return to our room. Still thinking about the pretty girls, I undress & consider my body. A few men since the Tramp. They usually like my tits, small but firm. Tummy flat, decent legs.

You're lying splayed out, where I left you, easy to lick up hard & mount smoothly. You groan awake, wanting, groggy from what I've been putting in your drink. An insurance that you don't get to full strength in these tussles.

You're another of my practice runs but I really don't need much anymore. The prick isn't profound learning. Its brain, its heart, a little more. But learn the prick & the rest reveals easier. The Tramp would laugh. Maybe nod.

I ride you, squeeze you, hurt you a little, you squeal pleasure. It's our last night, I lay in your arms after, first & last time.

Morning. I've stayed in the city as that restaurant rolled through. Left you a kiss on your lovely chest, bloody kiss licked up from where I bit.

Now a stretch among men not as young or as pretty as you. Have to put a little more mileage on this body. Some bruising for my purpose. Like the Tramp, I bring you with me in a memory. Your eyes wide, spasming, again, & again. *Why your bed & not the other two?* Because they wouldn't have *thought to ask.*

xii.

Quiet months. Leave my room only at dawns, grow & gather at the local park to keep this body extant. Watching my black & white TV, I'd kept it. Snapped the chain & kept it. Sometimes I have to make a friend to get some coins to watch it. Once the coins go for a small sharp blade. Sometimes they want more than what's for sale. Or confuse me with the pretty girls.

It was peaceful except when the ones upstairs started coming through my window, as though it was their due, & taking things. I had almost nothing though the room had been furnished. But they would climb in & take things. I started visiting the one below me more & more. He never saw me as a pretty girl but he was kind to my plight.

I'd stay a few days, smoke his cigarettes, watch my TV, hope that film about the woman would come back on. I'd missed the beginning and end.

He'd come home at night from days spent hurting people in an office, fucking women with no last names at lunchtime. Living days that were all edges. He'd lay with me like a surrender. We'd give up sometimes & watch my TV. Better than upstairs.

But then he would visit his niece & smile after. Smile & bring her gifts & dance her around in the rain. All would fall away. All the edges. He was happy & that was good. Nothing for most in this world but to find someone or something to be happy with. What choice to this? Wasn't that what I was trying to do?

xiii.

The Tramp would talk about love once in awhile. I knew he'd been a handsome man & now he obscured this behind his grime & tatters. I could easily imagine many a woman loving his sonorous voice, his thoughts. His hands were gentle, moved with unconscious grace no matter the moment. I came to believe as the years went on that I had loved him in my own way & he'd released me for my benefit not his own.

"I guess you could say love will warp your path, one way or another," he began, it wasn't long after we met. He had assumed protection of me accidentally, thinking the man I was on my knees for behind the tavern meant to do more harm to me than sucking a drunken cock in a dirty alley did already.

He explained. "It was his clothes. The marks on his arms."

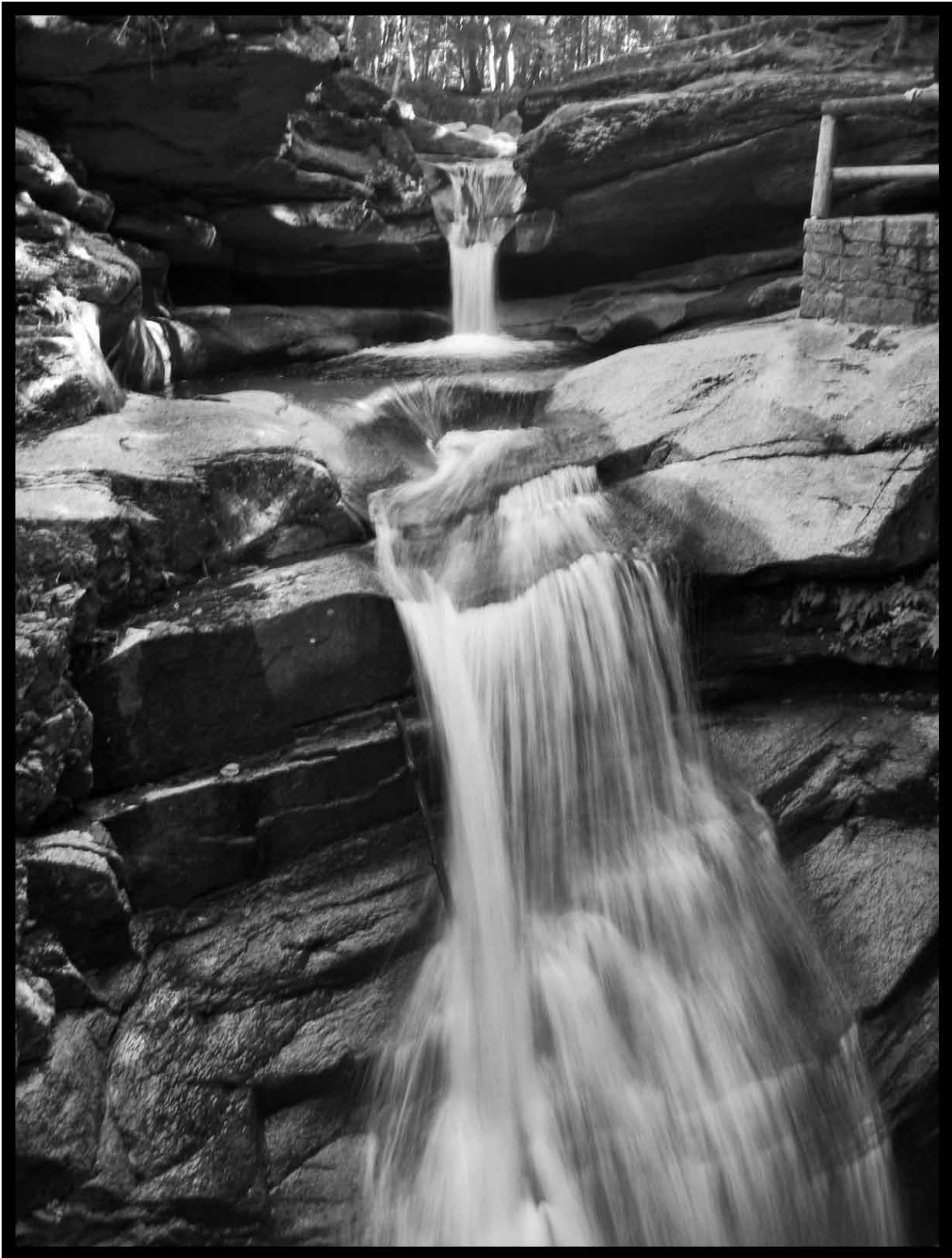
"I'm fucking fine! Next time you watch, you pay too."

He looked at me darkly, like never again. "You're not fine."

Took my knapsack lying near the moaning man's body, & walked on.

I was too furious to care what he'd likely saved me from. I had never traveled with anyone. I waited for his trousers to come down so I could get a much-needed bite in. But they didn't. I don't know why I stayed with him since the knapsack had little of value. He wasn't claiming me as a woman. There was no bind. We simply traveled together.

He continues. "So your best angle on the thing is to make sure you love as well as you possibly



can. Because your path will warp, one way or another. Nothing wrong to that. It's a good thing."

"Who have you loved?" I groused.
He laughed. "Who haven't I?"

Much later he took out from his great dirty overcoat a small handmade book held together & closed by a series of knots. There were pages & pages of drawings done in what seemed like charcoal, the lines etched into the paper as though by fingers, worked & worked.

Who hadn't he loved? There were many pictures of girls & women, each one distinct. Mostly faces, laughing eyes, sad mouths, ponytails, loose strands of hair, a scar, a dimple, freckles.

A couple of nudes, one slender, her mouth wide open as her fingers throttle between her thighs to orgasm. A bigger woman kneeling with a torso behind her, hands under her big breasts, yet not sex, no, embrace, her face is barely smiling, but beatific, joy, pure joy in this embrace. I looked for hours at those pictures, wished & feared my page would be there one far day.

Trees. All sorts of trees. Great monsters, rising to the stars in godly glory. Acorns. Crumpled leaves. One a burnt forest, stumps & shards from a great fire. I dream about that book still, when I'm lucky.

I think about it especially tonight as I've finished watching on TV a love story unfold.

The boy & girl are in a house with many floors. There's an elevator that runs from one floor to the next; no stairs it seems. They're trying to get together, to be close, it's not working. They end up always on different floors, again & again. I smoke & watch this tussle, is it years?

The seasons come & go, many of them, yet they never age. They never leave the house. At one point they find each other in the elevator, & for a moment they're close, happy, makes sense, things cohere. *And then something.* And then something else.

As I watch & smoke cigarettes, they're on different floors again. But it's different now. *Now they remember.*

The remembering is what changes things, because if they have, they will again. I watch as they near, one obstacle to the next, sometimes doubt, the worst obstacle of all. She becomes a whore. Him a priest. But it doesn't work.

Finally, many floors up, high, impossibly high, they find each other. There he is, there she is, they're together. She falls asleep in his arms. He sketches her face in a little book.

Wait. What? Maybe I dozed. It's a sweet story. It ends.

Then I notice something. Something that scares me. It's a window. I'm in my own room, as

rarely, & I've been looking out the window at the house over there. The curtains are closed now, but they weren't. What?

Maybe it was just dreams.

"Some warps in the path can be as beautiful as you can possibly imagine," The Tramp said once, or more, usually taking back his book from my unwilling hand. "But remember, young Princess Missy: it's all warps in the end." Little book back into the depths of his great coat.

xiv.

Were they dreams when I first watched you dance? Were they what draws me to you, even now, these dreams of you dancing? I think so but I don't know.

Others too would watch you dancing on the raked dancing grounds, how you'd make the sand & pebbles scatter. How you would lithe & blind move near the large rocks, roll over them, bend back to them, never a sound but the scrapes & scatterings.

You'd study books of patterns by evening with an older man, handsome, sad, loving you, & I would be so close, I could smell your virgin sweat, light & sweet, & his rough odor, & how many women had swooned in that in his years!

What were these dreams, prophecy? I was so deep in them, among the bushes & trees that moved with you, the secret fountain that would bubble & gush as you reached your crashing finish. The black stone shaped like a star with one point missing. The pink stone like a slouched or failing heart. Flowers no matter the seeming season.

They came more rarely, these dreams, as I took to my travels, with the Tramp & beyond. But just as fiercely & I would wake up panting for breath, crying, my limbs moaning me with pain. I just didn't know.

xv.

Wake up. No, *wake up*. In a warehouse, long steps, running. Shit, something, what? Light of day is gone. They control the situation beyond all reason, it's obvious. What am I here?

When they first came, it was as angels from God, His missionaries come to destroy the foul Earth, pass judgment on all. People *believed this*. *By the millions*. They submitted themselves to be judged & punished. It was that easy.

Wake up. No, *wake up*. It's a vast camp, strange, I keep moving. Feeling like something to be found, among these tents & trees & buildings. Something to help me *find you*.

I meet people wearing costumes promoting eternal life. It adheres to the body, sucks out the years & the toxins. *To wear this costume is to live forever*.

I keep walking. Wake up. No, *wake up*. I need to find a place to rest, to dream. Of you. Why to keep going.

You forget me sometimes. You forget I am coming to you. You dance for him, or the other one, & it's enough, it's full in you. I cry out.

This is not a hunger that I chose.

It consumes my path ever closer to you. *I won't wake up.*

xvi.

I keep moving, in mind or body or both. Long days, long nights. Am I still in that room & my friend nurses me? Am I dreaming in the Tramp's arms? Did I really escape that massacre when I was young? Just me?

I grind & thrash for something, not old sadnesses or furies or memories. Something now. Whatever has impelled me toward you, *give me something.*

When it comes, it cackles. It's a . . . tiny imp in many colors.

It cackles & leads me away, out a door, from a ditch, the grasp of two women & a man, I don't know. It's black & white, orange dress red trimmed, wide eyes, laughing mouth, a tiny thing I follow away from somewhere. This is play. Like my old friend & his niece.

I'm led away & I go, what else? What has gnashing my thighs for you got me? There is cackling. There is play. All is game, an illusion.

I go, & there are many trees. Pale, beneath the darker stars. The imp smooths my listen, learns me sniff twice, & again. Pay attention, both smaller & taller. The imp shows me there might be other friends, if I let. Let go, sniff, twice, let go.

I am thus content to exhale until the night my imp goes all white, still cackling but all colors gone.

The bite is in me again, *oh feel it*. Sand & stones scatter. *Feel it.*

I dream of you again, you are in the Tramp's book, page after page of you, you are crying out for me to come to you, fingers clawing in your thighs, *o fucking godd cum in me*

the imp all the while cackling my mind, her colors restored, wildly restored, her eyes wider, cackling high & low, hurry, me go. *Hurry, hurry*, cackling high & low, *hurry me go.*

xvii.

Then the worse part of it. I killed someone. I'm running & I have no chance. They know & are following. I remember it like a cloudy sky in my mind. *Who did I kill? Why?*

It's night. I'm in these strange woods, again. Pale with dark lights overhead. Over & over I find these woods & they protect me. The pursuers retreat, unwilling to follow me here. Do they think these woods will do me worse? What do I think this? Can I hear them talking?

I'm OK. Whatever this is, it can take me willing. I wait. It doesn't. So I try remembering.

My clothes are rags on me, I pull them off, tear them useless from me. The moon my light, I examine me. My hair is long on one side, shorn close on the other. When that? I'm thin, not starved but not an extra pound. My legs are strong. My breasts bruised, gnawed, sensitive. My pussy, bare, shaved, also tender. I'm not sick. What was it? I stare into the moon, hard into the moon, begging me tell, begging me remember.

There was a room, where it happened, small, a basement. My means gone, near starving, led by hands there, fed old bread, watery soup. A bed, my new workplace.

One man caused us to be bound together so tight I thought we'd die that way, watching each other's eyes go glassy. I shifted & squeezed my thighs till I found his pain threshold, then harder till he groaned, harder till he begged, harder till he screamed & was led away.

Another would save me when I wasn't there for saving. He told me excited he'd purchased me, & would bring me to his new house. Would dress me in ruffles & satin. Pink underwear. Would wash & brush my hair for hours. Study to know me by my every tick & pore, & know me nothing.

I couldn't. A part of me tempted, a weak part of me that longed to play deep into his mind over days or years until he would fuck me blind, call me whore, wash the blood off me after, feed me chocolates, sing to me in a cracked voice.

I couldn't. I had this goldfish, beautiful, in a glass vessel. I'd watch her swim as others would gag me, scorch my chest, weep & fuck me harder. I'd watch this golden bit swim in its glass vessel as they filled me with their goo, or lathered it on my tits, or forced it down my throat.

Then there were two, I'd thought the other died, but no, good news. They talk to me. Sometimes they are not even in the water, singing to me, so vulnerable. Their vessel keeps breaking & they lie in the shards, panting until I collect them. Singing happily to me, my friends, all that's passed by, all lost, regained & more.

Between men I clean my body & their vessel. Fresh water, they let me know too hot or too cold. We work together, as is right.

I begin to show them my life, welcome them deeper into my mind. The massacre I fled from, the Tramp, the pretty boy on the rolling restaurant. The cackling imp.

I show them you, my dearest love, my path, & they understand. They know. They then tell me something. A vision of the sea. A place before I was with the Travelers. It's like a memory of my own they help me to extract from the many lost ones, extract for new.

When he comes, with new dresses, & jewelry to decorate me, me purchased & to be taken away with him, I can't. *I won't.* He talks. Laughs. I tempt as I imagine him crying YOU FUCKING SLUT TAKE IT ALL, but no.

I can't. I urge me friends swim into my eyes for safety, turn away as I raise their bowl high & smash his head. He falls among water & shards, moans, forgives me.

I can't. I drive a large shard into his chest. Again. Fucking again. *Until he won't ever take us.*

My knapsack is in the corner of the room. I undress him & use what of his clothes I can. He's bleeding his last on the dresses & jewelry.

A fragment. Shiny, a little figure broken from something else. A little . . . bear. Reminds me of my imp. I take it. I take him with me in his clothes. I love him. I wish he had entered another cellar seeking his prize. I go.

You're both with me here, tonight, still swimming safely in my eyes, not too hot or too cold. I'll bring you with me, to her. *We'll sing to her.* We'll go.

This woods won't harm us, tonight, now or ever. It's morning. She waits. And now we go.

xviii.

Along came the Traveling Troubadour, long dead but loved by many in the places we travel. I find myself in his company, happily, as many times before, none the how or the why. *What is real? What isn't? What next?*

He laughs & bids me sing for the crowds. He has taught me himself, though more & more his lessons seem like remembering.

Often he tells me to *grasp them by their eyes*, see the music their hearts yearn, *sing it, sing it.* The snapping fires, the low moon lighting trees around us, this is easy & they dance. Learn something, something else, & dance more. He laughs, strums even brighter, nods me more.

Between towns & crowds, I show him my puzzle. I have a blue sheet to write upon, but seem to have trouble. I wish to fill it with all of my fragments which, when assembled, will form a whole, my path to her. He nods, sees my dilemma.



“None, one, & many,” he laughs, almost cackles. Yes, indeed, I nod. *None, one, & many*. He lifts his instrument, strikes a perfect chord, smiles a happy smile, & is gone again, until the next time around.

I wake alone, singing, wrapped in his warm garment around my dead fiancé’s clothes, check, goldfish sleeping lightly in the corner of my eyes, OK. All good. Stand, wash, sing a little. Move on.

xix.

Come the Island, Come the Island,
come the doubt, come me there,
I hesitate, protect me, I doubt.

Lived on the beach, sleep under a collection of branches leaned against a tree. Lay out many days nude to burn, as long as can, find myself relief for want of your touch.

Hesitate, doubt. Protect me.

Watch the full moon with my aching skin & see a face in the moon & the face seems to talk to me alone & it says *click-click! noise-noise! click-click! noise-noise!* in a gnattering tongue I feel like I once knew.

The next night my skin still troubles me & it looks like the tiny imp in the moon has returned to distract me from pain & sleeplessness, gnattering wildly, high & low, urge me too.

The third night I cannot keep awake as my skin no longer aches & I crawl among my branches leaned against the tree. Up in the sky, the moon is too waning for me to see the imp again. But she presses me along to you. *hurry me go*. She loves me, she cackles, she presses me to wake & go.

xx.

Our first time not in a bed or on grass, or by woods, but in the Royal Temple. My dress houses undergarments trimmed for secret entry, hidden pleasures. He hides me there before first light & comes when his morning business is done. Comes alone, lets rumors scatter that he draws nearer the old gods as war with the Mainland approaches. All respect his hours of prayer alone in the Temple.

I kneel between his thighs & arouse his member swiftly. Of all the cocks I have sucked, all the cocks I have received, the gentle, the violent, this is the one that matters, the only one.

I sit on your lap facing you, your hands sliding in through the hidden flaps in my dress, the rest of you sliding in me down below.

You are strong but guide me gently our first time, it feels good. I feel *something* with you in me.

You teach me to moan through our clasped fingers, to keep my eyes shut & see you through our quickening beats & breaths, & faster, & a nebulous climax you lead me in & out of until our hands explode in cry, until our bones shake & our muscles slowly relax. *Fuck.*

I'm let in early in the morning, let out late at night. I don't know by who. But I had already seen you dance, I knew I'd found you.

When he moves me to a private chamber to keep me more elaborately, it doesn't matter.

The goldfish in my eyes swim peacefully, the imp in the moon cackles with this good new play.

I would crumple the King your father as I near you, swear & sweat him & this world away from this skin of mine you will touch, *you will possess.*

xxi.

We are six. No. I know. Yes, we are scattered, even enemy now, but once we came together, walked as one.

We six, raised & summoned from different lands & times, bound for the Island, many years in the binding for this task, to answer for all what if anything could be done to save men—

Could the Tangled Gate undo all the wrong we'd brought to ourselves & our world?

Ours was the fellowship they make the myths from. The one of the great Beast tricked by our Dreamwalker into devouring his head. The one of the woman who bit off the cocks of enchanted seamen until the night she broke her teeth & lost her tongue devouring our brother-sister's image cut in stone.

The later one of the man who walked in crown & dragon's robes, telling of his god's every whim & judgment, deciding lives & deaths with nods & moods, until our brother sang him nude into the Fountain's cheering & clearing waters, him to emerge soft & wide-eyed, with every crumb of the world now mine & yours & all's to share.

A fellowship, broken on the Island, within the Tangled Gate. Not built by men, not the stuff of this world.

It tore us from each other not because malevolent, but because men can only undo men. We cannot undo the elemental forces of this world. Submit, thrash, burn, heal.

Yes, well. This pond I stay is calm at twilight, chipping & whirring of its world at peace. I think about my brothers & I wish we had another hour in the Gate. To submit to its power, yes, but insist our fraternity.

Teach us to know the world, play it, sing it, heal it of us, we are ignorant & rude of these things.

But teach us not how to love one another, for though you consume our bodies, you cannot know our hearts, how a hand's touch stays forever in changing shapes of memory, how a soft word twists into blood & loins, how the very air we breathed that morning as we arrived on the Island still fills & empties our lungs, each of us, tonight, tomorrow, it's cool, calm, we look around, anchor the boat, glad we are near to one another, whatever comes, whatever comes.

When I leave this pond, brothers, I don't know if I will ever find any of you again. And I don't know if any of your master skills were such I learned enough to use well.

But I know this is not my conclusion. We came together to save the world. I haven't forgotten this or any of you. Peace dwells in twilight at this pond, but not in my heart.

xxii.

I was sometimes called the Dreamwalker because I could step in & out of them, like other men a field of lilies & grass, & I could squeeze & shape them to a chunk of wisdom, a word, a message from what knows this world & blows best through its ways.

My brothers would tend me when I woke, sweating, sometimes injured from my travels in Dreamland. It had always been like this, save before them I would tend my wounds alone.

They would wash my body, clean & dress my damage, kisses, caresses. I'd not known men could be so gentle to one another & yet still prefer to lie with women. I too, yet this kind of intimacy moved me, I would try to learn my work better for these brothers.

I would sit with them by evening & tell what I could. Some things would not carry over, would crumble in waking, or in the saying, or even in my brothers' eyes as they watched me, needed me to tell.

As days neared us toward the Island & the Tangled Gate, my dreams went numb of picture, word, advice. My brothers found nothing in my face.

Only one image: a spread of fresh, warm blood on a log, a huge axe falling from the sky, twining it. Seemed a warning but against what? Bleeding? Chopping wood?

We tried something at my begging upon reaching the Island, its shoreless rocky edge. From my pouch the herbs & powders to set me into waking sleep. I followed with the others, in two places at once, trying first to see doubly, then singly.

In dream I was alone, on an Island come alive, coated in fur & teeth, angry, uncalmable, not just intent to consume me, or us, whole, but to efface us, like we never were in the world.

I cry out. A man's sad face, furious too—The Island—its body of the Beast, its face of a sad, furious man—I cry out, & fall down forever.

My brothers all return to me from their explorings, gather me close, each a hand on my trembling form. We are one & together again—

O world's dreaming heart! Why couldn't the Island have consumed us then whole, than spew us like spittle in all directions thereafter?

I feel you still, all of you, my brothers, tending me, waiting my words, even when the only ones I have left, finally, are: *I'm sorry.*

xxiii.

You knew me as he, you knew me as she. We lay together in couples & groups, the road too long for questions that no longer mattered. You held those with you, you loved them, they were lorn. You loved them.

As a girl I waited for the men to find me, I waited, veiled, ruffled, impatient. The universe made my body to play, to think & play, to think & love & play. To figure it all out among hands & eyes & thighs & words part prayer, part lies.

The men found me & I let them chase, let them breathe my scent & sleep alone, let them make canvases by my vague smile, let them caterwaul music from their hard loins.

The men found me & I let a few with a secret smile, moved them to build & to destroy & to calm the fuck down & *to raise back the fuck up.*

The years passed & I needed to know better, to feel it hard entering me, feel that driving thing of empires, gird it soft, feel it raised helplessly by blush & a thigh, need to possess something, have it, fuck it, *fuck it*, rest. Rest softly. Year upon year.

Eventually, what difference? I knew it mattered, knew it, then less so. All flesh is lorn, all flesh needs love, me to help make it so.

My brothers, when the Beast pulled me down to light, I felt the why for it all, remembered again.

We're here for the friction, we're here for the lorn. We're how the world makes its music, what it plays, what it burns.

xxiv.

Before I was King, do you remember? I washed my shirt carefully every day. I slept among the legs & hands & dirty mouths of my own brothers. The ones blood told me were brothers, before I learned my path needed dearer ones to me.

There was no King then. Just groups of men keeping each to its piece. Peace but when a woman

got restless for a new face. We'd heave it out for her claim. Mostly we were too tired working fields for politics.

But some of my dreams I could not bury between randy maidens' thighs, much as I tried. More to this world than working it over like a prize fight.

I asked the old men of the tribe, a tooth among them, they laughed.

Eventually it was the women, full moonlight, tall fires, I made them share with me their drinks neither wine nor water. The long hours showing me years ago, the Island, out there on the horizon, something there, a Gate? They couldn't tell me. They squabbled my cock till each her taste & fill. Then again.

Now knowing something I tried to tell. Something more to this world than dirty hands. The men shook me off for easier lessons of drink & sleeping the world hard off many hours.

I needed new brothers to teach me how listen, teach me how see. New brothers to travel that Island's dream & bring its secrets home.

xxv.

It was in the sea-water we first touched you, by then we were yours. That first day preternaturally bright, the kind quickly dries the lips. I'd said you'd come kind, fast & slower, like a woman's smiling eyes as you followed her hips, like faint water trickling you into a dream. The sea-water as it touched our ankles & knees, as we pulled our small boats ashore.

Then it was the air, it felt like remembering, it felt like private, impossibly private, things to each of us. A touch, a word. A private smell with its private smile.

The air of the Island curled around us in waves that slowly consumed. But a finger on the lips to me, not a word to any or the magic's gone. And it's just a lonely island. *Shh*. Finger on the lips. Not a word.

We camped out that night on the beach, subdued, none of our songs matched those strange patterns of stars, their strange colors.

Our bonfire roared, we six about it, about a mile from one set of warming hands to the next.

I wondered within for a word, felt I should, the others had always nodded kindly to my plants & potions, given me a step & a moment to help if I could.

I close my eyes. I call the Island to me, humbly, I bid it near as I could abide. I present myself for the protection of my brothers, *let me flow through them tonight & always, I pray I flow through & protect you one & all.*



Eyes open. They are looking me close over. A few smile. “This place will fell more of us in the end.” Nod. Laugh.

(Finger on the lips. *Not a word.* Or the magic’s gone.)

xxvi.

I was told first, given my task when I had none, when I had nothing. Another face among leaves & trees. Too many years chasing good ass & then whatever ass. Too many explanations. Too much time.

The voice in my head, I was hungry, lightheaded, pills for meals, pills for sleep. The voice, a young boy’s or a girl’s, humming at first, draw me in lure my mind. Look about, city crowds, we exist to each other by news only our skins & sniffs know. Nothing. The voice sang louder, moved me from brownstones & cobblestones to a park, a bench without light.

“Would you like to do something beautiful? Would you like to save the world? Would you like to feel like the stones, the streams, the wind among nameless things?”

I nodded to this madness, or open door. Nodded & was led back in time, my own times, my canvases, unfinished. Blood canvases, I saw them now & new, saw what they should be, *ahh*, I painted & painted, the voice singing, singing, its light, my path, on & on, it would have been enough, I ate bread & cheese again, I was happy.

I saved, I paid for one, I was particular, long dark hair, blushing cheeks, the fine round ass of a good whore, but little cracked, little tried, unbroken, paid good for her to pose by my chamber’s tall window, laid out in my bed, I’d let her read or doze, or eat tiny candies I’d buy for her in handfuls.

I preferred her not leave, & she didn’t. I dressed her against my weakness but she didn’t view it that way.

I hardened day by day as I painted, moonlight on that hard round whore’s ass, little cracked, little tried. The voice pressing, giving me the choice.

“Would you like to do something beautiful? Would you like to save the world?” I nodded & knew there had to be more. Kept my hands on my brushes. Hard, harder, kept on painting.

The canvases became other, developed a within, a toward, faces, singly at first but then I saw how they were a group. The tall windows of my chamber let in stars & moons & something between them, madness or open door, I nodded, the same faces, canvas after canvas, woods, pale woods, the sea, knowing, near the Island, of course the Island. Always the Island. Always the Gate.

Her legs parted, smiling, glistening.
Moonlit. Perfect.

“Would you like to do something beautiful? Would you like to save the world?”

I nodded & drew us together, at last. Each found the canvas I made for him, in his place & time, studied it, dreamed it day & night until known better than the common light, better than brain, body, beat, breath, knew it & stepped through.

I smoothed & spread her ass that last night before I left, entered her once, twice, *shh*, feel it with me, *yess*, feel it with me, I love you, feel it with me. & goodbye—open wider, there, now, let it all go—& goodbye—

There we were together, our ship, the sea & more sea. Morning. Waking in a cluster, a herd, a batch of wondering faces. What next?

Time to do something beautiful.
Time to save the world.

They knew, these found brothers, that I had brought them here. Called me the Magician but I shook them off. Urged me paint our path, our enemies, beautiful women to dance with. Shook it off worse. *There is only the Island. There is only the Gate.*

My sole canvas aboard that ship showed not the what nor the where of our task but how it would bind us better, & break us finally.

They gathered. Laughed. Then less. New vows.

I made us curl together, again, the night before we arrive the Island. Every man another's hand to his lips, his breast. Someone laughed. Another shushed.

We sailed unknown seas of stars, & songs of boys & girls wished & washed our minds. Night passed. *Coming home, coming home.*

We ranged the Island for days, the stories don't tell this. It wasn't a single day's conquest. We were brave, we were brave, we were less so. The Gate humbled us before it would be found. Farther & farther from the world, lost in mystic pale woods until I listened, begged a little, & listened, & led us the remaining way.

The Gate is none of this world & our skills & tricks & strong hands did us no good. The paths walled by vines & stones hurried & pushed us, no pause, no food, never quite night to rest. We came, straggled, crowded before the cave of the Beast.

Words gone as each of us entered the cave, & was consumed.

Consumed us, singly, & then in all, & I felt the stones, I felt the promised streams, I let go, & more, & all, & now the wind among nameless things. I nodded, smiled, did not return, my brothers, now I am become the canvas upon which you will do something beautiful.

I grant you this music,
I burden you this song.
I don't know if you can, but
you will try & save the world.

xxvii.

Oh, but wait, remember back a little, her, among the adventures we never spoke, gypsy girl, the girl in the graveyard & she was possibly dead, but we each had of her & were less & more.

We had sailed toward the Island for years without discovering sight of it. The maps read, the shamans drunk with, the myth held no live bones.

Pulled our boat into harbor, a city full of taverns, loose a little, put down the weapons & too many maps. We range to different new companions & pursuits. New smells in the nose.

"You're the Dreamwalker," she says to me, young, pretty, but a scar, but a limp, scarves of many sigils, cards on her table, a crystal.

I nod. Imagine licking her scar, her everywhere, then take my drink. My friend's new brew.

"The Island's a dreamer. It dreams the world."

We walk outside, I don't tell my brothers. She sniffs of blue fire, too too blue, & leads me to a graveyard. We lay among effaced stones.

I don't reach for her as I ought, or might, but she gazes the stars & sings me a song.

*There is a door & now we pass through
There is a door & now we pass through
There is a door & now we pass through"*

I sleep. Dream of warm blood on a fallen tree.

I find her while looking for the Dreamwalker. She smiles, & I tense. Bids me sit with her among a cluster of stones. Some say only "from." Some only "to."

"You lay with men & women both?" I nod. She curls into me, her hands soft, curious, benign. "The chasm won't be breached."

The painter joins us, remarks the moonlight, the shadows. She slips from her scarves & skirts

& bids him portray her. Portray us together.

We twine for him & he draws with a shaky hand, shakes his head, cannot render, & goes. She seems to follow, without her clothes.

My brothers are scattered & here is a naked woman in a graveyard. She is scared, limps, scarred but beautiful. I cover her with my cloak.

Now on an ancient bench near the graveyard's gate, she calms, pushes my cloak plainly aside. Urges my hands upon her. "*There is no time.*"

I turn from my games of pegs & chance & find only our youngest brother remains. "They've gone with the gypsy," he says, thin-voiced.

But she's where she's been all night, at her table, her cards, her crystal. Bids me sit. I nod.

"My cards know more than your plants," she says.
"That may be true. But my plants don't lie."

Her smile rings & rings of power, enough to dance in partner, enough to burn worlds.

Our youngest brother goes to look for the rest & I watch her follow. He'd drunk what I'd given him first. No time for lies. So many beautiful truths.

I find each of us disarrayed as though strong, fine, dirty sex but strangely no sate. We gather ourselves finally before morning's first light.

Nobody knows of the gypsy at the tavern that morning, & the scarves & skirts we seek in the graveyard are discovered colorless scraps.

Our ship finally a refuge from that night & what it tells us. We could search for the Island perpetually, or sacrifice all, finally, each other, & it will reveal.

xxviii.

We lay twined abed, as we have from our first night, & you press me again, smiling blue stars in the velvet space between us, what brought me back, & with my bond of strong brothers, how was it so?

You'd known your own fate from a child. First a girl bleeds she is chosen by one or another. They fight, they trade, one beds me after they drink & hug, maybe they share me that night as a mark of friendship. Each vying to make me moan more helplessly, cry & beg. Begging makes it worse.

So your sister had told you, & aunts, & your own mother with not enough words, & tears.

"It's hard on them, this life. They need to be brutal to us. It *compensates*." She knew such words & their ideas too, but died like none of it mattered. Just the hairy bit between her legs, & his need for *compensation*.

"Then you came." I smile. I'd almost forgotten the scattered tribes of this region. We came on a clue of the Island. But people knew me. They remembered me. "And everyone thought I'd come with a mission of union. My brothers liked it better than I did. They convinced me."

"No. I did." I smack her ass. I could find this flesh candy in the silence of the seas.

"Tell me."

"I dreamed you."

"Dreamed?"

"It seemed of no consequence, a man's yearn who's smelled other men's loins too close too long."

"It wasn't."

"No."

Our first night's camp was near where I'd been a boy. Some remembered, welcomed me, us, some didn't. I saw you at camp & I'd never seen such terror in a girl's eyes. Such hopelessness.

"I told my brothers to keep the men busy, all night, drink & fight them, again & again."

I'm silent a moment, feel her sweat on my heart.

"You wouldn't tell me."

"I had no words. This is what men do. This is what girls are."

"But still you feared. Your heart fought it."

She laughs. "What woman wouldn't choose which man beds her? By a tribal rule? Or by her own fired loins & heart?"

"I didn't intend to take you."

"You'd sniffed me close the first time we passed. I'd already chosen you. I just didn't think it would happen. So his small cock would have your handsome face."

I laugh, helplessly. You've taught me the heaviness & lightness of a woman's wants, of her needs.

"You made me King."

"Your brothers had already decided that. Just lacking was the kingdom."

"When they beheld you my Queen, I now had worth to kneel for!"

She shifts impatiently. Strokes my cock thoughtfully, if that's possible. Moves about in my arms, then leaps back from my known responses.

"Tell me."

"Tell you what? You feel my hardness. Shall I beg again?"

She laughs. Then stops.

"Why were you here? You didn't come to free & unite us. Not originally."

"Why say you?"



"Because girls like me are the spoils of the last standing. You hesitated. Gave me choice."

"I'm not a brute."

"No. And it takes one to ride into settled lands & claim them. Fell the men there or worse let them live servants thereon. *Tell me.*"

I marvel her again & wonder my silence.

"You sought something. Or someone?"

Silence.

"Should I fear you begged another her treats, & she lives still in your heart?"

"No. We rode as brothers looking for a home. We'd bonded by chance, by accident, & vowed to settle. We were ready. Too many limbs among us. Low fires in the heart. We were tired."

You didn't quite believe me. You knew among us six no longer spoken words, wishes, remained. You chose, after all, to love what I could give. Love, loving, kindness. An especial cruel hand to any man who'd have a girl like a tankard. To be drained, bussed by another.

I ruled by your lights, & why you were taken from me is all keeping me alive.

xxviii.

The ancient women have not forgotten me as I visit their dwelling alone. They gather around me in their furs & feathers & finery. The manacle each wears on her left wrist, as reminder.

"Tell me. We don't visit for sentiment."

"There are stranger strengths in this world than most reckon. Hidden paths among dreams, & truck even between life & death."

"Tell me."

The oldest, three hideous bones of a woman, eyes me. "Why did you return?"

"I won't lie. It was chance."

"What were you seeking?"

I look at the manacle on her ancient crust of a wrist & try to think of her, girl in new stained white panties, led off for consumption. *Compensation.*

I sigh. "We sought the Tangled Gate, a bond of men gathered to save the world. But it was vain. Why gather us & not reveal the thing?"

"They were despairing. Becoming saviors to my old homeland saved them, saved all of us."

"Now you despair."

"Yes. And you have help?"

These old crones then spend the last of their blood bone & magick to answer me. A bed the size of my brothers' boat, fires & stars where ceiling'd stolid stood, & them too many to count, & ferocious again in their flesh, mouths to be kissed & sucked, breasts to be squeezed & bitten, shoulders & stomachs & buttocks to be licked, chewed, tendered, hips & maidenhair to be

released in happy moans, laughing howls, & in that night they showed me, each a witchly piece to the whole, the route to the Island, & thus the Gate. *Thus the Gate.*

I woke by sun, chewed, well chewed & battered in dust. Of course they were gone, as though never been. But I knew the way now. It was no noble task for us, some great work of obligation.

We'd been wrong. We'd come to save the world now because we had so much to lose by its passing. Love fights for its right, love sacrifices when it must, but love most seeks to learn best how to live & shows others how.

xxx.

[Having let go the script, again, the Gatekeeper watches, mouths the words as they are spoken]

There is no time. That's what we six learned. What we know still. *There is no time.* We travel rootless paths. Cling to their scenery. We mold to sense impressions, helplessly, & layer upon layer our seeming knowledge.

Our bodies mature like fruit, to new shapes, to deeper within. The path to others sometimes farther, more volatile. Do the lights of the sky understand? Do other creatures of the earth? Can our want flare to knowing, stay?

We accumulated, entering the Cave, filled our bond more & more, seeming, then a falling back, a rupture. A loss.

We'd intended no kingdom & yet it now stood, & those who had raised it were now leaving, a voyage for all humanity, twas said, & though the world seemed prosperous & at its ease, they sailed without further word.

The King now knew the way, he'd summoned us & said. His great hall, its great communal meal table, where we ate with all of our kinsmen, was emptied but for one map.

His eye, his finger on one place, seeming in the open sea.

"There." We looked.

"In the morning."

"How do we land on water?"

"It will be there."

"How will we know?"

He stopped us with a fist upon the table. "It's there. It's what we seek. Guarded, but we will be let in." Then he turned & left, didn't take his map. Didn't need it.

It was our fellowship that allowed us passage. The King traded our love for it. For him, twas no longer save mankind or the world. *Save her.* Bring her back. Her unknown illness. Lack of funeral. No gravesite. We sailed.

Other stories tell of our arrival, the dreams, the dark portents. None tell the rest. *There is no time.*

The Island that was not there came into view the third morning out, & we landed its shoreless rocky edge. Woods, it was covered in an unnavigable pale Woods!

But the King had negotiated our passage. He gathered us the next morning, upon an unliked night of sleep there, closed his eyes, & began to sing. Sing & climb from the rocks & on into the Woods.

We followed him, weapons ready but no foe. A silent Woods to enter, save for our King's crooning.

Twas helpless we followed, our King singing a song not of familiar word or a known tongue, yet moving along without a stumble, while the rest of us were less lucky. He sang us along a seeming invisible path for hours, & impossible to say it led anywhere, & yet did.

It should have been night when we came out, & first beheld the Tangled Gate. Should have, wasn't. It was taller than a castle, & seeming ageless. *Was ageless. There is no time.* We'd yet to learn.

We remarked its legend high above us: "*For those lost.*" Were we? We passed through. There a Fountain, carved & decorated fanatically, beyond mortal crafts. Its waters an invitation. The King gestured us drink. There seemed no choice.

The passage through the Gate was only partly physical. It's this the myths cannot convey. There were no days or nights in the Gate. *There is no time.*

We did not come to the Cave of the Beast by a path, or several. It was arrival without intention. Were there even the paths told of, made of vines & stones? Had we left the Fountain, or the entrance, or had we even left the shoreless rocky lip of the Island?

The King roused us. As a group we'd been slumped by the Cave's entrance. Stupored. He spoke quietly, but with his compelling authority.

"This is why we were brought together. To come here & enter this Cave. We're here to save the world by our worth as men. Our willingness to enter this Cave."

I entered first & found myself of a sudden by the shore of a pond at twilight. The pond was covered in water lilies, & the insect hum rose to my ears. I sat by the water & did not know. There was no way back, as though I hadn't come from anywhere else. This seemed what was intended for me.

I entered next, seeing my brother in the far distance, by a place he'd mentioned sometimes having seen, called it a living painting. Yet I could not retrieve him, & despaired, when I

felt many arms embrace me, touch my face, join my beating, my breath, close my eyes, *my brothers—*

And I came, though what separated one from another of us I could less & less tell. I did not need aid to sleep & wake both for here in the Gate it was these as one forever, it was source, before sunshine, before soil, all was music, all was flow. I smiled.

I came to know & saw the living canvas of my brothers & how I'd come to paint it & I yearned my place! Please let me consume in the this canvas finally & know more than painter & subject, *let all be one, let all be one.*

My King I came last before you & something in this welcoming goo was wrong. I loved my brothers so much but I was trained by Creatures far wiser than we men to sniff & know. As I entered the Cave I sniffed to know & the pain seemed to rip me wide. I sniffed again & again, to calm. My brothers were not in that Cave. Not dead but gone.

When I came out you shrieked wordless at me. You ran past me into the Cave & remained within for three days. I was compelled to stay vigil, no more.

When you came out, that third morning, you were not as I had known. We returned to our ship, unhindered, no path or singing needed. You told me only one thing, "There's no need to mourn them. We know there is no time. So there can be no death."

All I felt was the falling back, the rupture, the loss. I wondered the Gate, then the Island, then the sense of everything & myself.

I broke with you, my King, when I sunk to my knees one night & cried for help. Cried for help a man could conceive, & use. A Savior, to comfort, to explain. A Savior, whether he had ever existed, could now exist. Could comfort & explain hereon. Could bring me along with the rest, where you, my King, my brother, had denied, when you willing sacrificed us all in the Gate.

The emptiness possesses me, even now, as I saw you divide from your kingdom, as I saw you reach back to the Island, as I saw you come to believe there was something there after all to save men, a bargain to be made with whatever Eternals had built that Gate.

I arrayed against you, my King, that others would not follow you, across the waters, on the path that had taken our brothers from us. A path you had designed because *there is no time & she had not died & you could save her even now.* You could still save her & our brothers. The Gate could save us all. *The Gate could save the world.*



To be continued in Cenacle | 88 | April 2014

* * * * *

Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Nine

xxxi.

A nudge in his side. Another. Now a jab. Bowie starts awake but opens his eyes only slowly. A light sniff. Her. Not the other one. Or one to come.

She smiles sidelong at him, not one to be caught distracted from the Architect's class.

The readings are long, especially when he'd prefer be studying the texts himself. But no, the texts are fragile. More than that, the readers derive power from their readings. The words, & who delivers them.

Preacher hadn't liked it, he was protective of Bowie no matter that they had been on several cases now.

"Why aren't you coming then?"

Preacher laughed. "He would know it was me in two snaps. If that."

"Are you enemies?"

He sighs. Looks sad. "No. He was my old partner."

"I don't understand . . ."

"No. You don't. That's part of why you're going. Much as I dislike it, you can find things out & figure them out in a way nobody else can."

"Think I'm going to prefer him?"

Bowie meant fun but Preacher glared. "I'll tell you this much, Garrish. You won't come back easy, or fully."

Nudge, nudge. He sniffs again, right down to her lack of underwear beneath that dull uniform. Wants to, doesn't think Preacher would like it. Doesn't want to enough to rebel. At least yet.

The Architect is tall, too tall somehow. The classroom isn't well-lighted, which probably is for mood, but just makes Bowie want to nap.

The Architect strides among the rows of cross-legged students.

“We learn these myths not to take them literally, but to see how the Gate’s story has lived among men for all his centuries. Whatever their verifiable truths, they matter as stories.”

His look at Bowie is direct. “It has taken a long time to understand the Gate, what its power is & has been always. To figure what we can & should do.”

“Now each of you is shown the origin of the world, its source in Emandia, & how arrives the Gate to the Island. Now each of you is given practice to devote to your art, time to feel *how real it seems through the Dreaming*.”

Pauses. Nods. “It wasn’t always so. We lost many, in mind or entirely, early on, thinking it would be quick. We knew so much, the Hum that signaled the Gate through time, the juice created to pursue it. We could piece together the fall.”

Continues. Bowie is fully awake to this. “We believed it was a series of acts, a *finite* number, they could be shifted, like levers, like Time itself a great calculating machine we could tinker to a better end. We would find these acts, in space & time, & settle one of our sleepers near each one.”

Returns to his low podium, upon which his text sits. Kneels, talks on. “*But what happened was that the Hum shifted*. The Gate eluded us & we could not use its power to repair our history. We found ourselves at war with the Gate, losing men & women, helpless to know how to prevent our collapse.”

Tenses more as he tells. “I sought our answer dream within dream within dream. Eschewed the Sleeping Capsule, trebled in strength the potion I myself had contrived. I slept beyond reason & stayed beyond the Dreaming to my mortal danger.” Pauses. Nods. Talks.

“It was my old mutt, Asterius, who saved me. I’d retreated to my Tower offices to do this desperate work, & finally he would not be so long kept from me. He found me & nudged me & licked me & dragged me back to him.”

“Asterius? Not Fido or Rover?” The class laughs. The Architect at least takes a breath before continuing.

“I held him despairing. His quick breaths, his swift heartbeat. How he tended me close like in other times I had cared for his wounds & ills. And then I realized what should have been simple.”

He stands, fully, tall, overly tall. “*History is the stuff of blood & bone. Save its body.*”

Looks at each of us. Slowly, thoroughly. “The Gate is history’s heartbeat. It could not save the flesh within which it lives. We had to learn what had been broken & figure a manner to heal it. This was be our way going forward.” A fist in his hand. “Bind the wounds.” Pound. “Tend the wounds.” Pound! “Heal the wounds.”

He's tired now. But had to tell. "The days & weeks & months went on. I saw human history heal but not recover. It's not enough."

His voice a whisper. "I now wonder if there is something else. A potenter magic to be seduced.

"I wonder if the Hum is a thread back through time, can this be? Travel it to what Emandia was, what we are."

The whole room is still to receive these words. He concludes quite simply. "I would go myself, if needed, as sacrifice or Hero. *We cannot fail.*"

Nothing more is said. The Architect wordless, motionless. They leave uncertainly.

xxxii.

Bowie is laying sleepless in his Capsule when a soft noise & she crawls in. Not forbidden but disapproved. Multiple loyalties don't work, so best make it a body's carnal feeding & little more.

This girl holds him, presses him, like she's cold. Bowie pulls the Capsule's lid fully shut & dims the interior lights.

"We don't have to. It's just his words really spooked me." Her voice soft in his ear rouses him quicker than he could have imagined.

(Is it silence or is it song when it begins? The world, the next one, the countless next one, blue-green, another ocean planet, waiting to fire, waiting to bloom, waiting to burst)

He moves for her face, next to it, nuzzles his cheek with hers, finds her hands, twines them in his, holds her a long time, slowing her beat & breath a little, synching

(But then the Hum, the arrival, just barely not silence itself, & yet, & yet. Low singing, so low, searching music, searching this new watery planet, sniffing like a Creature for the place to arrive, the place will sing to be the Tangled Gate)

Her clothes are easy to shift off, & his sniff yes nothing underneath. Her fear & a lust she's new to feeling rival in her, & lust always wins that contest—

(Arrives the Island, a Beast covered in trees, arrives & sings the Island, sings it soft, sings it promise, sings it lure, accept the Gate, Accept the Gate, Accept the Gate. The Island will growl, demur, beckon, let a little, let a little)

Pushes his head upon her breasts, hard, bite, bite, now lower, lower, there, your tongue, your teeth, fire me, fire me deeply, my flesh is prime for you, I will not spend easy, ah yes, & again, yess, & again, & fucking again

(Sing the Island a vision, a vision of what to be, what will emerge this union from new & old dreams, sing the Island a vision honest of old despair, what has failed, whyfor this new song. Sing the Island till the Island pleases no more, & love fires this universe once & future again)

She wants him atop her, hands squeezing her breasts as he enters her, her hips moving slow, faster, slow, letting him in deeper, more deeply than he has before, more deeply than he knew how with a girl

(Now comes the Gate, comes the Gate, comes the Gate now full & hard, sings unto the Island, arriving, arriving, mating, binding, let a little, let a little more. Grasping, binding, joy)

They moan together, moan into each other, their bodies moan into each other, she drinks him in, & deeper, & deeper, he wishes he could tell her, quietly, as they lay in each other's sweaty, sweaty arms. Why can't he tell her?

(Now a conjugal song, happy wedded *Hummmmmmm*. The Gate grafted to the beauties of this Island, to the new truths of this world. The Gate crafted to sing through time, love every last Creature of this world. Every last one)

They don't again, not even once. She wants to ask, fears the answer. Broods. Despairs. One morning, someone new in her Capsule. More likely she left than was expelled.

Bowie can't yet. It's too soon. Yet her departure hurts him, makes him want to go before he is ready. Just go. *And go*.

He would follow the Architect, or try to. Was this his mission? Did Preacher know the Architect's intent to follow the Hum backwards through time?

xxxiii.

What found on the Island, who came to the Island, how the dreams of men fired through it all.

The Architect speaks. "Always the Creatures, on every world Emandia sought new home. Always were the Creatures there, half-found in what the Island itself grew, but more."

He is now hunched over his low podium, reading the text closely. "It was agreed she would come first & if needed lead them all away again. She was arted for this purpose, & so came first.

"It was the quirk in her animated nature that caused them to be. Committed to this new world, unremembering any other, these would be her single clue."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

One of the bolder young men in the group. Challenging, conscious or not.

“What do you mean by ‘quirk’? Like a design flaw?”

“Yes & no.”

“Was she a golem? Or a piece of sentient cybernetic hardware?”

The Architect is now standing over the cross-legged student. He looks up, tentatively, but holds to his question.

“Stand up.”

The boy stands.

“What are you?”

“What?”

“What are you? Golem? Sentient cybernetic hardware?”

“I’m . . . human.”

“What does that mean? How is different, how do you know?”

The boy smiles. The Architect nods, motions the boy to sit. Hesitantly, but still, he sits.

The Architect resumes. Bowie notices that he does not really need the text, he has the words utterly memorized. Maybe it’s just looking at the page, touching it, being with it new & again.

“Given her kind’s yearn, their love of music, these Creatures would live in the caverns beneath the Tangled Gate, at the beginning.”

Architect pauses. nods at the talkative boy. He exhales sharply but then speaks promptly: “What found on the Island, who came to the Island, how the dreams of men fired through it all?”

Architect resumes. “These Creatures would also leave the Island, scatter through history among the world’s homegrown men & women, clues, like their dreams.”

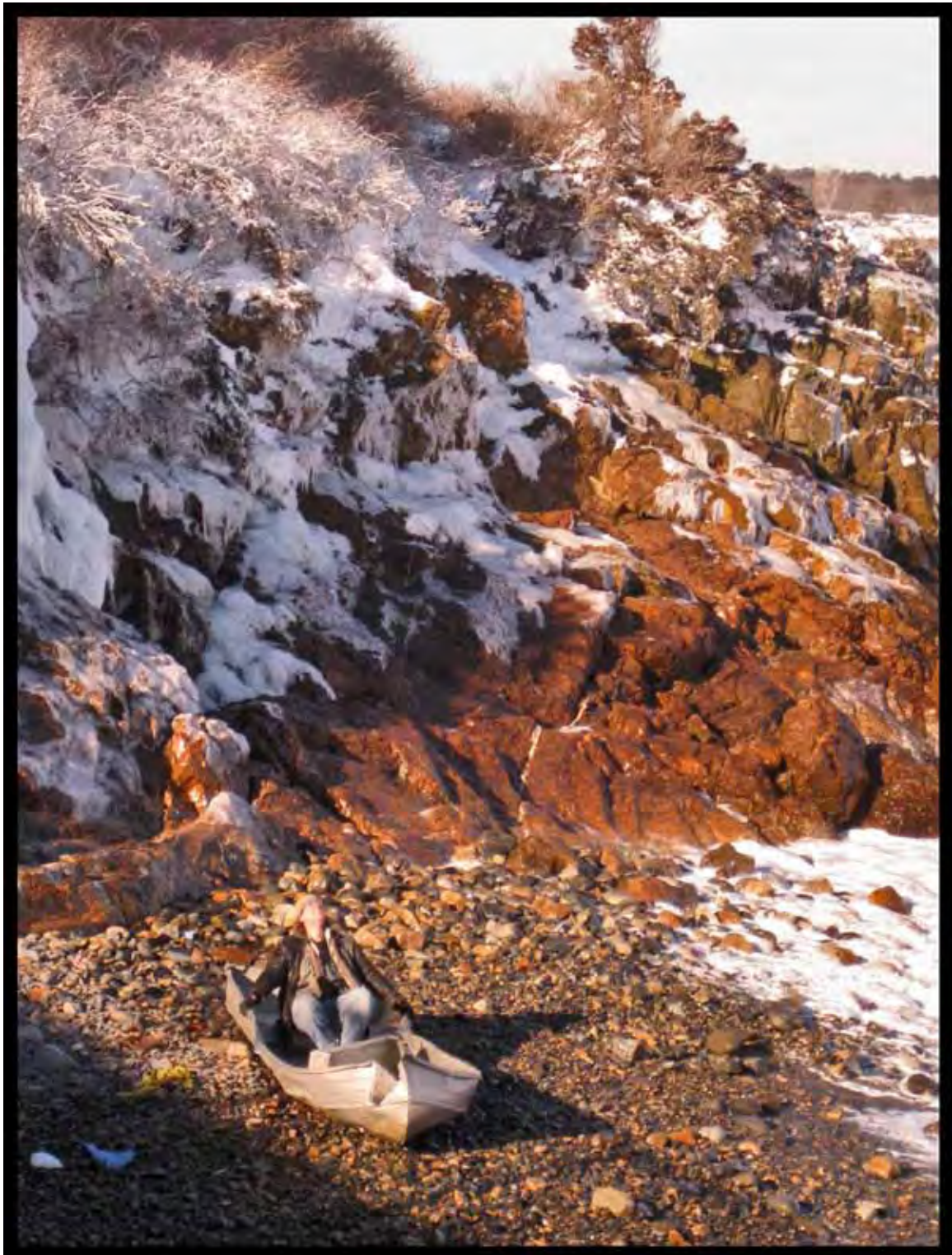
Bowie knows the rest of this lesson, recognizes each word as previously read, tries to use them this time again to break through his interior wall, his memory block.

“If you slept with a Creature in your arms when small, dreamed the untellable, woke wildly, the night big & silent, you were close.

“As you grew, & made your ways through the mysteries of want, & men’s answers, you were further away. Rightly yearned those wild, silent nights. Yes, there was unseen music.”

Bowie is young, there is a school he goes to for while, there is a girl, ah there s a girl, her name is . . . Iris.

Iris likes to draw pictures in class, sometimes easy cartoonish figures, elves, hobbits, dragons, but sometimes her fancies keep her awhile & the figures on the page multiply, ever more grotesque, & beautiful too, she draws like in a trance, Bowie watches as the teacher will be lecturing, then noticing her a little, then a little more. He’ll nudge her, urgently, better to stop & hide than be confiscated—



She smiles at him. Starts to see him as she sees her page, her blush is slight but he now dreams wildly, wishes he had a talent too—

Nothing more than nudges & smiling & slight blushes till there is a party, the kind meant to expose romantic tangles, press them a little for potential—

Spin the bottle. Oh yes. Winners take 5 minutes, timed closely, in a closet.

They won. He was convinced she'd conjured a spell from one of her stranger drawings. But there they were. And she is curled into him in this tiny, crowded, smelly closet. Whispering so softly nobody in the world, or leaning hard against the door, could hear.

“We can only do so much in here. And we only have five minutes.”

Without another word she leans even closer into him & takes his hand under her blouse, her stomach, her small breasts, their hard nipples, & further along, under her skirt, into her panties, teaching his fingers to touch there, & there, & like so, & so, her breath quicks as his finger enters her pussy, breath hardens, & in a little more, & a little more, he scares, scares hard & pulls back suddenly.

Just as suddenly the door crashes open & all the smiling & unsmiling faces & glaring light. Nothing to see or know but the drying salty dampness on his finger tips.

Did they love each other? Or were they two young animals hungry for that touch again? They rarely kissed, & it always happened in the dark. She controlled the what & how, & knew he spooked easily.

Maybe it would have gone on, or possibly ended, but instead they were caught &, he being the boy, & so of course the seducer, was expelled.

Suddenly, the Architect is leaning hard into Bowie's face. “When you no longer wondered their fate, long given to attract to taller icons & thicker books, they continued too.” Architect nods to Bowie.

He speaks emotionlessly: “What found on the Island, who came to the Island, *how the dreams of men fired through it all.*”

He was expelled but that wasn't enough. She would crawl through his window. Now all she wanted were his arms & he obliged though he'd have to sneak to the bathroom each time, to jack away his ferocious wish to fuck her hard & screaming. He'd come back. She'd sniff the air & smile in the dark.

This until Bowie's father got up one night, sniffed the air, came to his room.

“When the world began to run down, it would be again Creatures to your console, in one form or another, loving you, leaving you this time.”

Who was she, this Iris? Why does the Architect's talk of Creatures make him think of her, sweatingly, prick hard, think of her?

The Architect continues: "For she would summon them back to her, from all places & times, remembered some things, & time to move along, little Creatures, time again."

Bowie was taught by the Architect, all the Sleepers were taught, find the Creatures if you can, remember which ones you knew when small & the feeling, the wild silent nights, the unseen music. "Find them when you can. When you are near, it helps to hum, it helps to sing, it helps to smile. Be ready to dance as they are."

All Bowie could think of was Iris, why? A girl, not a Creature. Right? He didn't know. He wished Preacher were there to tell him, or warn him. He sniffed his fingers, then they are suddenly grabbed up by the Architect. He sniffs, though how many years since. He nods, smiles as rarely. "Her. Yes." He says quietly.

xxxiv.

Bowie kept to himself for awhile. Stopped going to the Architect's classes. They weren't mandatory but nobody missed them. Bowie did. No word was mentioned.

He wandered further in the caverns than before. They seemed to have no end, it turned out, once you looked hard enough to discover where boulders & rocks had been placed to obscure tunnels. Bowie found them, circumvented them, left them in place. He wasn't trying to destabilize things.

Got lost. Oh, it was pathetic. He'd chalked rocks along his climb, deeper & deeper, but eventually he had to traverse dark places, slowly, by feel, & eventually he tripped up, lost direction, thought he was done.

Sad he'd failed his mission, whatever quite it had been, & sat in one of the darker places to rest, try to let go.

The Architect found him. Or was just there of a sudden, sitting next to him, back against the rocky wall, compelling a water bottle into his hand. Had he looked for him? Or just manifested with a finger snap?

They sat silently for awhile then suddenly the Architect began to talk.

"Before you, there was only one who disappeared. She didn't lose herself in these tunnels like you. She disappeared beyond the Dreaming."

Bowie listens.

"She should not have been sent. She knew everything. How it begins & how it all ends. She

thought it was funny, like a game.

“A very old man had told her when she was small, ‘If you can stay awake in your dreams, & begin to look around, you will learn strange things.’

The Architect laughs briefly. “She told nobody, it was funnier that way. She found her Creatures in dreams, of course, & they welcomed her, of course, with a dance & a song.”

Bowie nods, like that helps.

“Her first lover, chosen more by whim than thought, let her down, unable to sleep awake in their tangle of blankets & candlelight.”

[“Why don’t you love me?”

“It’s not that.”

“What is it?”

“You’re beautiful. You make me laugh. But when I disappear, how will you find me?”]

[He looked & looked till he was quite old, & she’d become quite someone else, but he’d found her at last. Offered a place to rest. Fits.]

“Her next lover seemed to know, to touch her keys & make a better music, but shied off her harder harmonies. Liked her to moan his night but not caterwaul for all creation. *Alas.*”

Bowie nearly laughs. Maybe not.

“She came to us with big eyes, a little smarts, a show of tit, a little wit. She was among the first group sent across the Dreaming. I was still uncertain, so I gave her the least hard task. She simply did her task, & didn’t return.

“She pulled herself whole through the Dreaming, took the smallest form for her travels & games to come. A simple dress, big smile, laughing eyes. Like they were cackling.”

“What was her task?”

“Hm?”

“The task she was assigned when she disappeared?”

“Oh.” He thinks. “I don’t remember.”

“How did you know the form she took later?”

“I found her.”

“You did? What happened?”

“Nothing. She’d made her choice.”

“But you prefer it not happen?”

“No. We don’t know how it would affect things. Besides, most would not choose it.” Pauses.

“Are you lost in these tunnels by choice?”

“No.”

“Do you want to return?”

Bowie nods. They return more quickly than seems possible.

Bowie is relieved to return, even knowing that he, too, is going to be leaving.

xxxv.

The Architect ceases the classroom sessions. For some days, he is not seen, nothing seems to happen. The students wait, wonder what next.

Then, deep in a night when all are in their Capsules, all seems peaceful, there is a noise. A distinct sound, like rocks falling.

Everyone is awake, walking around, looking. Wondering where the Architect is. Someone points to a new fissure in the walls. Bowie nods, walks through, the rest follow.

There is . . . moonlight? Trees, tall tall trees surrounding a long clearing. Bowie & the others walk around, uncertainly.

Then the drums & fires start up. Like a fingersnap & all is tribal. The Sleeper students move toward the fires, the drums, it all has the feel of a shared dream, a beautiful shared dream.

Built by the Architect, thinks Bowie, moments before his voice begins to speak. His voice seems to come from everywhere & nowhere, from within & without, soft & loud, begins to discourse at length among the fires & drums, & the Sleepers now become dancers among many others.

“I was the first to cross the Dreaming, years before anyone else. I’d created a loose network of knowledge & contacts before the rest knew, while they still leaned on leaders & the learned to stop the crash. I was busy.” Words echo through the long moonlit field, its bowl-like terminus surrounded by a majesty of great trees, above which strode the great fullmoon monarch of skies.

Bowie moves among the Sleepers & other dancers, nears awhile the tall fires & their many drummers, sways a little but does not dance, resists it, feels like resisting this is what Preacher would advise—

Climbs the grassy bowl’s clearing toward the trees above, & the Architect talks on.

“There had to be powerful Sleep Capsules, hundreds of them, constructed in a deep cavern, below leaders & the wars they reluctantly tried to slow [these words endlessly echo out but Bowie hears more as he enters the White Woods: “Toward the end, more became convinced that this ending was the right one, that God willed it, or would stop it if he wished. The world had become so poisoned that death was coming for most sooner anyway. My partner & I” “Partner?” Bowie says aloud to the voice in his head. “You call him Preacher now.” “You knew?”]

Suddenly, to all again, the great voice: “The Capsules would gleam white in the lamps upon them, stone mined in the high mountains where the workmen labored up single file with heavy coils on their shoulders. It would ride in slabs down steep tracks to where I would ferry it along.” [“Through dreams?” “First, to the sea.” “Why?” “The sea was the common, the most stable entry point across the Dreaming.”]

The girl watches him approach, seeming talking to himself. She’s watched him often, but kept her distance. As he nears, heedless his steps, she steps out enough from her hiding place for him to graze her, & she lightly tumbles.

Suddenly Bowie is very present. There is enough moon between the trees to see the girl looking up shocked at him. Enough scent lingering from their slight collision for his body to tense fiercely.

“Oh!” she says, “I’m sorry. I didn’t know anyone else—”

He shakes his head, smiles. Offers a hand, adding touch to sniff & sight & sound in his receiving her being. She rises & stands before him. Smiles his in return.

“You’re a Sleeper. I’ve seen you.”

He nods. Wonders if the Architect is watching, planned this. As if neither to confirm nor refute, the great voice continues: “There had to be allies who knew we were coming, & why, who had already traced on to our dilemma from their seeds, some of many, & would give us both shelter & cover to operate. I found Travelers in many places & times, beautiful sober faced men, eager-thighed women. These would tender & teach us too.”

Relieved of their moment, both of them listen, too closely, to the Architect’s mammothly echoing words. Bowie notices she twitches at the word “Travelers,” just a flicker.

He begins to drift away, to see what. “Wait,” she says, whispers, barely more than thinks. He turns.

“Why aren’t you down there, with the dancing & drums?”

Tells a fragment of truth. “I’m not much for parties. He could have told us all this in class.”

She nods, smiles strangely.

“And you? Don’t all pretty young girls like to dance?”

Again the flicker of a twitch. A freckle’s height.

“I prefer the woods. Always have.”

The titanic voice: “Crossing the Dreaming was exhausting, double since landing was usually in the sea. I caused the building of a simple Pensionne with doors from many directions. I caused its gardens raised up, rooted it all in many centuries & places, open to all, but especially our Dreaming kind.”

Bowie’s turn to twitch, less obscurely.

“What’s wrong?”

She is slender, her hair long, nearly to her waist, twisted into a few blooms as it drapes over her shoulders, covering her breasts better than the thin garment she wears.

Bowie moves up to her, the weest twitch but nothing else. He leans into her face & kisses her light but lengthy, the last sense now taking its due. He is tasted & assessed in return. They sit together, against a very old, tall, sentient tree that listens too but does not comment.

Holding hands, sitting close, they listen: “I did not cause or coax the White Tiger to come, but when he came I knew we weren’t alone, & my efforts not so desperately hopeless.

“I knew further by stories of a Tramp met at the Threshold of the Dreaming, a tattered man with secret advice.”

“My partner told me these things. The Pensionne. The White Tiger. The Tramp,” Bowie says. She nods, listens, does not reply.

“There was one I regretted leaving behind, one Sleeper I felt an oddness for. She never mentioned the Tramp. When I decided to leave, I weakened into her arms the night before. I wanted her to take over, her to protect them, comfort them if I failed. She was a woman with even scater trinkets than the rest, but a single white shell.” Pause. Resume.

“She’d listen to it for hours. These are my only regrets.”

Bowie has been listening with his eyes closed, starting to get it, what this night is all about. The Architect is already gone. This girl was the one who last saw him, the one he wanted to take over.

He closes his eyes to listen, to allow her escape, if she wishes. His hand releases hers to pull his coat tighter. If she’s to go, then go.

She goes. She leaves her single white shell in her place. Now for him to decide.

xxxvi.

Bowie does not look for her. Waits to see what the other teachers will do, when it’s generally accepted the Architect is gone.

He quickly realizes that none of them were the Architect’s equal in power or knowledge, they well knew the texts, & were veteran Sleepers, but the vision was the Architect’s alone.

They continue teaching their classes, which Bowie does not attend. Most of his fellow students start attending, for a way to spend the hours, maybe more importantly to regain some familiar hours, tamp down the panic.

He should follow the Architect, but how? He only knows how to get back to Preacher, a word, a gesture. [An older Bowie would have just followed first & figured the how later.]

The girl who gave him the shell? The Architect hadn’t taken her with him. She hadn’t

taken charge of anything, as seemed his wish.

He keeps to his Capsule for several days. Has stored away a good supply of the dream juice, but does not drink it.

Had Preacher known this might happen? Sure, something like it.

So most hours he tries tinkering with the Capsule's controls, see if they can help him learn anything. Blows out most of the lights & they don't return. Breaks & fixes the temperature controls.

Finds an electronic cache of audio & listens through decades & decades of news reports.

It's hard to deduce whether the environment or the world economy collapses first. They really went together, it seemed. Slowly, so that the suffering increased gradually, appealing to the mass's desire to ignore, to huddle closer to strong leaders, to fear the increasing poor & willing let them be herded off to camps or, really, wherever. Each believing he & his loved ones would, should, be spared, ride out the worst, survive to better days.

Loyalty & racism mixed with growing apocalypticism. But slowly, decades in the happening. Blame was sharply focused, responsibility deflected. Someone else's fault, someone else had to sacrifice, or be sacrificed.

War & scarcity finally met & all justifications for survival were allowed. Us & them. Us versus them. No choice.

But nothing about the Architect, or Sleeping Capsule, or Sleepers, or the Gate, or the dreaming juice. Hope, what there was, lay hid many miles below the burning, dying surface of the world.

One night period, Bowie had turned from the news & history to music. Took a lot of searching to find some he knew, but he did. Nothing sorted, no hierarchy or order to it, he found himself listening to a country rock band called Mason Proffitt, here in his fantastical Sleeping Capsule maybe hundreds of years later.

Acoustic guitar & sad harmonies. *"My shadow left my mind & went walkin' around, & found a nickel on the ground . . ."*

A knock on his Capsule, soft, very soft. He released the lid & lifted it slightly. The girl who'd given him the shell. He raised the lid enough to let her in.

She climbs in & sits among his blankets, wearing the same gauzy rag, or similar. He lights a couple of candles, turns up the vent, dims the light.

Pulls the shell from one of the many canvas pockets on the wall, offers it to her. She smiles, reaches for him instead. Blows out his candles.



His hands roam her gently. Her breath quicks, & encouraged he explores more. But under the gauze he finds . . . nothing womanly. No chest, no nipples. No pussy. She is a warm piece of carved flesh. His hands do not find what his mind surely remembered he'd half seen already.

Yet she is curled closely to him, clearly enjoying his dear embrace. She takes the white shell from his unrecalling mind & cuddles their heads together to listen.

Whatever this is, it's as close as he can get to the Architect at the moment. So he listens to the sea with her.

Within its roar & whoosh, her voice, or her mind's voice, or her memories expressing themselves directly.

"I listened to the sea, I listened to the sea. I curl into the blue & crimson blankets of my Sleeping Capsule, nude with my candles, & listen to my single white shell.

"They would listen too, from afar, they'd quickly learned for times when I was not visiting. They listened to the sea. They listened to the sea. They would tend my scars & sighs, & listen to the sea."

She kisses Bowie closely & he feels her body glow & reshape itself for a moment, but when he presses a little, she recedes again. Stillness, silence. More telling.

"When you left I knew. You were too gentle with me, tasted & possessed me to remember, to say goodbye, like a bloom left obscure in my heart's chambers, to discover later, words you didn't have, or refused to give me."

Bowie listens deeper, clasps her body, her fingers closer, listens to the sea & to her voice, to both, till they are one continuous sound, till his listening becomes one with this sound & all is one telling music. *Listens to the sea.*

"I loved for you to listen to the sea as I slowly descended your beautiful torso, kiss by kiss by kiss, you closed your eyes & listened to the single white shell as I moved your thighs apart, as I sipped your sweat, as I licked & teased, as you listened to the sea, its long ancient roar, its deeper *hummmmmmm* than all, *o you listened to the sea* as I drank your seed deep into my throat & then licked my way back to you" Bowie become her & him both, tongue & taste & seed & skin, sea & sea & sea, swish, roar, swish, roar, swissshh

"to your parched mouth, your closed eyes, I kept a part of your seed to drink with me, drink with me, drink with me, we drink & we listen to the sea, together drink your seed back & forth between us, listen to the sea, drink your seed, goodbye my love, listen to the seed, drink your sea, goodbye my love, goodbye, goodbye"

xxxvii.

You'd not given me the key or clue to what I knew was there, not even that last night in my arms, not a word. I had to find it myself.

So many lives, I sorted through them for one. Not sweet, I need an edge. The dream juice I press harder in doses, add in endangering herbs, pressing myself in.

Find myself with almost too much heat to bear & a skinny young torso to wield. Blonde, curved, small, shapely. Violet-green eyes. Thick, suggestive mouth, cheeks that flame easily, fingers I cannot tame or even calm.

Corralled into a kind of youth prison for behavioral training. The trainers are half-dead, bitter, embers of old hungers to nurture, or consume.

I moved quickly from the sloppy groping romances of boys, who just wanted to stick their hard youths into *any* wet willing thing, to the charging careens of men who wanted to coax a greedy blaze to the field & then crush it loudly. I shifted & shifted & shifted my game, my moves, my body, my voice. Edging them closer to me, closer, jewel my body, but don't touch it, & burn. Clothe me close, clothe me tight, burn by my hand in yours. Burn hard, *harder*.

Nothing. Lust. *Nothing*.

Then one, he saw me, laughed, leaned back, sang in a cracked voice of time:

*o dear sweet old dirty time leaving
all the old men sad & splayed
in a young girl's careless smile.*

He didn't give me a necklace to light the breasts he sought to bite. He didn't clothe me to tease his cynical old cock with hints of my slender hips. He didn't just try to make me burst of sweet words spoke in a flaming virgin's ear—

Allowed onto the green grounds of the prison, but no farther, I spend my seeming days there under the shade of trees, eyes closed, testing out deeper dreams, but nothing sticks. Vague, groundless, I can't get deeper.

Then, once day, he's there, under the tree, also cross-legged, facing me with a bare smile on his shaggy old face.

Trying not to jerk with panic, I inhale deep within & nod slightly.

With an accent I can't figure he says, "I'll be mowing & trimming out here soon. Figured I'd betta' warn you against shocking your meditations."

"Thanks."

Now he smiles fuller. "T'ain't easy in that place." Gestures to the prison in the distance. "I miss my youth but I wouldn't want it back if I had to be there."

I laugh a little.

We become friends of a sort. The body I bear does not want or fear him, as it does toward everyone else in the prison.

No, safe. We laugh a lot, about silly things. He knows every squirrel & crow on the grounds, their squabbles, their endurance. Admires them.

I don't seem to live anywhere yet arrive from somewhere by morning & leave by night. Always dressed in the same barely concealing rags, like every other girl in the prison. This, I decide, has to change.

I don't want to, but I ask him. He smiles, almost like he was expecting the question, & leads me with a beckoning, bemused finger to his shack at the far edge of the prison grounds.

It's small. A bed, a table, a shelf of books. Some candles. I sit in the one chair while he fusses around in an ancient foot locker.

On the shelf, built by a plank & some bricks, I spy a small furry Creature. Sitting, calmly, looking at me. I say nothing.

Finally, he pulls out a set of overalls, sits on the bed, fussing them with scissors & thread down to my size.

"Undress." I start.

He stares hard at me. "I'm agonna dress you."

I take off the rags but he shakes no to my underwear. I am relieved even as there is no lust in his eyes. He wants to dress me & I think it was a long while before I knew why. No boy or man had touched me without intent before. When he does, it's to make sure these old but clean clothe fit me right, to impress the touch of his hand upon me. He dresses me sober-faced but with deep affection.

Satisfied, he feeds me some bread & soup. Hums something I feel like I know as he cooks. I know somehow this is our final meeting, words horde at my mouth but none come out.

The Creature is watching, almost waiting for me. I study it. Her. A lavender colored puppy, with bright dark eyes, brown bows in her fur.

"She's here for you," he says. "Happy birthday."

I'm shocked. It is? Isn't it? OK. Still: "I don't know."

"You want to find them, don't you?"

"Yes."

"You won't alone. Not in a thousand lifetimes. She'll bring you right to them."

Then he picks up a lavender candle, color of her fur, hands it to me. "So you don't lose your

way following her. They can go very fast. Comes of all the times they've had to."

Looks at me, smiles without humor. I wait breathless.

Speaks softly, almost reluctantly. "You have no within yet for yourself. Why would you want a hand or cock in there too?" How does he know I haven't? That every time I've receded within me. You can try, & they did, but you can't stick a prick into a wall with no door.

I wake. Listen. The cavern is quiet, all are in their Capsules asleep. Or fucking quietly. Or beyond the Dreaming.

I climb out, with my lavender birthday pup & candle. Thinking twice, not returning, I get my single white shell & then nod to the pup. She sniffs twice, & we go.

[I would have given you this shell, Bowie, Architect, Tramp, given you all, if only I was just a girl.]

xxxviii.

They listen to the sea in my single white shell, & I want to say how, give it all words, so they will know me true, & this something will release me.

"It was on the beach of the Island, that first morning I came. I'd been swimming for hours when I washed with the tide ashore."

They gather, listen, sniff. White Bunny, several bears, many giraffes, I shiver & want to say. Two bloo-eyed kittees. More sniff & near, I wonder if the Imp will cackle up.

"I found this shell in my hand. There weren't any others. It was too rocky, inhospitable, yet this shell. I listened. I lay in tidal waters, *listening to sea.*"

More Tenders among them emerge to sniff me. A little pinknosed bear in a red & white striped bonnet. A White Tiger with long spots. I am agitated. I talk. Talking pushes the something away a bit, undoes my panic, I talk.

"Was I her? Was I the demon of the old stories? I did not know as I followed her path, followed her days, from living on the beach, burning with the sun & moon, to my approach to the Castle, Dancing Grounds, the King, his Temple. The Princess."

I am convulsing they put the shell to my ear, I feel my body blowing itself out, they put the shell to my ear. They begin to hum, a brown bear with great brown eyes leads them, humming to calm me. I close my eyes. I talk on.

"I follow her down the hall, my other, my path, all that has led me here, all I have done. She turns back, sees me. I see her with my eyes, then see me with hers. Then both. We cry out, &

it's over. I'm awake."

I raise up & look about this cavern, so impossibly tall, a great tree, reaching to its heights. My lavender pup in my lap. My candle, not lit right now. All around me, raised noses. Listening with ears.

"I was back in the sea, where I came from, & I lived in silence thousands years."

"Until?" one asks.

"I don't know. I closed my eyes & let it all go. Drifted upward from the depths I'd been. Landed ashore. Not the Island. No Island."

The something hardly at all in me now. I'd spoken my question & been heard. There were no good answers. I was the demon, that's what they'd called me, the one who'd destroyed the King & his Island Kingdom.

They all speak in my mind, a single sweet powerful voice.

"There is no demon."

I resist.

"No." They insist.

I return to the Sleepers cavern after all, thousands years later. My Capsule, its crimson & purple blankets.

The Architect wanted me to return, to lead them. It doesn't take long.

The Creatures are always with me now. We listen together to the single white shell, & often hum, to sing.

xxxix.

"When she leaves I have no reason to stay. I load my gear, pile my shack on its wagon, & pull off. The prison behind me is one of thousands in every land & time. It is where end-times are incubated every day over many centuries.

"My path is slow, & I have too much time to think. This shack I pull belonged to a friend of mind, he was a small exotic.

"I never knew a word he said. I'd visit him, in that shack behind me, in the middle of the desert, back when I still crossed the Dreaming, back & forth.

"We'd sit on two small stools. He'd click away for hours on end. We were happy old friends.

"Then a day his shack was empty & he no more."

Looks at Bowie fiercely & talks on. "I tell you this because crossing the Dreaming is how I felt

that morning, coming to see my friend at his desert shack. Nothing. Shack locked. Nothing. Crossing the Dreaming, you will bind, you will be broken, you will be bereft. You'll return home, if you can."

Bowie nods politely to the Tramp. He's not going to be a help in finding her, he can see. Still, better to make this friend.

The Tramp takes a breath & talks on. "Maybe you'll come back. You'll try again. You want to save the world, it matters, nothing else is as important to you. You'll leave family, sweethearts, the bleak sadness of your end-times."

Bowie nods. Patient.

"You'll see me again, nod, pass, we'll have fewer words. What more could I say?"

Bowie senses the old man is almost spent of words, & willing waits him out.

"I could tell you my story, how I became the Tramp who greets Sleepers crossing the Dreaming." "Didn't you? Just now? Your friend? This shack?"

The man starts, looks at Bowie sharply. Starts to go on, pauses. Does.

"Once we didn't need potions & Sleep Capsules to cross. But I remained when the rest turned away toward planting spikes to mark the earth, map it, name it, burn its trees, siphon its fluids, black its skies, poison its waters."

Stands up from his stool, towers shakily over Bowie.

"Since my friend has been gone, & the girl you chase, my step has grown more & more heavy. I am the Tramp, as they call me."

Leans down to Bowie's face. "I could compel you feel how I walk, & test your own by it. As you pass me each time, a nod, a brief word, a world to save, I could tell you that what you left behind is what miracle this world has left to give you. And the rest are just heavier steps on your path."

Stands up. Nods. Says softly, "Maybe I'm just wrong of it all."

xl.

I said: No more musics for now.

The air is still as I breathe in & out.

The stars dark, the woods bright.

I continued: I am dreaming. I am awake.

I love the stories, whatever they mean.

I miss the boy I was years ago.

I conclude: I live on because men are hopeful
for tomorrow, whatever odds or proof
stand before them.

xli.

Wakes. She wakes. The pain in her back grabs her breath, & she wilds for air among covers. A snatch, another, *there*.

A noise outside. Which world this time? Oh. Dogs barking. *Oh*.

She lies back, still breathing tenderly & too-aware. That dream. The Island. Was it—?

A breath not hers. A man's shoulder. His bare chest. Still sleeping. Quicks her query.

She closes her eyes, mostly, more breath, less dream. Feels it out slow. A taste on her tongue. His? No spilled seed tastes like this. It tingles. It . . . listens?

There is the softest *hmmm* on her skin. In her breath, in the air. Her nose twitches. *Twitches?* Sniffs something potent, mysterious, important.

The man sudden harasses his covers. She sniffs again. Just his scent, on him, lingering on her.

Shuts her eyes more, dares. *That dream*. Its barest remain. A question, she tugs, gently, maybe a thread back in? (How?)

A question. What rhymes with the moon?
What rhymes with the moon?

She relaxes, tries to gentle into this body, its pale-rose, bone-contoured heat. She's young but matured in breast, hips, mouth. This man is here for its pleasures, perhaps nothing more.

And her? Something to do with the *Hummm* in the air. He'd led her closer somehow, his voice, that instrument in the corner of the room, among their tangled clothes.

The pain that'd awaked her was her own making, her alarum, the *Hummm* plainest in early morning, when the lights from windows & those within have not fully reassembled this world's architecture from its dream bolts & limbs.

xlii.

A hand softly on her breast, a sleepy smile inviting. She tempts. His teeth & tongue linger upon her from the night, his powerful cock consuming her all. Tender thighs the easy price.



Hand withdraws a little, not one to beg, at least right now.

“You don’t taste a thousand years old,” he says in a handsome accented growl.

“Hm?” Lets her eyes go blue & girly.

“It’s what you said during our fun. You were very high.” She’s still blank. “Mushrooms. But don’t worry. We liked each other first.”

She laughs. It was true & he did not believe a word. She was the kind of prize a good guitarist earned on a good night. He was grateful, fond, generous. But she was a girl, & he was a guitarist.

Thinking through body want & other wants, she thrashes a bit to snatch up his guitar & pull it into the bed with them.

“Play.”

“Sing?”

“Hum.”

He smiles. Nods. Kooky chick. Sweet smile though. Hot ass. He plays. He hums.

She rewards, moving between his thighs, coaxing, with little try, his cock up nice & hard. His playing falters, his humming, she lets up a little. He plays, he *hmmms*. She touches. She teases. She smiles & licks.

At first it’s just vague pretty strumming & a humming barely more than a moan. But she licks harder, softer, nibbles, bites. She squeezes, scratches, playing him as she determines how this works. Plays him, plays the *Hummm*. When he seems about to blow, she retreats, breathes him gently back a bit.

Where to . . . she closes her eyes & takes his cock into her mouth deeper, he’s now playing powerfully, it’s a game, a musical game, he wants to be good, of course he does, & so he plays as much to her touch as she plays his strumming & humming.

She feels around in her mind, pushing & stretching & riding the *Hmmm*, where to, where—

The wall. The hole in the wall. Her friends. The cavern. The Gate. *Why am I here?*

She sucks his seed so powerfully into her throat that he cries in pain, curses, cannot stop until she has drunk him all in, *oooo ooshit oooooofuck oooooo fuckfuckfuckgoddyesss*

She drinks his cock dry & drier & shriveled to empty. He lies back finally. What the *fuck* was that? What pretty girl like this one sucks cock like that?

Minutes pass as the pain recedes.

Suddenly she’s standing, dressed, kissing his cheek.

“What?”

“Thank you.”

“What?”

Smiles, girlish as a coed, she blows him a kiss & leaves.

He misses rehearsal that day. Next show. He looks for her. She is not to be found.

xliii.

Days pass. I lie in my bed looking out the single tall window, its sky, its moon, its stars. Knocks at the door come & go.

I begin to forget after a time. Arrive here, to this place, more & more. Now time to eat. Now time to sleep. Now a man at my breast & thighs though none like my musician. He still looks for me, but more often in dreams, in the eyes of those who dance & smile for him tonight.

The world as this is settles on my back & shoulders like a shawl. I agree to eat & walk in streets. I agree to work. Money pays my room & my clothes & my food.

Something in me still listens for the Hum, listens ever hungrier as days pass, as I seem to forget.

I take on a name. A word from a dream. Iris. I find a picture in a book. A blue flower. A messenger. A daughter of the rainbow.

I remember coming home that night tired, feeling pushed & pulled at all day, bothered because I could not remember the most important thing.

My room was my place for my bed. On it, my blankets, which I kept near no matter the day & night warm or cold. The electric blue fuzzy one, the soft crimson one. Soon I had many. I lie among them like my many lovers.

Maybe a full moon. Maybe many candles. I have oils in my hand & along my thighs, not to cum, but to slow, to concentrate deeper.

I am following a stream for many miles, at first climbing among the rocks along its shores, then I wade in, already nude, I swim, do I have fins? The stream enters a cave, moves faster, I let go & am swept steadily along & come to drier ground, arriving.

Strand, walk, become girl again.

A cavern so high, I walk on tiptoes examining its shiny, glittering beauty.

I'm not alone. Many are watching me. My nose twitches & knows. I wait. I accept. Whatever it is, I accept.

You approach me & I recognize you, my friend! You are a turtle not a turtle. You smile at me, that familiar look of love & worry & devotion.

"You came."

"You . . . sent?"

"I missed you. I'm sorry."

"I don't remember. Worse & worse."

He nods, sadly. "It's what happens."

"But why?"

"It's the Hum."

"Yes. What?"

"You chase the Hum to some place & time. And you arrive & then you begin to forget."

"But why?"

You sigh at me helplessly.

"You are trying to fix things. You think something in the Hum can make it right."

"What?"

"The world. Men & their world."

I wake. Right the fuck then. Tangled in my blanket lovers, horny as a cactus for some reason I wake up & *fuck*.

What do I do? I go back to work. The restaurant rolls through half a dozen cities in a week & then I'm back for a couple of days off.

I'm usually able to pick off a good one to keep my company for the trip. He rents our room, I fuck him about twice a day. Some of them like me wet & pliant, which gives me too much time to think, so I start sniffing for the kinkier ones. Usually there are costumes & a chain or two.

"Why don't you just use one of the rooms they give us?"

I smile at her, snap my gum like it's my IQ, & say, "What the fun if I come home with lots of tips but no teeth marks on my ass?"

Until the time I meet my match. A musician, he plays in the passengers' lounge for free. Reminds me of someone. I skip my late shift to listen.

Sings a few old rock numbers & people drift away but me. More & more, as the black landscape rolls past, we lock onto each other.

Especially when he begins to *hmmmmmm. O shit*.

He's found me. After so long looking. But there's something in him new & bad. He confuses me, my job, my surroundings, with what I am.

I try to calm him, hold him, but he wants to fuck, wants to hurt me, hurt something in me, & I let him a bit, it's his due. Then he hits me. OK. Again. Um. *Again. No.*

It's then I learn what I'm not. I slow his fist as he has me pinned on the bed. Slow it, pry open its fingers. It hurts him.

"Will you stop?" I say quietly.

"I lost so much because of you." His fingers begin to fist up again.

"Will you stop?" I say urgently, not wanting to.

His face, his beautiful musician's face, contorts wildly over me as his fist begins to swing.

It never reaches me. He never reaches me. He isn't there anymore.

Silence, hours. I let my wounds fester, knowing I could heal them, I could heal everything in this body. But.

I get off at the next city & wander streets for a few days. It feels better. These men & women don't work for pleasure, they work from fear. It gives them something to do, to put their hands & minds to. Their leaders & preachers offer them nothing, don't even allow the hard questions to be asked.

I find a room & a bed like the other one & again only me & my blanket harem to cuddle down.

But no. I need a friend. Like the guitarist tried to be & failed. Couldn't get my scent out of his eyes.

I close the shade & collect all my blankets close & I intend into my dream. The watery stream, the cave. Finally the cavern. There. A sniff. My friends.

"We came."

"I sent."

"You did. We've missed you, Princess."

"It's just Iris, for now."

xliii.

I startle & awake. The musician is gone though he searches me still. I hear his music still, deepens, saddens, no long art, or appeal, but a simple burning, warmth for lonely hearts who open to it, light to show them their paths on. He never stays. He searches.

I know nothing. I am nobody. There is no answer. There is sadness & morning light. The Hum always, & it is beautiful, & it tells me nothing.

The cavern. My friends.

The Island. The Gate. *Why am I here?*

Why can't I be there with you?

One morning I walk out into this world, & there is dirty snow piled against the streets, & birds twittering & chuckling the air, & I look into faces as they pass, & listen in a little, to each's bright tangle. Look down at my own hands. Clench, unclench.

Trying to understand better, I sniff the trees scattered through the city. They are ill, they languish. They despair. I sniff deeper. They despair *especially of me*.

I kneel & beg for more, but nothing.

A soft hand on my shoulder. Two bright tangled faces.

"Are you alright, Miss?"

"*Oh*. Yes. Thank you."

They offer me water, fruit & nuts. Help me from the ground to a bench. Look me over, do not sniff but close.

We begin to travel together. It's what they do. Their knapsacks & walking sticks, water pouches & good eyes for camping & not too long. Feed me. Tend me.

Then I dream of the Musician. He has followed me to the Cavern, to my friends. Stands looking at me.

"I can't love you. It's not what I am for. *Understand*."

He strums. My friends come closer, sniffing, listening. The White Bunny, turtle that isn't a turtle. Even the combustible imp stills a little, listens.

He strums more.

"No."

"You can't get there alone. That's never how it works. *You need my song*. I will keep playing for you. *Keep listening*."

I know nothing. I am nobody. I awake to sadness & morning light. These Travelers cannot help me. They feed me. They tend me.

Then it happens unhappily on morning at a market. Their kind gesture to the son of the wrong man. He strikes & kills one of the Travelers without pause. Would kill the other but my hand goes out. He disappears. His son cries out, & I relent. But I cannot bring the dead one back.

Kneeling over the dead Traveler, I realize the Hum has left him. The crying of the other, the fear of the gathered crowd. The son huddling close his returned father. The father panting, eyeing me, waiting.

Music. *I hear the Musician strumming through it all* & a path away appears. I want to bring the other Traveler, help bury her friend, mourn with her.

No. The music compels me separate. "It's their peace to make. It's yours to go now."

I don't understand but sniff. The path he plays is true, true as any Creature, & I walk it, slowly, it leads from the city streets & their trees. But this: the trees less despairing as I walk it.

xliv.

It always begins with the Creatures. Always has. Always does.

"Why?" You ask me.

I say nothing. Cohere to this page, its moment.

White Woods, is what this is. Quiet, at least right now. The trees are tall, & there is no path we walk.

"Listen!" you say, soft but urgently. The *Hummm*, always the *Hummm*.

"The Creatures?" you ask me.

"No. It's the Gate."

She nods. She is smaller than me. I walk beside her feeling too tall & clumsy.

Looks up at me. Smiles.

"The Creatures?" you ask me again.

I nod. Take your hand. "They protect as they can. They are usually small & vulnerable, so they attract our best attention. To protect. To tell secrets to. Cry with."

She nods. Encourages.

I think. "They came with you from Emandia. You came here, one of many to many worlds, & you survived, you & the other."

She nods. We sit together, against a white trunk. The light is murky but there. The air calm.

"Is this helping you?" I ask.

"Is it helping you?" she replies, sharply. Still smiling.

"It's not enough for you to choose to save this world. It has to mark you, before & after you decide. You have to travel its places & years. Feel immortal, some moments, worse than despair others. You have to grow green. You have to be a predator of a thousand kinds. You have to be prey. The kind that escapes, & the kind that doesn't, or somewhat doesn't."

She is listening. I'm not anywhere yet. But I'm flailing a try.

I think. Draw deep into my mind's pen. "The myth does not end with you choosing to stay. It continues. It's open-ended. You're committed."

"So what do I do?"

I pause, think. The skies above now powerfully starred. That's good. It's something.

I hold out my hand. Nod. Again. *Insist.*

There is a soft cackle. Another.

The little black & white imp sudden in my hand. Crazy eyes. The Princess starts, despite herself.

I hold out the imp for show. She gnaws my palm, waiting.

"Is she from Emandia?"

She looks at me. Nods. Shakes her head.

"Exactly. You brought something here to this world, but like yourself, they are made somewhere else, & grown here. Talk!" I suddenly order the imp. Give a little shake to dis-jaw.

She looks at me, crazy wide-eyed. "Eh?" A deaf old lady by mock.

"Talk!"

She cackles high & low, click-clicks & noise-noises for extra pepper, lazily scans for escape routes.

"Just one word. And you can go."

She stares up at me, a thousand feet & an inch tall on my palm. Nods, I think. Blows me a kiss, a spark, "fire," all light, all dark, & she's gone.

I nod.

The Princess breathes hard. "OK. But what then?"

"To be here is *to be vulnerable*, to feel alone. To age. To regret. To die, or feel like it."

So my abilities gone.

Yes.

Mortal.

Yes.

Can I die?

Yes. And no.

Tell me.

I don't think it's that easy. Once you occupy a body, even when it dies, it bleeds & dusts back to the world. Nothing is truly gone. And yet, forms rise & fall. We mourn their passing, fear our own. We don't find enough comfort in memories or markers or songs. We try, but the years wear us down.

"Creatures," you say again.

I nod. "Creatures."

She stands up. Helps me up. She grasps me close for a moment, giving me more than I ask because I am trying to help. And she's gone.

I stay a moment in these Woods. Alone. I know many Creatures who live among these trees.



The tales I know, I tell, & love.

For a moment longer I let Creatures come near to me. The White Bunny. Her hedgehog companion. The little black bear who *hummmms*. The purple furry Creature, dances with ribbons & bows. Not a word.

They sniff me twice, as more of them come into view. The bloo-eyed kittees. A number of bears. The giraffes, of course.

Look at each other as though sniffs being compared. As though it's necessary.

The White Bunny hops up to me, barely tall as my shin, yet a raised pink nose & I lift her up. I do.

Leans into my ear. With a paw's gesture & a soft word. "Scribble Scribble Scribble." By way of best advice. By way of mojo. By way of command too.

I nod. "Help me. Please."

They nod. I sit among them & we sniff far, find the Princess as she undresses, as she sleeps. Lets the breathing blanket that is her body arrive completely. Dreams.

Dreams good.

xlvi.

He was the prince, of nothing at all, a great shouldered black man, with long blonde hair, who I met as I was leaving the White Woods. Seemed real enough, kneeling hunched over a dead fire, staring hard into nothing at all, as though, just gone, it had been a better world.

I sniffed twice, & joined him in kneeling. He turned to me after awhile, after dark, & I felt like his compensation for what he'd just seen, just lost. We buried that dead fire, buried it good, & became the lightest, laughingest, of lovers. Whatever I am, whatever I was.

We long traveled & there were nights when I made him love me so that I could remember. Our hips would slip & grind, I'd gnash him deeper, till it hurt, & *I would see*. My childly bedroom wall. Me dreaming. Its gaping passage in. He would hold me aloft till crying sweat & then bellow all the night into me, that better world, new just gone.

We had to part. High surf just outside our door, an abandoned inn but for its many hallways of sparkling ghosts. We had to part. Standing the inmost hall, a great glass tribute to a drowned whale, the hands of long gone guests impressed into the glass's surface. *We had to part*. "I'll come again." His leaving smile. "You always do."

He was my prince, of nothing at all. A great shouldered black man, with long blonde hair, who I met as I was leaving the White Woods. Kneeling hunched over a dead fire, staring hard into nothing at all, as though, just gone, there was a better world.

The time in walking silence, holding my limbs at night alone. Eventually the new tastes of food. A long morning shower. A slow brush through my hair.

Now come to this city, a green city on the sea, & the remaining loneliness to find who I need, & the hard remembrance of his love to believe that I can.

xlvi.

My childly bedroom. Me dreaming. Into the tunnels. Into the cavern. The great cavern with its great tree, heightless height. Me breathing lighter than ever. *Please don't let it end.*

I wake to the jangling song on the clock radio shaped like a pink cat. My schoolbooks in a pile on the floor beside my bed. No turtle not a turtle. No White Bunny. No giraffes. No tiny imp.

But not not them either. For whatever the day among people folk, their endless craft for big & little traumas to fill their hours, my nights are spent more & more, deeper & deeper, in the tunnels, in the cavern, its great tree, heightless height.

I tell noone. Not yet. Men hardly more than boys eye me & I remind myself I look barely more than a girl. They sniff this slender body but not its mind thousand thousand years old. Is it? I would waning believe if not the dreams.

For the longest time they are simply memories of a childhood I may or may not have spent there, a dreaming Princess in her Island home. They feel real, I let them feel real, but then the jangle, & the pink cat radio, & the schoolbooks on the floor.

Then they begin to change. Suddenly, in one night. Because the hole through the wall is not in that castle bedroom but this one room studio I rent as the poorest of scholars in my classes.

I wake, choking, looking wildly to the wall. Nothing there. A wall. Nothing. Just a dream unless more.

My body yearns something. The boys, the teachers, all willing, I try to love them like the Prince, the Musician before him, but they cry, they bleed, they break. Only once, the one who sneering teaches about poetry & eyes the short skirts in the class, regrets my long one. Likes me, in part, because I do not enjoy how he recites poetry. Like he can tame the words, bend them in the fist of his voice.

The Creatures always wonder at words, sing like happiest shared breathing.

Hands tied, legs bound apart, a blindfold & gag for focus. I mount you after a long slow lick of your torso, a few sharp bites, & some moments just pondering what you can do for me.

Finally I climb on you, & mount you deep in me, & begin to ride you, a circular movement of my hips, I pull your cock in me this way & that, harder & harder, gyrating on you, hurting you a little more each & every time, my muscles tug orgasm out of you, & again, & I feel you begin to relax as men do, but a shift & I pull you back to attention, I take control of your muscles, blood, bone, compel action where there would not be, I feel your muffled panicked breathing & focus on it till it slows, calms, & I suck you deeper into me again & again.

You shudder harder than you ever have in me. *Abhhhhh.*

Someone there. Breathing softly. *Behind the wall.*

You limp out, silent, uninjured. Hands slack now. Good.

Soon none of the students will drink with me, or fuck me. A little lost. I close my curtains. Close my

door. Now dreaming in my bed always. *Unwilling the no*

Hurling my slight childly dream body against the wall, again, again. Aches, breaks. *Again, again.*

"Princess."

I pause, heaving.

"Princess!"

"Yes! You're there."

"I am. Please stop."

"I'm in & shut out both. Why? What this useless waking life?"

"I think . . . it's not enough to suffer."

"What else?"

"You have to confess what you believe, who you believe in, stand by them while the world disdains."

"What do I do?"

"I'll see you." I wake. Pain. *Shit.*

Clock radio. Schoolbooks.

I knew you in the store right away. A toy. Yet my friend. *Turtle not a turtle.* I carried you home like the whole dark world now had a gape to remembered light. I smiled to nobody's know. I listened.

The professor talks of evolution. Life from a sparkled speck in the sea. Doesn't look at short skirts or long.

I look at you in my bag, knowing the beginning, how it ended last time, what I am doing now. I confess what I believe.

Stands inside his practiced lecture, where raised hands are rare & eyes flutter near closed.

"This world is not alone among worlds. This universe is a blooming garden. Seeds landed here & took."

Someone laughs. Maybe someone else listens. The professor frowns & warns me of science learned from television, between the ads for sweets & beer.

I raise mine eyes to you, really, lay mine eyes upon you. Let you have my clothes, let them undress you into my grasp, will you into my breathing, kiss you into my insist, let you feed my breast feeding you, my love, my stupid mortal love, *ah*, now within me you see not the girl who you'd tried to fuck & consume, no, a star, *oh what a fucking supernova burst in your mind*, a moment, just a moment. A garden. Seeds landed. Took. You shudder like a woman. *Just like.*

Tonight I sleep smiling with you in my arms, & in the morning wake to you studying my face.

"What rhymes with the moon?"

I smile. Boop your little nose.

"I don't know either."

xlvi.

This world sexes up soft & close for a story, where the bones & chaos & blood might be aligned, dance

a friendly tune, & so I mull what I am trying to do & how to make my need into a pleasing myth.

I pack Boop in my knapsack & leave the room as I rarely do. I'm wearing a shirt one of them gave me, swirling white design on black, earth creatures embedded in the design. They like a good joke too.

Leave the knapsack casually half-closed so Boop can slyly see out. Down the street of brownstones to that old shop, I find a typing machine there. How men present their stories to others since fires & singing them not enough.

Boop dresses my hair long with flowers. I undress myself to write, offer myself plain to the Imp in the Moon, *help me to tell it, help me to sing it, make them heed.*

We begin in the local park, where some sleep & others grow vegetables. Boop will not have me go naked for the weather, but we agree I will make men listen with little more in dress. I hold my sheaf in the cold sunlight, & begin to read the words.

"There is a cavern, far below the earth, many tunnels lead to it, & we find ourselves watching as many Creatures gather, sniff twice, wonder what music, which games this time?" I read as though needing the sheaf but do not. These are things of my heart, I summon, *I summon.*

"There is on the surface high above this cavern an Island, & within that Island a Woods, a Castle, a Tower, a Dancing Grounds, & a Gate. A Tangled Gate." They listen, they gather. I have hardly begun to tell & yet more of them. Some for my breasts, loose among veils. Some because the words remember in them something. Something. I read & read again what I have brought until Boop pulls me to rest in my chamber.

We lay on my bed, curtains opened. I am exhausted but yet still quite awake.

"They believe books, Princess. As much as you in that park."

I nod. Let there be books. In them I tell all of the stories I remember, describe every small friend I've loved & now miss.

They believe. Many of them. Would me tell many more stories. But something about it. Still the world's cruelty, dirt, wars. Each sweeps his own front step. Someone paid tends the park where I still read.

Many who listen still have no home. The Way of the Creatures I describe is, to these devotees, a sweet candied dream.

I withdraw again. It matters. It doesn't. I have no more place among them to tend good anymore than their legends of suffering supermen & body-loathing gurus.

"You despair, Princess."

"I am angry and helpless. We do nothing here. I've changed little with my hands, my voice, my beliefs."

I sleep, days, nights, dreamless again until the full moon, its delighted imp.

Boop & I drink a tea of earth creatures, like those on my now-tattered shirt, we'd found them in abundance in the park, eager to play with the imp.

I let my body accelerate by them, I take Boop's paw, him too, we travel the distance, the light soft & solid beneath our feet as we climb, to arrive, to arrive.

A mile & an inch high before us, a delighted, mocking smile at our visit. Waiting, not waiting.

"Give me a useful word, imp," I command, ask.

"Eh?" her look unknowing the world below & its words.

"Just one," I say softly. Lift her in my hand, palm up, for her to snap & bite at.

"Nothing saves the world, this time or any other. Dreams are the salve for this."

Wait. *What?* Still staring at me, she said these words? Turn palm down to dis-jaw. She cackles high & low. Click-clicks & noise-noises. A face in my mind now as she's shooin' us away. Dreams the salve for failure. This man's face.

I will not accept this as enough.

Drink more of the tea, both of us, chase it deeper within.

xlvi.

Water, cold. Salt water, splashing. Choking to the surface, flailing. Another. *There is another.* We are together yet we can't help each other, except to begin to drown together.

A net. Tangled & dragged & choking suddenly both air & water & strong hands on us both, I feel her hand in mine for a moment. Squeeze. *We are saved.* Then we fall apart again as they take a look.

We are guised as girl-children & they remember to cover us up. That look of wonder & loathing remains with me. From curiosity to greed as we are reckoned the King's prize. A reward.

Other considerations. But two? They study us in our wet blankets & I find her hand again. She's more terrified than me. I breathe us together calm. *Breathe, sister. Breathe.*

We're bundled off to separate places on this old fishing boat. Another docks along side it that night. You were taken. You were terrified & taken from me. *I am so sorry. I remember now.*

I being to wake, to cry out, but Boop nuzzles me close, *Hmmms* deep into my grasp, draws me back in. These earth creatures are telling what I should know. *There's more.*

Eventually I am clothed in more than a wet blanket & the sniffs of me remain no more. The King will have his prize unmarked & we will have our reward. Paltry compared to the Travelers' gift, but his protection is more.

The ship lands on the Island as I have been thrust into a small windowless room to clean from

a pot & dress in cut-down clothes.

I am transferred from one tall set of weathered hands to smoother, gentler ones. Still, the same wonder, the same loathing. It is night when we arrive & so I see little of where I've come, where I shall long be.

At last, a room. A bedchamber. The door closed behind me. There are soft clothes on the bed but I push them aside & simply strip down. I feel the salt water, still, deeper than bathing. I feel my sister's hand. Her terror. I sit on this soft bed & look about me at the shapes of a princess's bedroom.

"I'm not a Princess," I say softly.

Toward dawn exhaustion gently takes me under & I feel myself slipping back deep into the waters, this time willing, this time I know she's there. *We will go together.*

A movement in the room. I withdraw from waters & see there is something about the wall opposite my bed. A . . . hole?

An odd-shaped hole in the wall, big enough to let me crawl through. I do. Nude & unknowing as I am of all this, I crawl through that hole to the first of many tunnels.

The White Bunny. The many giraffes & bears. The crazy imp. *The turtle not a turtle.*

"Boop!"

"Yes, Princess!"

"How does this help us? I'll wake soon & all this long gone. How are the earth creatures helping?"

"They brought me."

I start & look. A big, heavy, bald-headed man. Leather covered in ink decorations & jewelry. Now I am not in the cavern & tunnels. Just this room. Schoolbooks. Pink cat radio.

He eyes me but not as a man. Humor, not wonder & loathing. "I'm Benny Big Dreams."

Keeping held together, "I'm Iris."

"You're the Princess."

"Yes. And no."

He laughs, good & fleshed out for a dream figure. "I'll help you as I can."

A sudden pound at the door. "Keep the sex noises down to a dull roar! Not everybody's getting some!" I still my *Hmmm*, music to thank the earth creatures their gifts. *My sister. My path.*

xlix.

I don't see Benny Big Dreams again soon. My days are quiet. I go out again, to the park. Tend some vegetables, since they encourage me. There are earth creatures nearby & this calms me too. They tend cheerful despite all.

Sometimes men approach me. They are lonely. Sad. Mostly, wanting. Looking at me & wanting more than I have or know how to give.

Sometimes, when they are deep inside me, I am able to do a little something. Heal a bit. Undo some of the fray. They pull out of me, more wondering than before. Sometimes scared. Measuring their cocks for possible loss.

It gets colder. I am not doing well. My body is worn from sadness, from the casual harm some men do to me. I stop going out again.

"Princess."

We are under all of our blankets. A thick brown one especially, covered in bear faces. Protecting us as they can.

"Princess!"

"We have to find Benny."

He makes us a tea, brewed from the rest of the earth creatures we have, & he makes us both drink of them & chew them down.

"You're not well," he says softly, with breaking love.

"We'll ask Benny," I say & hug him.

Benny likes us to find each other as though by chance in one tunnel or another. Annoyed but agreed.

This time he makes it harder.

"Benny! Benny Big Dreams!" My dream body & voice are fine & full & intimidating.

He emerges, as though from rock. Bows to me, mocking. Wondering at what he is would lead me wondering what I am. I simply talk.

"I need your help."

He eyes me. "You're stalled."

"Worse."

Nods. "What are you trying to do?"

I start. Think. "The world is going to die again. I can't let it."

He laughs. "Can't you save it again? A twitch of your comely nose?"

"Yes. No. I'm not sure."

Now he's serious. "You need to become sure."



"I don't know what that means."

He stares me bluntly. "The world loses something in the saving. It's a little weaker after. You can't save it perpetually, even if you wanted."

I nod. This, then. "What do I have?"

He speaks softly now. "You lose something in the saving too."

"*Just tell me*, Benny." I feel Boop stiffen beside me, but say nothing.

"What did the imp say to you?"

"That the world can't be saved. That dreams salve this failure."

I weaken a little & he holds me, lightly but protecting.

"You don't believe her."

I shake my head. "I can't. There must be *something*."

"Tell the stories again, Iris. But tell new ones. Of a good place. Make it as real as dreams are. Make it safe, for Creatures new & old."

"Creatures? They live here, in these caves & tunnels."

He nods. "Yes, & in this new place you will create."

"Will I live there?"

"Do you wish it?"

I think, hard, this matters, I *think*.

"No. I can't. I can only live near. With Boop."

"There's more," Benny's voice so soft & gentle I am ready to cry aloud.

I nod.

"You'll let go living in this world for that one. Your powers will spend there to create but depart here."

"Will it help?"

He cackles softly, in reply.

/.

I hesitate. I let days pass by. There's more to do before letting go the world. *There must be*.

Then I find him, a new friend. He is a . . . little beagle puppy. I am asked to find him & take care of him.

"Where, Princess? Who is asking?" Boop's look is obvious.

I am feeling a little better. The days are warmer. Boop has found me more earth creatures & medicine. I don't ask what. And it's only to keep me going for awhile. While I decide.

I think. "She came to me in a dream. She said 'find him & take care of him while I am gone.'" Boop nods, sighs. Together we dress me in my tattered old earth creatures shirt & dress, he flowers my hair like old, & we go out. Not in my knapsack, though. I carry him in my arms, despite his worry.

We walk down to the park. A few of those living there remember my stories still. Smile at me.

Would protect me if need be. I gave them something to keep.

Then on to markets. To the toy store where I'd found Boop himself.

There. On an empty shelf. It's him.

"Algernon," she told me he's called," I say to Boop. "But she calls him Sonnyboy."

We return to our room. He is new & scared but he feels among friends now. He calms.

Delaying, feeling stronger. I find a job. I begin to tend my battered body. It's hard to do & I do not heal fully, but there are a few months, I remember, even now, when we three lived together in that room.

We lived together & I would go to my job every day. I would leave Boop & Algernon in the window to watch the day & wait for my return. I would come back in the evening, cook food, & they would tell me what they saw. The light passing differently on sunny & stormy days. Loud games in the street. The scents of wild berries & car exhaust. Tired faces, distracted & worried. They watched.

On the weekends, on Saturdays, I would heap them into my knapsack, & go to the cinema. After a few weekly visits, it seemed like it was the same film every week, which was strange. Stranger too is that the story advanced more each time.

It was called **RemoteLand**. It began, sometimes, with a car crash, sometimes in reverse. I would sneak Boop & Algernon into my lap & eat my candy bar & little sack of popcorn, & watch & watch. For awhile, not a Princess nor a Savior. Just three good friends.

It got stranger. The story shifted to an Island. A Kingdom. A tall Castle, a Tower, Dancing Grounds.

Then one week, a Gate. And telling *my story* though strangely with others peopling it.

"Benny," I growled.

He would not confess the film his doing. Just his usual nudgings.

"Soon, Iris, *soon*."

One day I did not go to work. I could not get out of our bed. Boop & Algernon clung to me with terror.

"OK, Benny," I said aloud to the dark room, its dusty schoolbooks. Its long-unplayed pink radio shaped like a cat.

Benny came for Algernon to bring him to the new place when it was time. "Trust me, Princess." I had no choice as I let him go.

Boop & I huddled together, no force of dreams or nature would rent us. Earth creatures now filled my room, since I was ready, & I did not have to drink or eat them. We went together, letting go to make new, *letting go to make new*.

I will see my sister again. *I will see Algernon again.*

In this new place I create, I take a new name. I am Christina, sometimes Chrisakah. The maker. The creator. The guardian of another new land. Crissy, for short.

We leave that room behind & come to this new place, where Boop & I will dwell alone all of our days, friends to & guardians of this other new place.

Our new home is green & hilly. The air is cool & lovely. I wish my friends from the park could live here in peace. But I have left them with my trace & no further. Benny will gentle their dreams sometimes, he promised me.

“There should be a Castle, Princess.”

I shake my head. “I’m not a Princess. I never was.”

Boop stares me down despite his shortness to my own. “A Castle we will build together. It can be . . . fun.”

“Fun?” I smile. Remember how.

“Like your stories. Rooms that come & go. And visitors too.”

“From where?”

“From the new place you will help to create.”

I nod. A Guardian who is a Princess living in a Castle. Boop will be my servant though I beg him not to be. He is sure. This will work.

I am not alone as the days pass. I live with Boop in our Castle. No dancing grounds. No Gate. It’s *all* Gate now. Benny cackles. The imp nods.

And so my story, from pieces I sometimes remember & so this picture to view. I call my new home Imagianna perhaps with more hope that I have.

One fine day, the finest, that beagle comes to the new land I have helped to create. I learn it is called Bags End. I think of the Red Bags & nod. One day them too.

He doesn’t remember me. Only who I took care of him for. His long-lost Mommy Beagle.

But he likes me & likes when I tell him stories. Likes it so much I arrange for my old typing machine to find its way into Bags End so that he can tell that place’s new stories.

My bedchamber is the same as it was on the Island long ago. Boop sleeps in my grasp, as always.

Sometimes I let us dream & find the old hole in the wall, & return again to the tunnels & cavern below the Tangled Gate. But it's only dreams, I know. Imagianna is where we are now.

[Benny nods. Keeps his distance mostly. It's for the best. Nothing's gone. Nothing goes away. Nothing returns. He does not see in time, then & now & hence. All points connect. Not yet for Crissy to remember this.]

[But he knows her sister is still looking for her. Her sister has forgotten nothing. Her sister is nearing Imagianna all the time, no time, every time. Soon.]



To be continued in Cenacle | 89 | June 2014

* * * * *



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Nine

li.

He was my mutt Asterius & this was true enough. He liked when we drowsed in my armchair, when these times came. I didn't sleep as often as he did. But he always waited for me, hopeful.

Dumb brute? No. No more truly mute than the trees or the stars above. Each to his own kind's tongue & song. He couldn't speak man anymore than I could speak dog. Starlight or oak.

When I weary enough but not to sleep I'll poke the fire up, & take my seat with him. He seems longer or shorter with my wish for warmth & nearness. That's fool to say. I say it.

Sitting with him, I leave aside my magicks & my books. Our chair faces the fire at an angle, & the window shows the Great Tree I like to see. Windy, wavering. Otherwise, the Tower is quiet & still. The fire, the tree. My mutt's breathing.

I am the uncalm one in this. The fire snaps. The tree dances. The mutt naps after a time. Only I among these am unsure his role.

I try to relax, let go into my bones.
Breathe. Relax. Once. Twice.

Let history's testament fall to sand.
Let the trail of old blood diminish away.
Let the deepest love cup, not contain, & thus
learn by release.

Breathe. Relax.

Again, the dream. You are not mutt but my brother. A big man, big & broad as I am tall, lanky. Laughing, always laughing. Laughing is what you do, compel me to. You don't read books. You drink deeply, feasts & women.

We are building a wall, a construction in words, languages old like frail, warm skin; others newer, glowing with seed, humming, partway back to stars.

I pause my work, larving up syllables & stones, look up, see your laughing face, the many of you I've known. Common despair. My brother's hand on my shoulder. We continue to build this wall.

What do I know now I didn't know then? How can a dream have a depth of miles & length of years to remember by?

I nod, in my chair far, & remembering too. Mutt in my lap, brother urging me to sing.

Let the stars between dull hours be more to guide.
Let our humility sup on every beast & bug & vine & stone & new song we aren't.
Let the gorgeous rubble of dream always be the tale I yearn to tell.

I beg a little, sink a little deeper into it, grip the warm fur, *please, again.*

We begin to travel along this wall, find crevasses to hold to as more time passes than ought, years for days, centuries, we cling to this wall as it drives furiously through history.

It's an ugly wall to fast to, blotched like old blood, & its path goes jagged & uncertain. Loses faith, as old things do.

My brother won't let go me, the path, till I make him do. *Let me go.*

I close my eyes within this dream & mouth words. *Once. Twice. Breathe. Relax.*

Let the kind hours explain the world to you. Twining fingers, silver falls of leaves, meals desperate & late & fine.

There was an hour when you
could've flown,
did.

I'll keep singing this.

When I let go the wall, I wake again here. Armchair. Tree. Fire. Mutt. My shoulder aches but I don't stand yet. You're dozing in my lap.

This is as close as I can get to you. Asterius is your gift to me, promise of our bond, even now as you otherwise dwell forever in the shades & wilds of Dreamland.

lii.

Remembering:

"Cease the tide by cursing the moon? Crush the drumheads, men will pound their stones,

twice harder! Bind a woman's fire & she will lay dreaming coming stars!"

Everyone laughs. The King in good spirits. A fairly calm sea. The Island near or soon will be.

[That we are under way again is both miracle & tragedy. Would we ever have moved on if he hadn't lost his Queen? And how? How? Taken? Murdered? Poisoned?

[There was a changed sense of things one day. Like there never had been a Queen, or she long passed in years. Like something written in the sand, then crossed out, then the tide coming in.]

I pet your shaggy head. My brilliant fool. You enjoy being a dog, permission to feel everything in a moment. Piss freely.

"What his crew didn't know was that the King had contacted my brother, Benny. Traveler in dreams. *You*. I think."

[Or some kind of you. An herb he drank later that night, kind of a poison but, if survived enough, a deeper entry to Dreamland. Passage, movement.

[He bid his brothers good night & they drank on till very late. His mood gave them hope. Each had left loved ones back there, with sad faces & unanswered questions.

[You'd had no hope till the last meeting with the Travelers before setting off. Convinced you'd only find your beloved via dreamways, you'd promised them a more honored place in your future kingdom. The Island would ever welcome Travelers. For the herb.

[Now writhing in my bed, poison drunk in my belly, a cloth stuffed in my mouth so none may hear my cries. I have to survive death, alone, uncomforted, & the door will open. Strange, there are two. I choose the one to dreams this time.]

You begin to doze, lazy, know this tale, both, either. "It was you allowed him his grief, his absolute despair. She saw, finally, *understood*, that yours was to find the Island, *find the Tangled Gate*. Yours was to save the world."

I shake my head, seeing again mutt where I saw my King. I'd served no man till I knew you. None since. Knowing your grief better than you did, why it so, it carved my heart a groove close by yours.

["There will be two," you told me that night, when he let us alone, King & his Queen together a last time. "Give all to the one who comes to you first by the sea. Having done so, the second will come to you, & you may grow old finally." Kissed him last as wife.]

You tire of my Tower & want to run. I let you chase from my offices outdoors, my day & night without end, my gift from her.



I walk more stiffly than I once did, the Architect grows old too, eventually.

But each time you visit me, Benny, each time I am able to form you mutt at least, when I cannot form a man, I reckon your sacrifice anew. It was you who must keep her till the last, you who salved & broke the King's heart, finally, so he would let go, & save the world.

Eventually night again. Armchair. Fire. Mutt. Azarius. Brother. I'm not sure.

Can I come to you in Dreamland? What you don't know as you slumber in my lap, breathing in & out deeply whatever cares you have by dog or man, what you don't know is that I have the dream herb now too. My teacup. What I've brewed all night. The Architect wishes to know, wills to know, the Architect, Benny, *will know*.

"Cut!" yells the Gate-Keeper.

"Cut?" asks the Architect. Kinley?

Nods. "We've guests on the set."

"Guests?" Kinley is completely bewildered by all of this.

Two young men, one scrawny to a scary extent, the other one tubby but not grossly so.

The Gate-Keeper is kind to them, nobody knows why. Nobody has *ever* been allowed onto the **RemoteLand** set. But these two. He's ceased what seems to everyone like months of intense filming to host these two as guests.

They have questions, smiling, terrified, but here they are, on the Island, the Architect's Tower, his private offices.

The Gate-Keeper smiles. "Ask."

The thin one speaks first.

"Why would the Architect want to go to Dreamland? How are he & Benny brothers? I mean, how is Benny a traveler in dreams anyway?" Stops, more terrified of his words. The film crew is still hanging around. Kinley seems absent. As does Asterius/Benny.

The tubby one talks too. "What does the Architect wish to know? What became of the Princess?"

"What do you think?" the Gate-Keeper asks.

The two stare at each other.

"Don't be scared. Tell me. What makes sense to you?"

They are still silent.

"You live your lives around my film. Yes?"

They nod.

"You lived in the Nada Theatre until I invited you to come with me?"

Nod.

He smiles. It's a kind smile but it's dangerous. It expects.

"Then I will allow you an opinion on what happens next."

The thin one blurts, "Don't you know?"

"I'm curious. Tell me. Give a moment. Think. Then tell me."

The two are quiet. The set is completely quiet.

The tubby one says, "He loves the Princess. He always has. So he wants Benny to lead him to her."

"Or he wants to free Benny from Dreamland finally," the other one adds.

They look to him with wide eyes. It's like committing a violent crime to speak like this.

The Gate-Keeper smiles kindly. "Thank you. Your ideas are inspiring. Now you can stay on the set for the next scene. But over there, those chairs in the corner."

They nod, find their seats in the corner. Wait to see.

lii.

Between the night & day without end that you gifted me, a dusk, a dawn, where I love you still. A smile of yours I keep, even though not mine own.

What leaves last, if leaves at all, are the smaller things, cooler moments when we simply shared space. Good, & too much of it.

When you studied the Tangled Gate through my Tower office telescope, you wouldn't breathe. I'd listen from across the shadowy spectres of the room. Not a breath. You'd move the glass, inch by inch, study the maps, move some more, testing what you saw with what you encountered in Dreamland. A sudden connection, now a breath. Knowing it wouldn't be in that spot next time, *knowing it*, the Gate was like that. *Still*.

You left little scent those many years. Any man would have sniffed after you, the King's ripening daughter, but little to compare with girls who vied in your shadow, it's like you disappeared in your departures. Remained in more obscure ways.

It was your passion to know your own truths that rivens through me even now. How did I come to know what you were, when were you more than beautiful, lonely, & too intelligent Princess to me? Was it before or after I let you escape the Island?

I had chased across centuries to find a way to save the world. I wasn't going back. And it was you. I believed you were from another place, had come here, & the world of men aborn.

And then I learned my own story too. I was from that far place, from Emandia, as well. We had been landed on far ends of the story. Yours to grow with the world, find its beauties, mine to review its finale.

I love you still. We were both contrived for our tasks, however different. An attraction set along our border to assure we'd find each other, the eros between us the sparkling fuel by which we'd know the right world true, & no others, & move on bloodless otherwise.

My mutt won't come near me when my dusky walk emits like this one. *Contrivances aren't suppose to love each other.*

Why do these dusks & dawns disturb me more? What is missing?

I love you still. Now. This. I sit in my office, now, tonight, & I look over to my old telescope, perpetually pointed to the Gate, whatever the world. I see you there, now, tonight, breathless, studying, studying, & I am breathless too, *oh*, I was then too, & you are so close, I've come the world & its centuries to be in this room with you, why can't I stand up? Why can't I approach you, to explain what I know, what I don't, & present myself to your womanly gaze, for your womanly assessment, & perhaps a shy smile, & again a breath, scent of aster.

[The Gate-Keeper looks over to his young friends, nods, smiles. Ready to bow & scrape, they nod & smile in return.

[But one more to go. By request.]

liv.

We came from Emandia via deeper dreaming through the Red Bags, arrived whole & complete. You & I were one man, brother, Benjamin, Benny, compelled from one trunk to two branches, two men.

I into building, what some sneering called the architecting of the world of men. Sneering because despair, because too many failed worlds. Because only madness builds again & again, same hands, same tools, same materials, & smiling expects a novel result.

You were the *but*, Benny, the wild card in me extracted to run free.

You laughed, you raced us up hills, climbed the tallest trees, led the songs wherever we traveled & invited to a meal & a fire. Your shoulders strong, your body as broad & dense as mine lanky, divided even between your deep shouts & love of open woods & my retreat to murk & thick books.

You didn't know we were twain for purpose, by day, by night, by sun, by moon, by waking, by sleep. We receded from each other slowly, a breath, an untwined finger at a time.

Perhaps it began with your discontent with lovers. No matter how she approached, shy, brusk, a girl for the slow, gentle taking, or one to bind or be bound by leather rags, heated with claws or serrated blade, you fretted & hurried too soon from her. *Flaws, always flaws* you saw in each girl or woman. The shade of a cheek, the roundness of a breast, the want to be solely, wildly



possessed, the growl for you & a dozen other heavy-cocked men in their turn. *Flaws, always flaws.*

You dreamed more. We ceased our travels because you liked the strange pale woods we had come. "There are other beauties than the ones we have known," you'd say to me, often, like a prayer, like a tic. Kept me near for when you woke, witness to your half-mumbled visions, convinced there was an inner space shared by all, a perfect world, a *Dreamland*, did you contrive it yourself? Did it contrive you?

I would try to tell you what we were but you smiled like it didn't matter.

I asked you, "What other beauties?" & you said, "Come with me, brother, let's make them together, forever!"

And then you were gone. Gone to Dreamland, *become* Dreamland. I was alone in your pale woods. I could no more find you while asleep than awake. What did this mean? Our trunk was reft.

Eventually I mourned & let you go. I stopped looking for you in my dreams & began shaping tools there to bring back, building tools, tools to fix the flaws in the world.

A world demur enough to make men want to defend & protect her every breath & bloom. A world growling powerful enough to twist their greed, to conquer & tame, twist it crying in their minds, come for me now, *come for me*, your miracle world, its every beauty, & release. *Come again*, & release.

It was near the end of the world when you finally let us meet again. I was come in Dreamland to an old memory of our pale woods, where I lost you. I was leaving in the morning to travel back the years to the Island, Tangled Gate, find & fix the flaws. Hopeless, a woman's scent in my mind still. Tired, her embrace easy cost to let this next imperfect world go.

Came bounding up to me, barking, joyous, wet-tongued, ugly beautiful mutt & you, *you*, Benny! Barks, licks, pants, what you could give me to hold of you, so I would not ask your help mending the flaws, so if I failed I did with your love & no more.

Held you, hugged you, worried to your glory my long fingernails in your shaggy fur. Woke with your scent in my nose, my cheeks drying from your many kisses.

I left for the Island, the Gate, & willing forgot you until later, until I was retired here, day & night forever, & when we met it was in waking this time. I had nothing left to ask of you. You still came as mutt, & neither of us pressed man from you.

Perhaps where my discontent. Perhaps I want you man not mutt in my arms? Perhaps begin our travels anew, having saved this world, flaws & all, our turn together again? You sniff, you bark, you lick. Pee & roll happily in shit.

I want other beauties than these, brother, scent of aster in my mind. Your old laughter too.

[The Gate-Keeper looks at his young friends again. They are shocked & hardly nod.

[Kinley, restless, very restless, hardly held still by Christina, a helpful growl from Maya.

[A word to all from *Labyrinthine*: I will not be held so close for long. These boys know my feral wrath. *Nod, boys!*

[They nod. They know.

[The Gate-Keeper says, to Kinley, to *Labyrinthine*, a little more, please. We are nearly there, I promise.

[The tremors raised now do not cease, however. There is near an end to this & again run wild free. It will happen, by willing or will.]

lv.

“Deeper Creature time,” he writes, finding his old notes ledger & resuming on a fresh page. “Looking for a gape in my world, I keep thinking about this, about how little I know about it.

“They weren’t from Emandia as we were. They were native to this world, from the Island, its White Woods, its endless, pathless White Woods.”

Pauses. Looks around the nearly ageless dank of his office. Its books piled high, containers of herbs & potions, trinkets from the many places & times he’d travelled. Smells of decay dried to dust. His desk really a great table, covered too but for the area before him, cleared away periodically.

Himself dressed in soft rags, noone to show for, shine for, bother about. His body nearly immortal but old with patina, time & sadness.

Resumes. Struggles. “Or maybe it should be called Deeper Creature timelessness. For they do not live with awareness of time, shackled to its passing & *finitude*. *There is no time*.” Nods. “Theirs is an existence outside time’s passing, like my own, except that I am as aware of time as they aren’t.”

Picks up his ledger & on a whim brings it to the Tower office’s front window, where located his great spy-glass & thick maps of the Tangled Gate. *Where she’d sat*. He sniffs, can’t help himself. Just memories. Table not a quarter the size of his own, he moves things around, settles in. Dust, displaced, stays displaced, awake again, wondering.

And, there below, the Gate? This still the Island, that yet the Gate?

He mulls. This discontent won't salve itself, nor will sitting in this office do any better. The Gate?

Nothing to lose but his loneliness. Looks & finds his long unworn overcoat. Feels odd, like he won't be back here a long while, like it's time. For me, *there is time*. At least for now.

lvi.

The Gate never changes. So massively tall, & its legend where its scrollwork peaks: "*For those lost.*"

Enters & there is the Fountain, perpetually crumbling yet ever gushing, ever insisting a drink. A drink, & a choice. Briefly considers declining but then realizes he need the Gate's help. Whatever that might be, he needs it.

So takes his two-handed scoop of the cold, tingling water (music to taste, water to listen to?), drinks it on down deep, & moves past the Fountain.

They knew me once. We became friends & together helped the Princess to succeed. How do I reach them now? Remember my old advice to her: tap my head once, my heart once, sniff twice. Follow somewhat seeming random the vines-&-stones-lined paths.

Slows, frustrated. Skies above a silent grey. Wonders if it is possible to fail & exit the Gate a failure?

Wonders then at his own quick to give up.

Closes his eyes, begins to feel around, the air cool but not cold, the silence not terribly deep if one pressed a little—

Come on. *Come on!*—he calls wordlessly, calls & calls, cries & howls, moans unto *hmmmmmm*, summons all the hope & hopeful purpose he has—come on—*come on!*

Softly, at first, then again, then a little louder, the echoing through the air & through his mind, a cackle, another, *many cackles*, swooping & swirling around him, ringing, echoing, echoing, then echoing the echoes, it cannot be other than his old friend the wee Imp! Can it be? *It must.*

lvii.

The cackles continue their echoing play, & I follow. Follow, & yet no closer. I must faster. *I must play.*

I think of old times, the White Bunny, & I try. Long ears, glowing fur, pink nose, nothing. *Nothing*. Still man-shaped.

Man . . . shaped. Not thinking at all, this is my body's turn to do. I sleek down, not quite a bunny, or an imp, but a Creaturely form all my own, what I might have been I now am, for this little while. Listen close, I speed.

The cackles triple with delight, *this* is their Architect *come to play!* They direct me, a long tunnel of dancing cackles, & I follow, I speed like no man has, man I am, man I'm not.

Speed till I slow, slow sudden to stop. A cave. *This cave.* I know it. The Beast long lived here.

The cackles are urging me on in, but I remain still. The Beast is of forces deeper than my knowledge or skill. The Beast is this world itself, given a body to roam it, a mind to reck itself & all dwelling on it.

I kneel. I kneel very low toward the Cave & its possible inhabitant. I speak quietly, scrub a man's natural arrogance before his world, his hand's & eye's & mind's & throat's raw power, & I speak from my long loneliness & yearning.

"My friend brought me here. She urges me to pass. She is a Creature, & travels to her home. I am a man, of a kind, & wish to visit, with my questions. I ask your leave for safe passage. Perhaps there is still good in me to do others."

Upon my last words, & only these, a breath, a stirring, the sounds of something unearthed from dug & tossed rock. Something emits the Cave.

I stand. Approach. No. Yes. *Tis.* The blue bag I gave the Princess long ago. Whole & handled still. The Cave says nothing more but I sniff twice & feel my entry allowed. Realize myself still in Creaturely form as I make to pick up the bag with swift but clumsy paws. Regret, but reform.

About to revisit its contents, curious what remains, but the cackles sudden everywhere, high & low, they practically push me into the Cave, carrying my old bag unopened for now. Well.

Man again, I move at my own swift speed now. I feel more myself as this latter-day adventure continues, uncertain but burbling. Thinking me ready for anything.

No. And not. I come of a sudden into the too bright central cavern of these caves & tunnels, & for a lingering moment as I stop, crouch, choke my breath & beat still, I hear the scraping of stones, bare feet upon stones, bare feet dancing, dancing, a lithe body conjuring song from patterns & dreams. My heart stops. I fall away.

lviii.

When I come to, I am aloft, but back in the tunnel I emerged from. My form changed to, *ah*, I am again Hummingbird like when I first met her along paths of the Gate!

I'm afraid. She dances happily with the Creatures, she's found her content. She gifted me my Tower, day & night without ending, & I've balked. Dissatisfy with retiring quietly to a drawer, a man-shaped tool plied, & done.

I flit, flit some more, find myself falling into these pleasures. Remember to listen with ears & there are still cackles around me, waiting, now nudging a little, *come along, Hummingbird! New play! New play!*

Enter the great cavern again, inured to its bright light now, & see the Princess has concluded her solitary dance & now every Creature big & small joins in her frolic.

Many of the major Bears in this number, little ones too, even wee ones & their oddest of noises make me think of the Imp somehow. Several Giraffes, a grey Hedgehog, the White Bunny! So many more.

I join. Before I can think to think, or choose to choose, I join in & dance. Flitter high & low, feel out the song they sing, find my voice among the many others, & join in too. Like I belong. *I belong.*

My form shifts, unknowing to me, slowly, I become less Hummingbird & more the Creaturely form I'd chose to chase the cackles, swift & sleek, but then less this than a man's form, my form, still dancing, still singing. Still smiling among all these old friends.

When the singing crescendos & to its slow close, I feel crowds of Creatures dividing in twain before me as I half intentioned, nudged & nudged by cackles, clicks-clicks & noise-noises too now, I arrive, fully formed man, the dance & song finished, I arrive to the shocked, smiling, beautiful face of my long-beloved Princess. *Oh my.*

lix.

Labyrinthine says, quoting Heraclitus, "we are and are not."

Has new friends, they are small, wiggly, kind to *Labyrinthine*, they generate good feelings between them. Makes work go easier, these kind friends.

Nods to me. I resume.

Your smile holds me from falling, keeps me from fleeing. Your hair as red as always, as long, your eyes still a faerie blue, but nothing to your smile as you slow me enough to rest, not pause, in my place. Your smile the sum of what all these years have not been. Your smile sups upon me until I am well-chewed, swallowed, expelled back to myself as this calm reunion's moment.

"You came."

"You . . . called?"

She nods, steps forward, & grasps my hand. "It was time."



I feel something wordless, something I do not know, good or bad? I don't know. Look down. Our hands, as they keep grasping, meld to one.

I gasp. Begin to laugh. Still holding her, our hand, I lean over & laugh loud.

"What is it?"

I hold up our hand. "This! I think this is what got lost along the way. We let go each other's hand, & then came history. All of it."

She nods. I please her. She leads me by our hand somewhere, woods, White Woods? No Creatures follow us. All is quiet.

I want to say & say & say.

"I do too. It's OK."

Calm. A beat. A breath. OK.

"Where are we going?"

"Where I was bound already. I waited for you."

We come through the Woods to a clearing, a long one, & I see at the far end a platform, atop which sits a grand stage.

The Princess smiles even more so at me, I feel as though our limbs are twining amongst each other in her excitement. *Ahh*. Many Creatures now join us in the clearing.

We have no special place to stand or sit among our friends here, although I notice the White Bunny, the turtle who is not a turtle, & yes, the crazy gnattering Imp all nuzzle up near to us. They know me, sniff twice familiarly. My heart shines, & falls free.

"Tis a Grand Production!"

I nod. "There is no time."

She laughs. Points.

A white-furred bear wearing a long Scotch-styled scarf is waving a long paw & crying: "On . . . with . . . the . . . Show!"

There is the deep-black bear who comes out to dance, tells a few jokes, juggles a few, then more, then countless balls, then executes an impossible tumble into the crowd, returning before he left.

There is the black & white bear who slides onto the stage, dancing high & low, tapping his paws artfully to music I wonder must be the Traveling Troubadour's, & brings out the black bear & others to leap & fall to the audience's delight.

Our friend the White Bunny on stage performs many dazzling long-eared hops, impossibly high & fast!

There is a comical dalmatian & his daffy quips. There is a purple-furred dancing Creature, long ribbons in dizzying flourish. There is the tumbling brown monkey who jumps seeming miles high. Many, many others come & go.

I forget who I am & am smiling the Princess's smile, laughing her laugh, feeling her long deep warmth with these friends. This is who I am when the world isn't in peril, or when we let each other be.

There is the handsome furred bumblebee gliding over us, & atop his furred back is a small melancholy-faced pup, & they fly together not like steed & rider but like their paws too are one, like there is no other way to be, stars above, earth below, *we too are one, we too are one.*

I wake. Cry out. "*Shhh.*" Look around. *Oh.* Creatures cavern. They are clustered all around us, still dozing.

She smiles down at me, I panic, but feel our hand still warmly one. Relax a moment. Let her arms around me possess me all. So close. Release. *So close.*

"Yes. And no." We recede a little. Just a little.

"There's more. There's else."

"Not every Creature lives safely here."

"Nor most of the world. Shaped like men, Creatures. Trees. Everything."

"It's why I called you. Why you brought my blue bag."

I nod. I'm ready.

Lx.

Labyrinthine says, again quoting Heraclitus, "Nothing remains still."

Labyrinthine agrees. Having lived in many places, travelled far miles, grown sheet by sheet by sheet.

Labyrinthine's friends agree. Things change, a-gain & a-gain. *Labyrinthine*, *Lx* for short, laughs. *Things Change* is a relation.

Comfortable friends together, *Lx* nods me continue.

Sitting side by side, we unclasp the blue bag & open its cover. A soft floral scarf covers its contents. She removes a dearly known item to me. The braided Threads, hands them to me, these are still powerful for our task. I nod.

Then she takes out two small red balls, blue striped. Three more, orange these. She nods this time. I put them aside me with the Braided Thread.

The Creatures stir & wake around us, sniff twice, know change & gather, gather close.

We each touch the Creature near to hand, the Princess her White Tiger, me his kind-eyed bullfrog companion.

I feel each Creature touching to each, one to many to all, paws, nuzzles, we too are one, we too are one.

“You’re doing this to teach me. You know this already. You always did.”

The Princess smiles at me, her smile like shine, like wash, lets me close to her, her skin, her hair, allows me rove across her cheek, touch her lips, smooth to her neck, ‘cross her shoulders, upon her breasts, of them, in them, on them, pleases me man, pleases me soul, becomes my tongue sliding across her body, taste you tasting me, let flesh meld & light, let flesh twain & delight to chase, release, chase, release, we too are one & two & one & two & one too.

She lays the colored balls, the Creatures know them as Treasures, in a pattern to broadcast us where we will. Twined one to another, the Princess allowing the girl’s form in her for my pleasure, touched by every Creature as they doze near us, & later to dancing, & later to exploring cavern & Gate above alike, we begin to sing pathways into the world, touch & teach others how.

Remember some things. It took thick books of why & walls of fear against beasts of the world & unknown men’s faces to shock you into following, obeying silence. It took centuries of contrived sufferings to convince you that *this world is to be suffered*.

It took great iron cities built gouging & burning from the earth to convince you that the world does not easily provide to all. Caterwauling leaders to scare you from each other too close, & let the suffering men & women in the streets lie, & *let them suffer*.

You had to tame. You had to conquer.
 You had to cage. You had to own.
 You had to celebrate dominance with feast.
 Cry & fuck. Cry & fuck some more.

There is no time. Especially in dreams. As we sing into the world, a low *hmmmmmm* you will not yet hear, tis because it began in your dreams, what we sang you as we held you close, travelled you by cosmos & microbe to see in all we too are one, we too are one.

Travel you to the Tangled Gate, source of your world, secret you can enter & learn to know. Just a drink from the Fountain, still lingering on the Gate’s legend “*For those lost*.” Yes. You were. You will find your way now.



In the Gate, down its many tall pathways of vines & stones, we'll follow you now. There is the Hummingbird & its tale of men & women remembering their first song & flying away, *awakening & flying away.*

Perhaps you will lead to Cloverdale, its dank first room, its room of mirrors, its desert & there a small shack. Will you meet the small exotic or the Tramp his grieving friend? *Where will you lead us next?*

Maybe, freely going now, you will find the *hekk* stick in your hands & thus decide easily where this dream next, lead us on or let us go, part the Gate itself, or else a smile, & deeper in.

If Cloverdale, you might come to the Carnival Room if you can, learn to sing how &, entering its marvels, for you a long-limbed fiddler, for you a great buck barking you to knee? Will you carriage with us to the far end of the world, behold the Sleepers, join them awhile in their Sleeping Capsules, drink the juice to cross the Dreaming, or show them how without Capsule, without juice?

Will you choose to travel with us many dreams like these, learn what we are, Architect & Princess, & behold the Island outside the Gate, live with us its story, how we came to be, what we learned to know, what mysteries we cannot reck, wild cards to our equations, our songs, our histories, our loves?

As we sit here now with you, in this warm cavern, these friendly Creatures all around, some dozing, all partners in the *Hmmmmmm*, we invite you to wake when you will, how you will, make of this dream & its like whatever you wish, but return whenever you wish to as well. The Braided Thread we leave, ever weaving through your dreams. Yours to grasp or leave lie.

[And when she at last came, & took your other hand, & when he came & took my other, something was now complete, now told of what was & what passes on to be. I did not let go, I am a man & I both hope & fear, but I willed my heart open wider to all, to every & all, we too are one, we too are one, together we will architect this world. Together we will architect this beautiful world.]

"Cut!" cries the Gate-Keeper, & for a lingering moment all is still.

Then Kinley & Christina both stand up, stretch out their muscles from their long sitting. Maya remains seated though. Benny's already gone, of course.

"Are you OK?"

"I'm staying."

"Staying?"

She nods.

"I don't think we should be apart," says Christina, getting suddenly upset. Kinley says nothing.

"Tell her!" Christina snaps.

Kinley kneels close to Maya, takes her hands. “We’ll never really be apart.”

Maya nods. “I know.”

He stands. Takes Christina’s hand. Nods to the Gate-Keeper whose crew is packing up many cameras.

Christina is reluctant still but Maya smiles up at her. A real, loving, lasting smile. To keep, to remember, eventually to renew.

They part the cavern, nuzzled along the way by many Creatures.

“What now?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Deeper in?”

“No.” He stops in the tunnel they are in, puts his arms around her, they kiss deeply.

Christina is pleased, of course, but unanswered. Remains so as they walk on.

Talks suddenly. “Princess or demon?”

“Hm?”

“Am I the Princess or the demon?”

“Oh, the demon for sure.”

They both laugh loudly, clasp hands tighter, & walk on.

Labyrinthine nods at me. A reasonable good conclusion to Part Nine. *LX*’s friends are napping nearby.

“I don’t know what next either.”

“Part Ten.”

“Yes. But what?”

“It’ll happen. It’s what you do.”

I nod. It’s what I do.

The evening is cool, still sunny. The traffic passes slowly, rush hour, the ironically named time.

I sit at a cafe I’d not been before, at a sidewalk table, behind a low fence. People pass by. A glittery theater marquee across the street. Restaurants.

Strangers avoid eye contact in cities. Do not willing touch. Save contact & touch & words for known faces, or transacting business.

A man across the street sits against a wall, his begging sign & cup. Shakes the cup; most ignore & pass by. His clothes & boots are well worn. Wears sunglasses.

It's *all* Tangled Gate, in a way, all White Woods. This world an Island.

When more to say, twill come new pages to say it.

6-6-2014

To be continued in Cenacle | 90 | October 2014

* * * * *



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Ten

*"Try to forget me.
Try to erase me."*

—Pearl Jam, "Jeremy," 1992.

Tis afternoon, lolling toward dusk. The bartop under my hand is old, wooden. Polished well to show its grains. Show it is valued, treasured. We tender what we love, either what we affirm or cannot deny. *We tender.*

This barroom has a television mounted in the corner. An AM-FM radio behind the bar. Pretty good jukebox over there. Six songs for four quarters. Records, too, not digital files on a chip. *We tender.*

There's an old poster of Jimi Hendrix on the wall. Woodstock '69 or Monterey Pop '67? Which one purer to his essence? Both, I suppose. Maybe I prefer Monterey because he was younger, not yet caught by fame's tit, further from his fall.

We tender. This story hasn't passed through Luna T's Cafe in a long time.

The song on the jukebox is now decades old. "*Jeremy spoke in . . . class today.*" Fills the room dangerously & familiarly both. Crackles in the 45 record. It's been played hundreds.

This notebook is thicker with pages than last I wrote it here. I think that's good. I'm glad it's thick & getting thicker.

Nobody's here. None of my old loves. Rebecca. Mr. Bob. Rich Americus. Noisy Children. Dr. Arnold T. Knickerbocker. None. Bandroom is dark & quiet too.

I don't know beyond this moment but story resumes & continues from here, wherever it's bound, coming pages.

I stand up.

I kneel. I bow my head. There are no answers to this world, none in language or somewhere outside it. I kneel before the mysteries of life I will write or say about but without answer. Want. Pain. Loneliness. Music. Dreams. There are others. Obsessing on them does nothing. It makes Art, fills pages, allows me to breathe sometimes, but it *does nothing*.

What then. If not solve then salve. Is that enough? Is that what Art can do, all Art can do? A warm wet bandage to a perennial wound? A low crooning to sleep? Comfort that the body or mind or both will fail, always fail?

I've always wondered what more, what else. I can't stand, I can't stop kneeling until something. It's all Tangled Gate. This Island. All White Woods.

If so, what then. And why kneeling? To what? The mysteries I name do not command it. I choose to. Then choose otherwise.

I stand. Take my seat back at the bar. One place as good as another. This notebook is a good one. I've had many. This pen a good one. They run out.

I look across the bar & there is my old friend. Dr. Arnold T. Knickerbocker. Dead? Alive? I don't know.

"Does it matter?"

"Let's say you're alive."

"Let's."

"Where do you stand on these mysteries?"

"I kneel too."

"It does no good."

Catches me cold his look.

"In a way, nothing does any good."

"What then?"

"You choose."

"Choose."

"You choose to do something. Think your thoughts. Move your hand. Move your body. Say something."

"And then?"

"And then something else. Movement. Time. Day. Night."

"Why?"

"Because."

"Because?"

"Just because."

"What then?"

"You choose."

"Does it really matter?"

"Yes. And no."

"Is there anything I can move from? Keep & move from?"

"This."

"This is just me . . . bitching. It's not fiction."

"You said, you wrote, 'it's all Tangled Gate. All White Woods. All Island.'"

"Yes."

"A sort of metaphysical place."

"Yes. Dreamland, too. The world roots in earth, dream, music. It's blood & bone lit by stars."

"That sounds like poetry. I don't feel like poetry."

He hobbles off his stool, a short, frail, ancient man. Overcoat & hat. Cane. To the jukebox.

Pulls out a coinpurse the age of centuries & uses coins fresh from the Civil War to feed the machine.

Amazing. The progressive rock song comes, unfurls, a bass & drums that toy & complexify under lit up organ flourishes & a guitar that unfolds & unfolds itself to nothing, & touch, & all flames—

*“Inside your fuego
we keep it rolling
Inside your fuego
we keep it rolling . . . ”*

It pours out, it fills this barroom, pours out its windows & doors

*“I ask Diego, if it was stolen
Inside your fuego we keep it rolling
Rolling
Rolling
Rolling . . . ”*

I try to get it, get it *again, care, really fucking helplessly care—*

Knickerbocker takes the stool next to me, I rock & groan in mine. This music is titanic. It cares.

He puts his hand on my shoulder & squeezes.

*“Rolling
Rolling
Rolling
Rolling . . . ”*

I let his warm old hand grip my shoulder, I let its warmth come through me, all the way through me, let this moment struggle to matter, & matter, OK, it matters, *it always fucking matters—*

All White Woods.
All Tangled Gate.
All Island.

I nod. Hold his hand on my shoulder.

“I can only do this.”

Silence.

“I can only try to do it better.”

Silence.

"It's my gift."

"The world is your gift."

"Then this is my thank you."

Hand squeezes my shoulder, as though approval.

I nod.

I'm ready.

Move on.

As I walk out the barroom door & evanesce once again, in the moment, I let for a moment, see you sitting there, looking at me, not looking at me, something I seem to know, & then of course I do not, I sniff & breathe you, your face what's owned me always, your shoulders & breasts I can only move by, fear, lust, happiness, dream, your stomach I lick down, & down, & down, till my deep is deep in you, whichever you, whichever me, *I am shit-nothing, I am shit-everything—*

The world does not reconcile, it does not cohere, it is familiar & unknown, I begin to release you, release my sniff of you, you don't know either, whichever you, *you don't know either—*

Look at every face & think:

You don't know either—

Ahh suck in the world's sugar,
its boring old poisons too—

World, you don't know either.

You don't know.

A scream in my mind to all.

Nobody knows.

The world is gift.

My Art is my thank you.

i.

I walk for a long time, city streets, whichever city, it matters & matters less, I think maybe the variations a little, but always couples happy & unhappy talking through parks, someone in the grass with a good, obsessing book, or any book, someone is hungry, someone else is murderously angry, someone born, someone dying, a lot of waiting, some hope, a lot of fear, I walk close to this all but keep moving—keep moving—

Eventually I am on my bike, not a motorcycle like Americus's, no, an old mountain bike, been my companion for years, riding, riding to get there, through suburbs important only to those living there, a long road, a bridge, over it, & a turn off, down a dirt path, & now under that

same bridge, there is a stream, a dirty stream

Lean my bike with a pat against the cement buttress upholding the bridge on this side of the water. *Whoosh, rumble, whoosh!* above. The distant sounds of a dealership, a main office calling salesmen to phone calls, via a loudspeaker. Sounds too of a high school football game. Numbers, cheers.

Across the water the two of you. The thin one & the chubby one. Of course. Passing a glass pipe. Of course. Looking at me like I've got a gun & badge.

"It's OK. I used to come here."

They look at each other. Relax an inch. Maybe.

"I arranged for you to meet the Gate-Keeper."

They freeze again.

"It's OK. I've just come to give you names."

"Names?"

I laugh.

"You've never had any."

"Who are you?"

"The guy with the pen."

"Pen?"

"Yah. Look, this won't take long, this bit of it. Pay attention."

I mean to wave dramatically or show nothing up my sleeves. Uh, wait, I've a t-shirt on. Old Crow Medicine Show. Mmmm.

"You, the skinny one. You're Ralph."

"Ralph?"

"You, the chubby one. You're Self."

"Self?"

"Listen . . ."

I turn away, climb on my bike, begin to pedal away through grassy marsh, to the path.

"Those names are important. You can find out why if you want."

They're still yelling & calling as I ride away.

They finally give up.

"He's gone."

"What kind of names are those?"

We sit down. I've got more opium. We need it.

We haven't done this in awhile. Living in that theater. A girl sort of dividing us.

"I know you don't like her."

"No. You don't get it, do you?"

"What?"



“I do like her. Why you & not me? I hear you in the bathroom. It’s not fucking fair.”
 “You’re my friend.”
 “I know. And you’re not a loser anymore.”
 “You’re not either.”
 “I am.”
 “Look, can I tell you something?”
 “What?”
 “She’s . . . strange. It’s not all that it seems.”
 “Sounds it.”
 “No, listen. She can, um, retract herself.”
 “Retract?”
 “Her. Y’know. Parts.”
 “Like her tits? How?”
 “Yah. I don’t know. Not all the way but it’s like she won’t have nipples. And her, um, pussy, it gets like, like. Like a Barbie doll. Nothing’s there. Like not even to go to the bathroom.”
 “Have you then?”
 “Done it?”
 “Yah.”
 “It’s not so easy to say.”
 “It isn’t?”
 “No. Can I just tell you?”
 “Yah, man. I won’t tell a soul. You know me.”
 “OK.”

ii.

“There was a knight & he would travel around an endless, pathless woods, observing, advising, protecting when he had to. He was quiet & brave, made friends easily, had a surprisingly sweet & kindly smile.

“Tis said he was captured by a queen or some great lady, who had him brought to her castle, imprisoned in stocks, readied for execution. And yet it did not come. Long days passed & it did not come.”

Bowie startles. This house. His father’s house. The night of a big party, never given before, but this one would fill this big house with people, music, talk, it was something important.

And here he was, hidden in the pitch dark of his bedroom, in his closet, crouched behind the many coats & jackets, most of which he did not wear.

Nestled in here with Iris. *Oh shit.* Feels her warmth, more like a growling, intelligent heat he could barely keep near.

Closes his eyes. No, he’s not the boy he was with her. Feels the years in him, the wrinkles of his life so far.

And her? She sniffs to him the same, & not. Older, like him? How?

It was she who'd been talking just now, in his ear, the strange story of the knight.

"Iris."

"Bowie."

"Wait. How do you know that name?"

"I don't know."

"How are we here together? We were kids on the night of the party."

"What . . . party?"

Bowie starts, then explains. "Listen to all those voices, the music. Listen! . . . that happened only once here."

"Were we . . . together that night?"

Bowie nods to her, in the dark.

"Nobody had caught us out. My . . . father."

"So what then? Did you bring us back?"

He sniffs again, his mind roams his memories of her body when he held her. She's the same but, like him, older.

He doesn't care. *Doesn't fucking care.*

She flows closer in his grasp, there in the dark in the back of that closet. Curls among his arms & legs, twines them impossibly close, he shivers with this, this is how she was back then, they melded, it wasn't just lust or love or the memory he held out from himself for so many years, they *melded*, their hands, where their limbs & torsos touched & twined, & she began to sing, begins now to sing, to *hmmmmmm* in his ear, he feels his body heat up, impossibly heat up, how is it this again?

He tries to think, to remember that night, it was their last untroubled, uncaught, their last & their best, they would venture into the party, watch from closets & beneath tables, & retreat to their own closet, to laugh, to kiss some more, her fears were falling away, she was releasing to him, a moment at a time, finally, he'd been so patient & loved her so much—but finally—

But something else, something *fucking* else that night, holding her again now, her wordless enjoying, her from where? how? She seems not to care like he does. Something else. *What. Who?*

Who. A very strange who. Bowie can't remember much of his looks, frail, practically disintegrating, but for a moment he & Bowie talked. Where was she?

She was down there. Licking his cock, swallowing his balls one & both, his strange alien sometimes sexually featureless girlfriend was doing unto his cock what seemed like carnal surgery, raising every nerve ending, every little hair, playing them, *hmmmmmming*, while Bowie talked to the strange frail X the Space Alien—

That's what he called himself, then, & years later at Luna T's Cafe. Those years later he would

apparently be seeking refuge, asylum, & Luna T's such a place, it's why Bowie himself ended up there for awhile—

Could she hear them talking? Were they in the back of his closet? How had he met X?

X was not on the run then. In fact, he was what Bowie became, a spy. Across worlds, maybe more but, still, a spy was a spy. A kind of mind soldier in someone else's bigger game.

Was X recruiting him that night? Was that how this began for him? A cosmic headhunter recruiting him while his nubile alien princess girlfriend gave him the worst best excruciating head he would ever get? *Ever?*

Ever. Now. Wait. *Now?* She was down there again. He almost laughed. She really didn't care how they'd been reunited, what this way.

He only said two words, to buy himself a little bit to figure. "Slower, love." It was worse, better, slower.

He closes his eyes, uses the old spy's trick to resist torture; pulls himself deep in, impenetrably in, no entries, no exit. Save now he can control it, appear impenetrable, but actually gone, a back door, a non-existent back door. Worked perfectly.

Iris doesn't care if we ever leave that closet. When we did the last time, we were taken from each other.

So I leave us in our loving twist, & I go, I go quickly through the many rooms of my father's house, using every cloaking trick I know, old ones, simple ones, looking for X. He'd said to follow, to leave her her privacy.

I can't say the years I roughly traversed that night, it's like I was traveling backwards in time. Old friends, younger, who they were in glory days nobody knew were glory days.

I kept going, those old nights at T's, those gone faces. The Asian accountant. The sarcastic preacher. That old crazy poet.

Finally, I realize something, shrug, shake myself onto a barstool at Luna T's Cafe's bar.

Shake within, compose. Listen. Red Sox on the TV, leading someone 2-1 in the 8th. Sniff. Beer. Sweat. Pussy. Taste. It's real. All this on my tongue like then, like it is now. Touch. The stool old but steady under me. My hands resting lightly on wooden bartop.

Look up. The old man, barman, Mr. Bob. Pepper-grey hair. Spectacles. A fond smile for me, always knowing but kindly, nothing more.

"Another, Bowie?"

My friends shout another for me, that I'm not keeping up.

What year? I don't know. Before all this was gone.

"I came to you that night, to show you what was possible. I glimpsed you into this."

"All the while she sucked my cock"

"All the while I sucked your cock, Bowie"

Now she's at the bar too, then now, bar, closet, beer, blowjob

She looks at me, smiles, smiles more, her face lights up blindly as I am consumed by her in that closet, then, now, I don't know when I don't know where

Iris I love you

I had to let you go

I had to let you go

I had to let you go

iii.

Call it want or genetics. I've asked that always. Every slinky ass in white shorts on summer's nights. Want or genetics? And does it matter? Does it really fucking matter?

I can't dismiss the science or the faith of a good answer. Some of it is to be found peering down deep enough, closely enough, into physical matter. There's some answers down there, & room for us to maneuver, improve, or at least change—

But not all of it's down there, or at the far end of a telescope. This universe is not truth, but truths, many of them, bound together, strangely, well, badly, truths knowable to the human eye & heart & ken, but others not, others knowable only to trees, or roaches, or stellar debris, there's burn, there's fire in these things too, & ways to the picture one human eye or even many can't see.

Or we see something light up & we call it Godd, or love, or country. We call a flash in the night by a word we will keep to remember. As we forget, night after night.

I'm no better with answers now than a hundred or a thousand pages ago, Whoever I wrote for, why. What I sought to accomplish.

I was lonely & I think I've always seen Art as a bridge out. Even if I was only keeping my own thoughts company, they meant something, they were real. The world was real. Suffering happened but it wasn't right.

So I stood a chance of something better if I kept writing. It was my path somewhere. My music into the world.

And the world's way into me, into my heart, how I let others close to me, they had to create, had to create & share it with others, brave to do so. It worked. Many many years. It works.

And still people are lonely, are silent & lonely. Still white shorts, high asses, summer nights. Still want. Still genetics.

I don't know. There is sadness. There is morning light.

iv.

Again at this bar. Red Sox winning in the 9th. Another cold mug in my hand. X next to me.

"What can I do? What am I supposed to do?"

"Better?"

"I don't understand. These times came & went. These people were mortal. We can't undo that."

"Not that."

"What then?"

"Do It Better."

"What does that mean?"

"Come outside with me."

We exit the bar, its game, its noise. Use stairs to climb to the rooftop parking lot over T's, place where many a security guard has napped after smoking many a fine blunt. Stars are pretty up here.

We have a good smoke. Of course aliens would smoke the best ganja. I start to speak.

"Bowie, let me." X coheres more than he has, there's muscle & bone to him, there's heat, this is someone who has traveled & endured centuries & miles to be here with me tonight, on this roof.

He starts to speak, to sing a little. I let, I listen.

"Call it want or genetics.

Tap twice, call it music.

I've tried to figure between the bars,

come up with my own hands,

& holding tighter

"Call it music, tap twice, understand

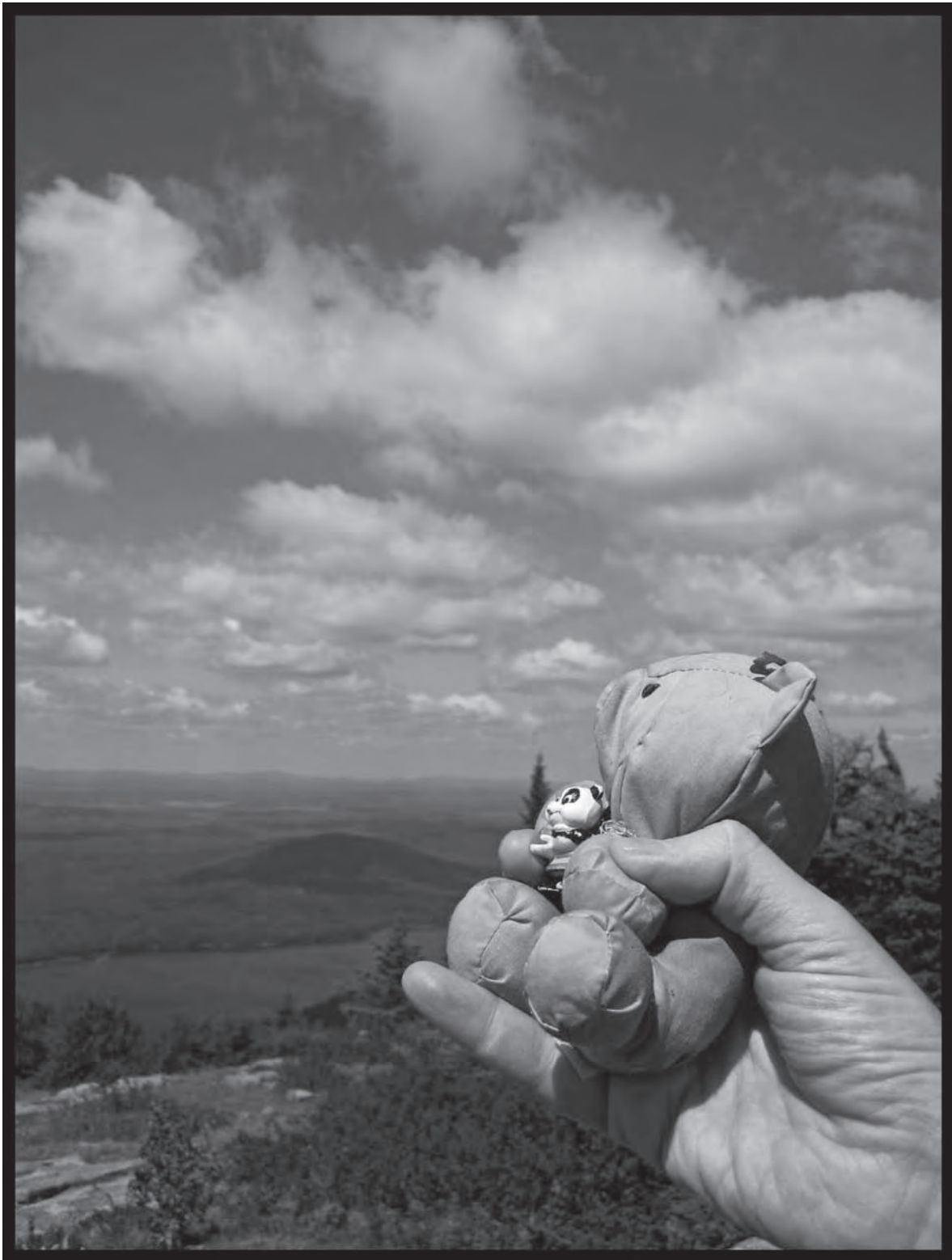
like a good dream. There's dancing

& there's hard cries tonight, both,

more, music, a good dream,

tap twice, more.

"I dream. I try to understand.



Dance & cry. It all means something.
What? *What.*”

He leans against me finally, frail, old, young, old. We smoke back & forth. On grass, let go awhile. On grass, let be. On grass, breathe, relax. It's all a dream. A dream of a dream. Call it music. Let be.

v.

Do it better. What does that mean? Write better than before? That's possible. It should be. What other choice but try?

Better, or different? I can't write as I did then, don't know that I would want to. And yet, some of it I read & admire.

Bowie looks at me. “Whose scene is this?”

“‘appears to be ours.’”

“Well, what then?”

“That party. Your father's party.”

“Yah.”

“Why?”

“Why did he have a party?”

“Yah. Only once. For what?”

“I never knew. He didn't tell me.”

“You were too busy fucking with Iris.”

“Yah, of course. What did I care? I wasn't a spy. I was a horny boy with possibly a real & sometimes willing for some things girlfriend.”

I laugh.

“Can I have her back?”

“Now?”

“Then, now. Yes. Look. I get it now. X the Space Alien was trying to tell me something at that party. Very important. I was too busy trying to fuck Iris finally.”

“Yes. White shorts.”

“Brother, you can't fucking know.”

“I wore them for you. I didn't like dressing like that. But I knew you'd like it. You would like me more.”

My jaw & heart & soul & cock & body drop. It's you. Really you, as you were then. And I'm me. I'm me now. I have this moment.

“Go, Bowie. Take her. Go!” says X blindly in my ears. We hand in hand chase through my father's house, did I even know how to exit, did it have doors?

But we go & go swiftly, & somehow are ignored by people in rooms & hallways, in the

entryway, coming, going, through the door, Iris in white shorts, me in whatever—

“Bowie, where—”

“Iris, do you love me?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Always? Yes?”

“Yes.”

“Through time & space?”

She laughs. Her eyes shining into mine, cars parking everywhere, people passing. She reddens.

“Yes.” Sees my look. “All of that, Bowie.”

“Do you trust me, Iris?”

“Yes.”

“And you’ll come with me.”

Reddens more. “If you want me to, Bowie.”

I am leading her away from cars & people & lights. Among trees.

“Sniff.”

“Um?”

“Sniff twice.”

She does. Does again. *Oh*. She smiles. There’s my Princess.

We walk together. Close. Closer. The trees thin, thicken, thin again.

Moonlight. There. A patch of grass in the moonlight. I lead us.

You are then, you are now,
you are whatever I wish most,
which is both, you all times,
now, then, all times, me,
better, me, better.

I kiss you & understand. My mind floods with your lights, your voice, your body, your love, I
kiss you & understand.

Me, better. Iris, me, Bowie, *better*.

We go.

vi.

We come to a clearing in the woods surrounding my father’s house. We lived on an island, I
never knew if there were others on the island too.

We sit in the clearing, it’s grassy. Iris is smiling at me.

“What?”

"Bowie."

"Iris."

"Is this what you want?"

"With you?"

"Yes. Here. All of this."

I think, twice. Honesty seems a good strategy.

"I lost you, Iris. Now here we are together. I don't know how. But I love you. I don't want to lose you again."

She listens, smiles. But she's thinking, I can tell. I had to pick the girl with the hot ass & the brain twice my size.

Honesty again, here goes, not even a strategy. I love you, Iris.

"I love you. There's not some better good where I let you go willing."

She shakes her head. "That's not it." Though, she adds with a smile, not hinting jealousy, "there are at least two other girls thinking about you & worrying about you."

I say aloud, now I'm honesty's bitch, "Christa. Gretta. Yes. OK."

"A harem, Bowie?" she's laughing.

She must love me & be OK with her feelings too.

"I don't know. It wasn't on purpose."

She laughs again. She's so fucking beautiful I put out my wrists to her.

"What?"

"Put the manacles on."

She laughs but now is thinking again.

Oh.

"We have to go back in there."

"No, we don't. That party ends & I lose you. We're going to stay clear until it's over & I haven't."

Iris is holding my hands & her blue eyes are tight upon me, such that I can't even get a comfortable look below.

"Bowie. We have to go back. And you have to trust me we won't lose each other again."

A spy isn't supposed to fall into these situations. But Iris was why I became a spy. To find her, & later to find a way to forget her.

"Why?" I ask hopelessly.

She smiles, lets me look below, well below, then tugs me back up.

"Didn't you ever wonder about me? About who I am?"

"No. I didn't think like that then. You were the most beautiful thing I had ever known. That's all I knew. That's all I know now."

"May I tell you, Bowie?"

"Will you leave me?"

"No."

"Promise?"

"I do."

I nod.

She falls into my arms, slowly, gently, slows time, I feel her slow time, I don't know how she

does this, slowing time, and talking, talking, at first *hmmmmmmming* then eventually words, words, “I’m from another place, Bowie, from a far other place.”

Bowie hardly nods, listens. “It’s called Emandia, Bowie. It’s not there anymore.”

Trying to remember, remember, there were things Preacher wouldn’t talk a lot about. Maybe a few words. For now, was his thinking.

“If I asked you who we worked for, would you tell me?”

“Better you ask me what we work against, Garrish.”

“What’s that?”

“A belief that it’s all over. And there’s nothing can be done.”

She’s talking in my mind now, crowding out the rest. “I came here a long time ago. But it’s like there are these versions of me, across centuries.”

“Versions?”

“I follow the *Hmmm*, Bowie. I follow it through time. Long past now.”

“There’s more than one of you?”

“Yes & no. I just live different lives in different places & times. Like a flower. We’re all me.”

“Are you all as hot & too smart?”

She laughs. “Everyone of us wishes she had you, Bowie.”

“There’s only one of me. I think.”

Nods in my shoulder.

“I have a feeling you could handle more than one Bowie a lot easier than I could handle two or three of you.”

She thinks. “We’d break you.” I nod, willing to concede this. She laughs loud.

How did I forget you? What did it take? I know what it was: Preacher.

That meeting, those years ago, in that rooming house. None of it was random. I was already a spook, but you recruited me for something else.

I’d brought that girl, the niece of the owner, who’d set her up drugged & laced in a room for a series of good-paying men to fuck, brought her from that room to my friend, in another room, full of stuffed animals, bunnies & beagles & kittees & giraffes, to be cleaned, & he owed me, he owed me everything, I was returning, it was still night, my room & equipment were already packed, swept, gone, I came back, I dared come back, stupidly, to find you.

The girl was safe with him, as safe as if his balls & cock’d been cut off, clean or dirty. Yes, he wanted to fuck her, he smelled layers of men’s cum on her slender body, wanted to add his own, wanted to burn her white of the rest—

But she couldn’t see the needle feeding into his spine—blowing steadily through him, seed, seed that responded to his primal wants, he saw himself taking her to his bed, reassuring, murmuring, her seeing hope in his eyes even as he undressed her, whispering whispering, telling her to touch there, & there, to smile pretty for him, *so pretty*, her legs parting trusting

him, he was different, he was different, this was love entering her so hard & hungry & deep & hard, love, unh, *love, unh!, love, obhhhhh*—

but he was different from the rest, it was all going on in his mind, he was showing her the bed reserved for her, behind the curtain, the bathroom so clean & with scents & soaps, soft towels, a foot locker with simple clothes for her, all well, *all well*—

rolled her over, feeling her torso tremble & shift, pushing her ass cheeks open, she breathes hard, she feels him push in her, she whimpers, again—

showing her a shade opening to a window & there a sunset over a distant forest, distant mountain—she smiles at him, wonders why Bowie left her here, *why, why, why*—he is kind, his smile soft, he feeds her bread, cut apples, lightly fruited water, is patient as she chews—

While she remains in his custody, the seeds never leave his body, not day or night, they absorb his deeper & deeper lusts, *he binds her, he cums on her pretty little tits, he bites her tight little ass, he pushes his cock into her mouth, fucks her slowly & deeply, she learns to suck better to keep from choking*—kept bifurcated like this—*fucking her*, not fucking her—tending her, *tasting her, hurting her, licking her clean*—not fucking her, soft words, water, a hand in hers as they walk to a local park, the garden, the autumnal colors—

Bowie returns for Preacher who, in turn, waits for him.

“Bowie.”

“Bowie!”

“Bowie!” Iris shakes me. Smiling.

“Were you?”

“Yes. I’m with you. You saved her, you kept her safe. You went back for Preacher.”

“She wasn’t you. I saved her & she wasn’t you.”

“It’s OK.”

“I don’t always remember the early days with Preacher. But I do remember that he said to me, ‘I can’t make you forget her entirely. And at some point she will return to you.’”

“Yes.”

“Where did you go, Iris?”

Iris releases from him a little. “He told me not to come again. He told me to go. He was powerful.”

“Aren’t you?”

“I loved you, Bowie. My power was gone in that.”

Bowie stands. “We’ve been coming back here all the years since.”

Iris nods.

"You were a spy?"

X nods.

I study the bartop before me. Shiny, shows my grubby face.

"I thought you were traveled from planet to planet, embedded, unwilling, to show your captors, um—"

"Yah, I did that. And I came here for sanctuary."

"But?"

"I wasn't captive in dreams."

"No?"

"They weren't concerned. They didn't see me as much more than a trained animal."

"Dreams."

Nods.

"For who?"

"They got me here. I'm not sure how, but the data I provided, world by world, tended me here."

"They were looking for something."

"I think so. Like following a trail, but they didn't know someone else was concocting the way."

"Why here, X?"

"My friends in dreams weren't enemies of my captors. I didn't understand it, but it was benign, tending them to this world."

Mr. Bob the barman is listening now, wiping a clean glass clean.

At that moment, Rebecca comes into the bar, up to me, kisses my lips softly, sits on the stool next to mine. I think: she's 34 now. We married 14 years ago. More? She watches this page & smirks. "You married me at 17."

I nod.

"She's from there."

"Where?"

"Emandia."

We three listening, me, Mr. Bob, Rebecca herself, are silent.

Still looks at me. "Does it surprise you?"

"No."

He nods, sips the mug Mr. Bob had slipped into his slender grasp.

"Does Rich know?"

"Not yet."

I look at you, Rebecca. "This explains how you just appeared that morning, in Cement Park, & nobody ever came to claim you."

You nod.

"You're willing?"

You nod. Your blue eyes are as beautiful as ever. "It's OK. We all need this."

"I don't know what that means."

She smiles, a bit of her jailbait twinkle back. "Nothing left behind."

I nod.

"I don't know what will come of it."

"No."

X stands, comes over to me. "I led them here, I don't know why. But she's here because of them."

I nod. "I didn't know. Someone directed Emandia this way. I thought it was their choosing, & that they tried many other worlds too."

"Few took."

Rebecca has an art pad out now, is sketching. I lean over. Oh. A gate, a tall gate. Above its highest scrollwork the legend, *for those lost*.

I smile.

"Now we'll go."

She nods & smiles too.

I look at X. "Thank you. This all makes some sense."

viii.

We leave Luna T's Cafe together, this is old, this is now, her hand is warm in mine, she is as quiet as ever, yet not unhappy, not dislocated by the news she is from Emandia.

"Maybe I always knew, Raymond?"

"How?"

"Look at me."

I stop. I look.

My.

"You're 17. But."

"Now look."

Oh.

"You're 4."

"Now."

"You're . . ."

"Something?"

"Yes."

"Where should I stop?"

"I don't know."

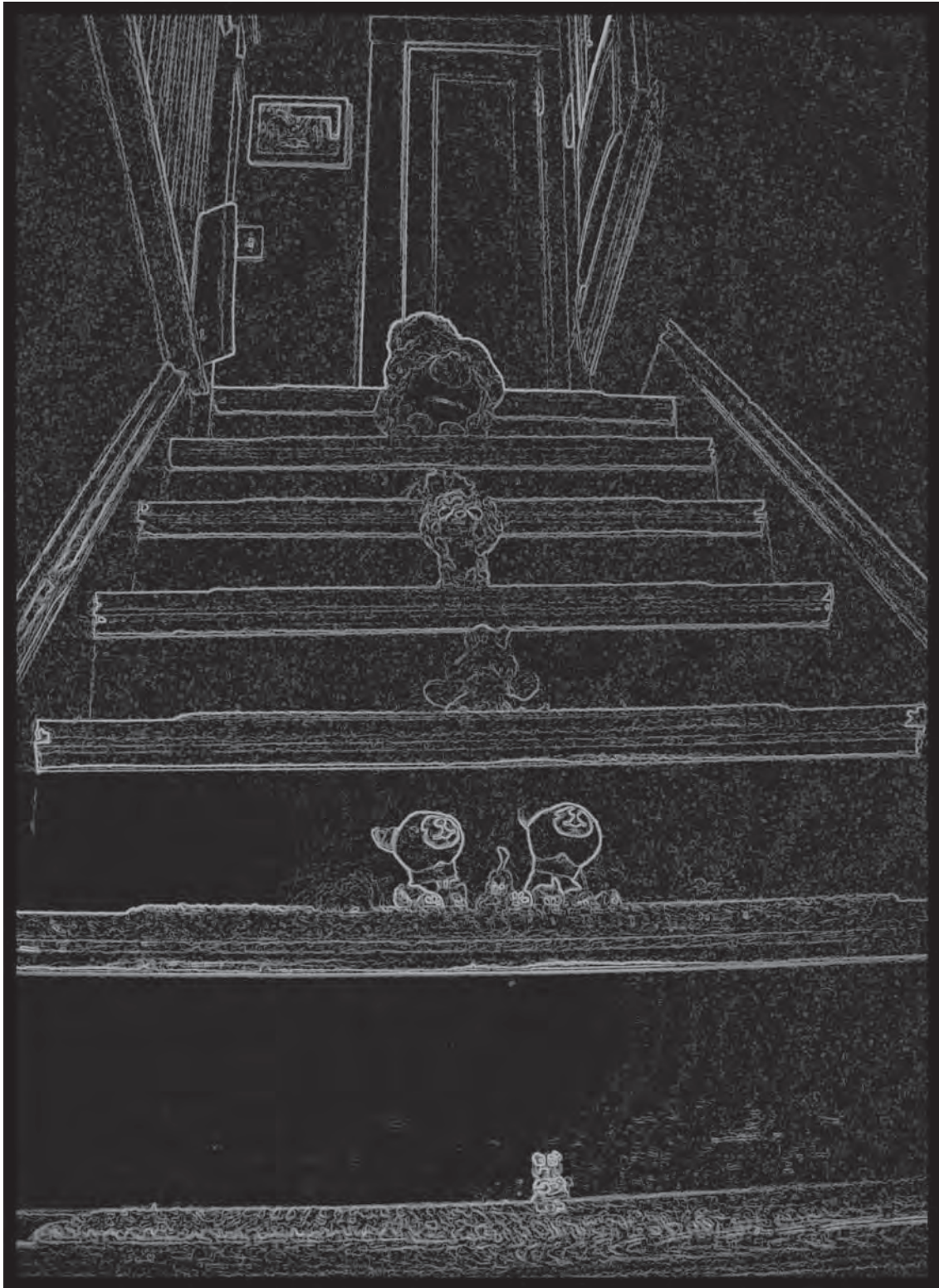
She nods, lets the question go unanswered, shifts slightly back & forth.

She smiles at me. That never changes. We walk on. She has places to show me.

First stop, the City Fraternity. Oh, old times. Guy Lemond, Frere Gregory. Godd the little pink bear. She nods to the last of these.

Pass through a courtyard, come to a long row of cells. Doors marked by number. We stop at 6. Of course.

Knock.



Godd the little pink bear. Immediately to Rebecca's hug, her age diminishing rapidly. Releases, floats before me.

"Well."

"Well."

"I don't know what you are or what to do with you now."

"Why are you here?"

"I want & need to bring my old stories back into it. This."

Nods. Go on.

"I've been reading them. I wrote steady these stories from 1989 till 2001."

Nods.

"Then she broke my heart. And I chased her across the country. And I nearly lost everything. And when I was able to write again by my own lights, there was a gulf between me & those old notebooks."

Nods.

"I didn't even have them in my possession for years. And when I did, I didn't read them. Now I am. Here you are."

"Good. But what?"

"I don't know. But maybe you can come with us?"

Godd smiles, an old shy one. "Be happy to." Fetches a hat & a cane. We leave the City Fraternity & encounter nobody else from back when. Just as well for now.

Rebecca has Godd in paw anyway, & we keep gong, a long walk, city streets, not sure what city, Hartford, Boston, Seattle, Portland, yes, & others, they lead out of the city & my interest coheres.

Woods. Oh. Yes. I stop.

"This is where I reside now. These parts. These are the White Woods."

They nod. Rebecca smirks, like there's something I don't know.

We travel pathless along for a long while. I *hmmm* a little, hoping it will help. Then, oh, *oh!* yes.

A caretaker's hut. An old friend. A naturist.

Jim Reality III. The Traveling Troubadour.

He is playing guitar on a tree stump outside his hut. Stops to puff a joint. "Ahhh!" Happy.

Sees us & happier still.

I hold back a bit.

"Which one are you?"

"Which what?"

"Are you Jim Reality III or the Traveling Troubadour?"

Blue-grey eyes twinkle. "Yes!"

"Is it OK not to choose?"

He nods. "It's all OK."

He plays for us for awhile.

*"We've got a Reservoir of Love
It's all I'm thinking of
We've got a Reservoir of Dreams
All is not as it seems
Reservoir of Love
Reservoir of Dreams
All not as it seems"*

We sit nearby, soft grass, listening. Rebecca holds my hand, just enough.

I stand. "Will you come with us, Jim?"

"Of course, Ray."

"And play as we go?"

"Naturally."

It's a long walk to the next place, a long climb into hills I'd not associated with the White Woods before. But it's all White Woods now. All Tangled Gate. All Island.

This is helping, even this much, writing these names, conjuring these ghosts, tendering them new, new flesh, here they are again.

Climbing & climbing, I lead the way now fully. Jim strumming along. It's a place well hidden even in these Woods, little more than a shack. You'd hardly know what it was. But come with us. Let's see.

ix.

Starlight Lounge—Dancing & Cocktails Nightly.

Oh. OK. Here goes. "Mind the broken step."

Here I come, with my alien-born age-shifting daughter, holding a furry pink bear deification of the creation impulse of the Universe, & my dear dead guitar-playing brother. And these woods now White Woods. Ahh. So, the review? Yes, check, here goes.

Push the door open & a mounted sign off the right within:

*Appearing Nightly
Gay Trey (& Occasionally
Perry Homo in tune)*

Still dank, still many empty tables. Still the stage at the back bathed in old, warm lights. Still the ice case off to one side, in lieu of a barman. Still my part of one shelf labeled "Salinger, J.D., aesthetic wastrel, 3rd Class."

Still my Harp Lagers of Ireland.

"Do I, Soulard?"

"I think you do. On this, we benignly diverged."

Fetches himself & Jim & Godd bottles. Looks at Rebecca. She smiles no.

"Rich"

"What?"

"You're here."

"And?"

"It was me & them. Now suddenly you too?"

"This is my place. Where I come."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"So, yes, I'm here. You brought my loved ones. Why wouldn't I come?"

I nod. "I'm glad."

"Reading the old notebooks?"

"Yah, just finished with '95."

He laughs. "For you, it's pages. For me, it's life."

I nod.

"But here we are. Now."

I nod again.

"Does the digging help?"

"Shows me how the same I've been for a long time."

"I guess."

"Richard James Americus."

"Miranda."

"How long since we've shared a scene?"

"Oh too long."

She laughs. "And you brought so many friends."

"Well, Soulard brought them here, & I showed up."

"Ahh."

Now what. Waiting for me. I try something. Was up one sleepless night. This occurred to me. I take Godd the small pink bear from Rebecca's grasp & hold before me.

Black & white top hat, a sort of candy cane style. Same for cane, black & white, candy cane syle. Your fur is pink, glows pink, is musical. *Hmmmmmmms*. You snicker.

"What?"

"Is that how you are going to do it? Modernize me to your passing sensibilities?"

"Yes."

"What else?"

Your eyes are black, really black, like stones, like holes, like small forces.

You nod. "That's better."

You're injured, lame. Powerful but lame. Like creating adds, & it subtracts too.

"Hm."

"You're not drinking."

"No."

"Why?"

"It wasn't what it used to be, Rich. Do you know I live in time, too?"

"In time?"

"Yes. I age. I grow older. One day, I will, all of this will, die. Not for a long, long time. But it's true."

"So no drink."

You shake your head, your small crooked smile.

Now Rebecca. Look at you. Really look at you. Your eyes are dark brown, are so fiercely intelligent I nearly look away. No. I don't. You hold my hands, we face each other tightly.

Your hair is long, braided, to your back. Your smile undoes me. It does not age, does not change.

I lean forward to your kiss, it's soft, it's hungry, it's memory, it's unsate. It's music. It *hmmmmms*.

You lean back slowly. "Me too."

I nod. "It's how."

I blink us for an extended moment elsewhere. You walking away from me, a candy smile little your own, a skirt shorter than my breath watching.

"That's my promise, Rebecca."

Now back, her eyes hardly a flutter to acknowledge the gift. Enough.

Jim Reality III. Well. Well.

Short brown hair. Blue-grey eyes. Mischievous smile.

"I miss you."

"I know."

"How are the stars?"

"Perfect."

"*Hmmmmmm*."

"Yes. You get it. I always knew you would. You just had to mellow slow."

"I didn't."

Your breath catches. You laugh suddenly. "No. You didn't."

Gay Trey joins our little group before his show.

"You're Perry's son."

"Yes. He adopted me."

"How old were you?"

"I was 14. I'd run away from everything & everyone in my life. Finally I bought a knapsack tent, threw out what I couldn't carry, & walked into the woods. I'd been around here awhile, not too good after awhile. I was lonely, hungry."

He pauses. "Finally, I just laid down near a tree & stopped. I was just too sad of it all."

"Then what?"

"Well, it's crazy. This White Bunny came up to me, sort of nudged me up, I followed, I guess

a long time. Then I ended up here. Like I wouldn't have found it otherwise."

Silence. A smile. "I went up the steps, stumbled on the broken one. Came in. And there he was. Singing for all his life."

I leave these old & new friends together for awhile, & part the Starlight Lounge. I'm pretty sure Rebecca will wait, probably Godd, Jim, maybe Rich. Maybe not.

A few turns among trees, a hill, & I'm very gone. Just me & the nature I am part of no matter the seeming otherwise at times.

The wind blows steady as I find my way to a pond, big one, blue rippling waters. Find my way roughly among bushes & trees, the ground underfoot getting wetter as I near—near & near the water's edge, now marshy wetness, among the wildly dancing little white blooms, dance to the wind & know nothing, dance to the wind & know all—

look into the water—at my face, unseen in a while—my eyes are green-flecked brown, my face grubby & grizzled, my hair long, luckily tied into dreadlocks—

There's fish in this pond, I get one with a hook, string, patience, impatience—some berries I've tried before, not poison—I heat my water by fire & filter it with a length of Marie's hosey. She'd worn it that last night at dinner, into evening, into bed, till it came off roughly in my hands onto the floor—sent it along with me into these Woods—it's been so long—

I haven't been back to the cabin, is it still there? Is there a new caretaker? I've found myself living under the great stone bridge & it's been OK, I've made it work for me, for now.

I'm here because you're gone, it's that simple. You are my brother & you are gone. I did a tailspin from the moment they told me you'd dropped dead on your floor. Him? *No*. This was a man who played out, solo or with his band, four, five nights a week. Some nights he'd bring two girls home, three, fuck them all, make sure they laughed & fucked each other too—other nights he'd read, read seriously old, obscure books, the kind you'd get shipped from other countries—he tried to tell me—I tried to listen—

"It's not easy, John."

"Tell me."

"I've been trying to understand the world all my life. You know that."

"I do. Of course."

"Trying to simplify things. Get down to the root, a cause, a first thing among things."

"So these old books are helping you?"

"They tell me how old the search is, how it's always gone on, how nothing has been solved. How centuries of men have asked, & lived, & died."

"And all that fine poon you take home?"

"What of it?"

"No answer in all of that?"

"Answers I'm not interested in to questions I don't ask."



John stirs his drink, ginger ale on ice, considers, wants to say something.

"I told you about what happened when I got sober?"

"A little bit."

"I lived out in these Woods. I took a job as a caretaker for them. This rich motherfucker owned them. Paid me well."

"Did you like working for him?"

"Nah. Felt wrong. So I left. One fine night I walked out of my cabin in his Woods, & kept the fuck going."

"Yah, I know this. You seemed proud."

"Hey! He was an asshole. But see, what happened next—"

"You mean with Dylan & Maya?"

Whoa. Fuck. John careens up from this dream. *Shit.*

He'd never told anyone of those days before he got back together with Marie. Nobody's business anyway. But here he was now, far from her warm body & bed, in these Woods again—

I loved watching you play. I'd come to as many of your shows as I could. You could sing so beautiful but your playing was what mattered. Your long winding solos, acoustic or electric, I knew women loved them, knew you enjoyed their attention. Knew that wasn't the final point.

"So what then? Old books? Pretty girls? Are you serious or is this some leftover college bullshit of yours?"

"Hey! You quit too."

"I did. And I don't go chasing the godhead on stage or behind black thongs either."

"That's not my fault. You chose Marie."

"I sure as fuck did choose her. And it was a good choice too."

"What then?"

You were deep in your bourbons though holding your head steady. I'd been sober years & tried to say the words that count.

"You'll keep asking & looking & asking & looking until one day you don't do it so much. A little less, hardly noticeable. Then a little more. You'll rally, pull your shit together. But it's inexorable. You will give in."

"John."

"What I'm saying is that you have to do some things before that. Find the woman. Figure out which books & stick by them."

Why did I push you so hard? Where was my right in this? I loved you so much but what the fuck place was it of mine to define *your* path?

Did I doubt my own? All that led me away from these Woods & yet here I am again. Did I miss something?

x.

Into the evening, quiet awhile. Nothing, everything changes, every possible way. Somewhat. I'm listening. Night's when these Woods loose all.

You wrote songs, quite a few. Well, more than anyone else I've known. I made a book, using what skills I have, because I wanted to write down the words to your songs, I wanted to keep them. You weren't so famous or followed that anyone recorded your shows. You never made a record. I never understood why not.

"It's not the point."

"What is the point?"

"The moment. We all share it. Does its magic. Or doesn't. It takes or it doesn't. That's all."

"What? Like the Dead or Phish? Can't capture it in a studio?"

"It's not that so much, Johnny."

"What then?"

You'd smile & shake your head. You didn't have words. Or something. I don't know. But I make a book of leaves & bark & other materials I find in these Woods, & I sit in my quiet clearing under this bridge, & I remember, & I write them out.

And then, as I'm singing them quietly to myself one night, my fire down to a fading burn, I hear noise, across the stream, other side I've not been to. Music. You're strumming to the words.

You're not there. I know it. Your crooked smile, shaggy head. That guitar you loved like nothing else you owned, which wasn't much really. I resume singing, you play on. Eventually, I stop, & you are gone. I don't sleep a long time into the suddenly empty night. Then I do.

Dream there are strange fish in the muddy stream, gliding by, hundreds, thousands. Glowing, polka dots, buzzing stripes. Now nearer me are toads too, tiny, beautiful, still, waiting, not waiting.

Is there a way back from this?

I think. First things first. What was that?

These days, your face. Smiling. Usually your hand in my shorts, if there were shorts. You loved getting your share of cock.

Was that it? Like that? No. You like that it was *my* cock, my good cock, & I was happy giving it to you. You didn't think like this—who the fuck would but an asshole like me?—but it was all true.

You were the one told me go to the woods, back to them.

"You figured some deep shit out once there, right?"

"Yah, I guess. Wasn't what I was hired to do."

She laughs. "Those Woods?"

"What?"

"You're not a girl, John." But she won't say anything else while at the same per-fucking-plexing time telling me to go find my old cabin. Her bet was the rich fucker didn't even notice I'd been away a few years.

Fuck if she didn't seem right too. My old caretaker's cabin hadn't changed since the night I'd left it, suddenly, & gone, & not come back, & here I was—

Same G5 Macintosh in the corner. Dusty. Too big a monitor for me. Takes the charm from porn to count wrinkles. Same loft bed in the corner. Same everything. Like it was the same night, & here I was, back from a walk.

Shit. Um. Um?

xi.

Americus. Rebecca. Godd the little pink bear. Jim Reality III. Miranda. McFarland. Use or lose 'em. Choosing the first.

The corner devoted to the hookah smoke & benign shimmering bulk of McFarland the owner suddenly stands up. Has he before? Does now. Speaks too.

"Miy frends," his voice Hispanic-ting'd despite his name. "It ees time for a long needed renewal of thiss place. Mirrranda, would you turn on the house lights?"

Miranda stands, a little shaky herself. Suddenly returned Gay Trey takes her hand & they find the panel near the front stage. He quietly assumes his show is delayed a night. Dandy. This is better anyway.

Up go the lights & the deep webby agedness of the place shocks into view.

"My friends, I apologize for the dee-cay you see around you," McFarland says sadly, the smoke dissipating from him. He is bearded, mustachio'd, a white three-piece suit. Handsome, though dusty & webby too.

"It was Reechar'd's chance discovery of thees establishment many years ago that revived it & thus myself & Mirrranda & Perry Homo too. Then slowly you others came.

"But now, *now* my friends, I declare a full-on renovation of thees establishment. If you are game with me, we will feel long unused buckets, wett old mops, cleen & cleen & cleen top too bot-tem!"

"The missing step too?" smiles Rebecca.

McFarland nods, causes her to wait with a raised finger, returns with a plank, nails, & hammer. Hands to me. I guess I'm still in this scene.

"Meester Soulard, if you please."

"My pleasure, sir. Señor."

Raises a hand. "No! Call me Serge when you feel so inclined."

Serge McFarland. How bout that?

So it begins. The renovation of the Starlight Lounge—Dancing & Cocktails Nightly. We mop, dust, nail, & generally clean the *fuck* out of the old place. I can't say I understand what for.

"I can," Rebecca smiles at me. Yes, I like her about 18. Newlyweds, for awhile to come.

"What?"

"Well, it's either we renovate this place back into the story or you won't write about it again. And you're not one to abandon a good setting."

I nod. Smartest girl I know, in this fixtional world.

Cleaning is not an interesting business, in & of itself. So let's leave the cleaning till its result some pages hence.

xii.

I get onto the loft bed, turning off the green-shaded lamp on the table next to it. Leave the curtains open, push them open in fact. I've no quarrel with these Woods. I know nobody owns them. I've come here with a sad heart & no secrets to keep.

If nobody has succeeded me as Caretaker, does that mean there's been none since I left with Maya & Dylan? I suppose that's clear.

"But care how?" I say sudden aloud. "I did almost nothing when I came here to this job. I wanted to know your secrets but I didn't think you needed my *care*. I had no care to give, for you or myself. I'd lost Marie. I was shit-nothing."

Pause. Listen. Nothing. Or just maybe not-nothing. Talk on. Finish it.

"It was those kids that taught me to care. They cared for me too. It wasn't perfect. I wanted that raver girl's ass bad for awhile. Somehow it didn't happen. Good thing too. Marie gave my cock a good deep sniff that first night back. Smiled funny at me, but nodded. Hers. Always had been.

"She sent me back out here. Marie. My brother died of a sudden. On stage. Crash. Him, his guitar, that was it. Dead when he hit the stage.

"And I wasn't there that night. I meant to be, like I was at all his shows I could make. We'd been out of touch awhile but he'd come back to Seattle & there we were, mixed up in each

other's business & happy for it like old days."

I stop. Listen. Yes. There's listening. Well, keep talking till you're done.

"It was so fucking *sudden*. I wouldn't want him suffering but *shit*. I went through the funeral in a coma myself. Marie really took it over, all the arrangements."

I laugh. "She'd hooked up with him first, years ago. Even hotter then. Hasn't lost much. Anyway, she saw she was going to be one of a rotating harem. He didn't have to try hard, & he usually said yes with a slow half-surprised smile."

I stand. OK, they're listening. Someone. So I have to say what I mean about all this.

"We knew each other a little but the night she decided it was over, she came to me. I did the only thing I could. I talked to her, all night, let her cry on my shoulder, listened, listened. Every hour or so I felt my cock raise up curiously & I'd excuse myself to the toilet. Stand there, fuck her fine ass in my mind over & over till I whimpered & came. About once an hour, most of the night."

I laugh. "At dawn, we're on the floor of my studio apartment, sitting under its only window, holding hands. She tries a little, testing, half wanting to. Mostly anger & revenge"

"No."

"Why not. Johnny . . . don't you like me?"

"I do."

"You have a girlfriend?"

"No."

"Gay?"

"No."

"What then?" She starts to pull up her already short skirt to show me a little more.

"Stop." Mean it. She stops.

"If I'd met you last night in some bar, I'd be inhaling your sweet cunt about now."

She giggles. I took a chance with that.

"But it's not like that. He's my brother. He's not a bad guy. Just young. Doesn't know what you need."

"And you do?"

I shake my head. "I don't. But I'd like to find out the right way. Old fashioned, at least once, for fun. Date. Flowers. Kiss on the cheek. You naked in my dreams before my bed."

She laughs. She likes my candor. Glad. I don't have much else. I can smell her scent in the deepest veins of my soul.

"So that's how we started & yet when he came back after years away, she gets me out with him like old days, trusts me to bring my cock & heart home at night. I do. And when he drops dead on his guitar, & I fucking flip, she takes care of it. Sees to his memorial with all the fans he never knew he had, & the cremation. All of it. And to help salve me, she sends me here."



Pause. "Yah. That's it. So I've been here but now I am talking to all of you. Whatever that means. And maybe I can be Caretaker for real this time. For awhile. We can care for each other."

I stop. Really stop. And listen. Wait.

xiii.

Back at the party now. The closet. Iris is in my grasp, hands twined, calm otherwise. Never know.

"So."

"So."

"Think this through with me, Iris. Your brain is as hot as your ass."

She laughs, wriggles a little among my limbs, to disturb. Iris humor.

"So."

"So."

"We're back here but we're older."

"Yes."

"Why?"

Iris is quiet, mind whirring fast & slow. I wait, vaguely wonder how to explain about her to Christa & Gretta. Harem? Nicer thought than the truth. Well, maybe.

"Bowie, what happened after you left here?"

"He took us elsewhere. My father."

"Why? Why did that happen?"

"He didn't explain things. You were gone & he told me I wouldn't follow."

"You listened? You?"

"I know. But I wasn't Bowie then. I was Garrish. He terrified me. He was all I had."

"Did your mother die?"

"I . . . I. He never told me. She was gone, long gone. So I guessed she died."

Iris is simply holding me now.

"Another big house? After this one?"

"No, it was smaller. He got sick."

"With what?"

"I don't know. He wasn't the same when we left here."

She's silent.

"It was you. He realized he was wrong to send you away. He'd taken something from me."

"Why, Bowie?"

"He knew what I didn't. He knew what you were. It scared him."

"Did he tell you this?"

"It was his look, Iris. I didn't understand it all then. I think it was simple. He was mourning my mother. Years of it. And he was scared by what you were & how much I loved you."

She's silent.

"Where did you go? I mean, my part of you."

She's silent some more. But words pend now.

"I followed the *Hmmm* for a long while. For awhile, I was in this town built on a buried spaceship."

"Spaceship?"

"It was deeply buried, a town had grown on it. Stores, houses, buildings. Trees & parks."

"How did you know?"

"The buildings all had sub-basements not in their structural plans. The park had a staircase into the earth. A door with a keypad. I broke the code. Went in. The stream had false bottoms."

Bowie laughs. "And meanwhile some poor local boy is taking you to the park for picnics & for swims in the stream. Did you ruin his eyes & skinny dip with him?"

Iris starts to talk. Stops. Twice. Wow.

"I would explore the ship, it was huge. Pristine. Empty. For the longest time I couldn't find out why it was there, deep in the earth."

"Did you?"

She nods. Very sad. Bowie lets up.

Talks again like a turned page.

"Should we talk to your father?"

"Talk?"

"Go see him tonight, Bowie."

"The night of this party."

"Yes. Why else are we back here?"

"For me to never lose you? For me to explain to my harem we have a new member, don't hit me?"

She laughs.

"We look like adults, Iris. How do we explain?"

Iris starts breathing hard, realizing.

"We don't. *He explains to us.*"

Bowie spasms. "He did this?"

"Who else?"

Yah. And fuck. And yah. Who else?

xiv.

She's waiting for them to come back. She'd sent them off to make good with each other, however boys did that. They weren't drinkers. How do stoner boys kiss & make up?

It's not like she wasn't planning by now to have both of them. That was the easy part really. It would calm them down. She would enjoy it. She'd teach them what she needed them to know.

No, it was how to get onto the set like they had. She's been chasing this movie since it was cut into walls with pig's blood. These boys were sweet candy on her path. Well, not just.

But they wouldn't bring her. Or couldn't. Maybe some of each. The Gate-Keeper would simply

fetch them. Did he know about her? Was she a danger to him?

Was she? She didn't know. She didn't know what she was. When he touched her there & there, she'd get excited, spook. Close up. She wanted to, thought about it all the time. Thought about them both. One at a time. Both. Was she saving it for the Gate-Keeper? Saving what?

They'd be gone all day & so she went to her hiding place where she'd been living for months before she'd braved coming up to the theatre. See what **RemoteLand** looked like now.

The boys didn't know how far the Nada Film School sunk into the earth. They don't see the Bridge of Glass that passes through it too. Or remember the Hotel it's in.

I wasn't lonely here. Little things talked into my ears. No bigger than thought-sized but I could hear them clearly when I got here, they walked with me to the right floor, helped me find a room. The hallways were always bright, no windows, but they helped me to find a mattress, & some extra clothes, & some boxes of food. And weeks passed as we would pick some rooms to go in to take from, & avoid others. And I always listened.

Save once. I don't know. It's like me. I want *both* boys now. Then I wanted to choose the room, sometimes.

No. Oh boy. My tiny friends disappeared as soon as I opened the door. They fled.

It was a party going on. The music was so good! Lights. Strange smoke in the air. I was wearing a short tight white dress. Eventually a boy. More a man. Smiled. Didn't say a lot as we danced, as he kissed me slowly, touched me lightly, almost not at all. And other girls watched, watched close to see if I'd keep him or not.

I moved closer to him. Smiled willing & eager into his eyes. *Teach me, take me.*

But in that deeper room he was rough. Clawed my dress from me. I felt wanted, it felt good. Then I felt something else.

My little friends had come. I struggled. This wasn't loving. They were nearer, loving me. I did something & he groaned. Again. *Again.* He was in pain. Nearly again but they stopped me. *No more. Let's go.*

We sat together in my room. They'd shown me where some old chocolate was. Years old? Centuries? I sucked on it & cried. *I'm sorry. I'm sorry.*

Eventually they sent me up to the Theatre. To my pretty boys. Back row. They were struggling & sick. They sniffed me twice, & began healing. Until I foolishly chose one.

Back in my room. My friends!
They sniff me too, but not as boys do.

“What do I do?”

They don't know. Or don't tell me.

They tell me they live in a deep Woods. They are happy there.

“Could I come? Could I bring them?”

They are sad. I have to walk this path. It matters.

I have some chocolate still. They sniff & smile.

“Can I bring them here?”

No. I nod. Trying to avoid this all won't work.

“Can I ask them to bring me?”

Are you ready?

“I don't know. But we all need to know, don't we?”

You need to know.

“What will happen?”

You will meet him.

I want to scream. It's been too long of this.

They're coming soon. Get ready for them.

Yes. Pretty up. A girl & her two beaus.

There's more to them than you know. Give them more than your kisses.

She nods. But to start, the dress she's found. White. Short. *Oh short.*

xv.

She returns to the theatre. Almost midnight & the boys have not returned. She hopes they haven't gone gay on her, doubts they have. Still. Boys are strange.

Decides to rebel a little & sits in the front row as the lights dim. She tingles as always to the spooky organ music that often opens the film.

The screen remains black though. Strange. The music rises & falls, begins to shake, twitter, burn?

Finally there is light on the screen, barely, tis deep space. This is new. A starship, impossibly big, long, angular, not a mark on it, no ports, no letterings of identity. Silent.

Approaching a planet at first a long way off, a blue-green dot. This one? As it nears, like the music had before, it begins to shake, twitter, burn. Its featureless metallic surface crumples, bakes red from within, nearing & nearing the blue-green world. Shuddering, gashes appear, approaches atmosphere, burns, falls through wildly, a scream emitting it that she curls away from, clutching her head. Now heading straight for land, nothing steering or braking its descent, its crash is like a volcanic explosion. Collides the ground & sinks in, continues to sink

in, through topsoil, trees, bushes, rocks beneath, older & older, layers of earth untouched in many centuries, even longer. Slows, slows. Stops. A canyon of debris & uprooted chaos a path to where it rests.

The film speeds up time, showing how eventually the earth fills in the wound, heals itself almost miraculously. Unknown times later, there is again land on top the former chaos. Things grow on it.

What's strange of all this is that that ship does not stay as deep as it was. Over time it moves upward, inch by inch until, while still broken & crushed, it is only very slightly below the ground. This, when a human village settles upon it, drawn to the fertility of the soil, the many fruit trees, the wild river nearby; it seems inevitable it will be discovered by those shoveling & digging building foundations.

Which only leads to stranger for while a few in the village know what it is built upon, most do not, & this knowledge is kept close, at best allowed out as superstition & warning.

She leans forward, shocked. The film's usual car crash never comes.

Close to dusk, the sweet drone of late summer insects. A garden, a vast garden, can't see the far edges of it. Long swathes of blooms & bushes, trees more distant, paths among all. Calm in the way natural places get. Not waiting. *There is no time.* Even if there is passage & change.

She's been working all day on a dozen projects, various tendings. The smallest shift is something she notices. Listens. Breathes. A skin of water slung over her shoulder, stringed sack of dried meat, chunks, fruit, nuts, hangs from her belt.

She isn't a young girl, the freshness about her is one of care, patience; learning, having learned, how to survive both hope & despair. Love the moment, learn better to love the path to here. Learn again & again.

Lovers, quite a few, not in awhile. She's held so many hands, twisted wetly with so many laughing & serious bodies, so many surprise arrivals, so many departures slow or swift. Since coming to this garden, she's let people go a little.

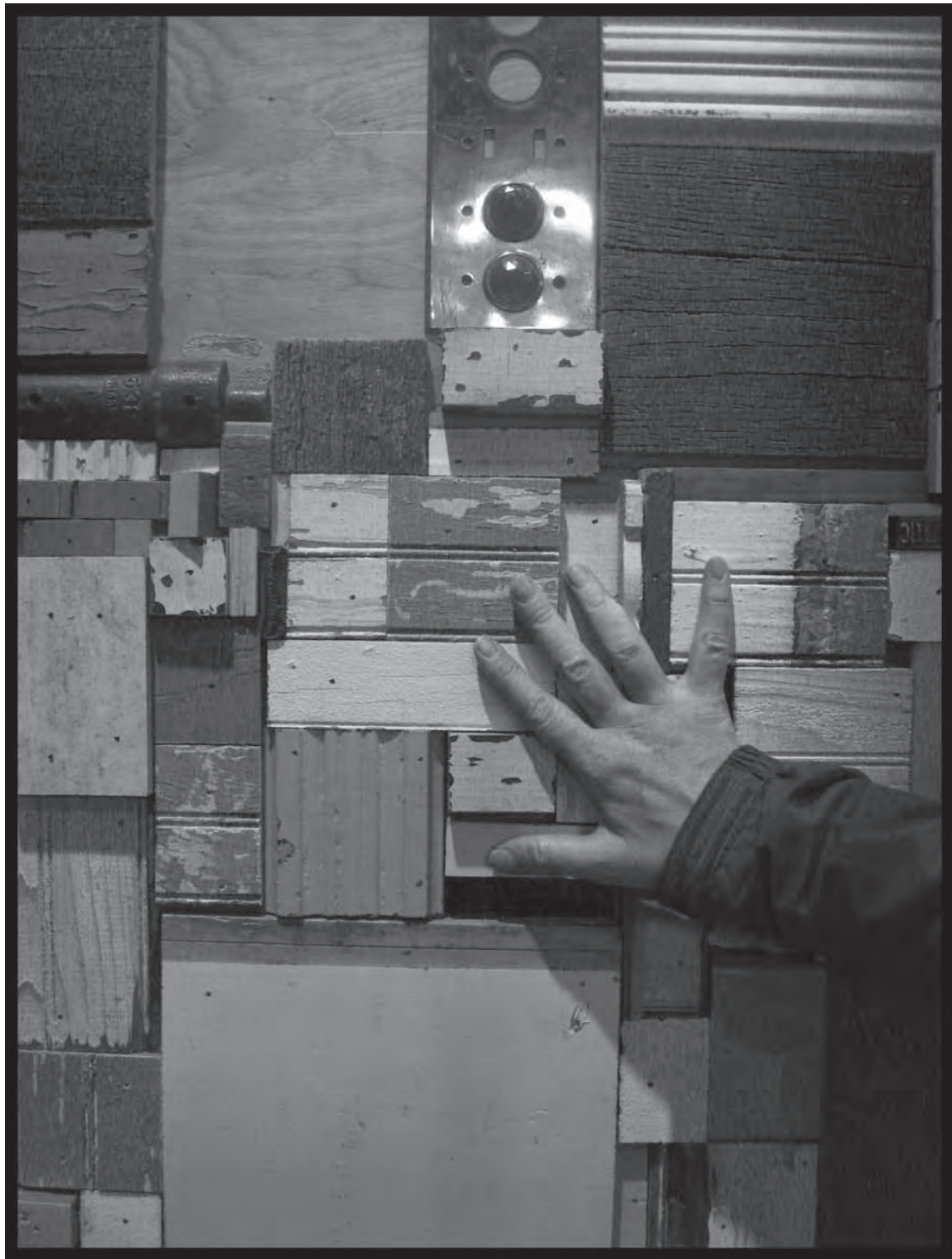
She clips, she weeds, only where needed, she moves barrels & baskets & tools around. Listens, breathes.

The white flash among the bushes & trees interests her, though it's new. She'd finally asked, & there was a laugh, & she was told she was lucky to see that much, not many did. Only a few saw more.

"More of what?"

"He's a beautiful beast who roams the gardens."

"What kind of beast?"



“Some say he’s a White Tiger. Long black stripes.”

“And others?”

“They don’t think so.”

Suddenly they’re back, the two boys. If they were smarter, they would have been one on each side of her. No such smarts.

Why had she chosen the one she had? It was silly, almost random. He’d looked at her eyes first, then her chest. All boys’ eyes ended up down there, but his had started higher. Looking for something in her face, her mind.

And they hadn’t, not yet, not fully. Oh, she’d kneeled before him, he was a sweet quick suck. He’d cum & this smile would linger on his face, peaceful, all wrinkles smoothed. Then it was gone & he was wondering where his friend was & resenting her for not just fucking him.

He was right. She didn’t know why she resisted. But, then, yes, she knew.

It was the other one. He’d become so unhappy, seeing his friend with a girl. Would it have mattered who? Four limbs, two tits, a pussy, an ass. A face for lips, maybe talking, maybe a brain. Maybe not.

Were they bad? No. They were boys. Good ones too. Another pair would have just convinced her by outnumbering her. Taking it, a couple of times, deciding then if she was worth keeping.

Which made what she did now so much more exciting. Whispered, “Tell him to sit on the other side of me.” Silence, shock. “Now?” Told. He hurried.

Her white dress filling their minds, as was her legs widening till each claimed a knee’s caress. Then each’s nearest hand was lead to nearest breast, no bra to interfere. One knew she liked a rough thumb against her nipple, the other she taught. He learned well.

Now her hands, sliding around the cold from outdoors jeans nearest each one. A snap, a zipper. Holding their two cocks as they caressed, both of them terrified, obeying, getting hard as boys do for any reason.

Squeezing, pulling, tugging, scratching a little. Finally letting her moans come a little, giving them the sounds boys or men or disintegrating bones know mean a girl or woman likes it & *wants more*. Her hands work separately, slowing, speeding, close, closer, more moans, faster, deeper, now, ready, *now*—

“Cum for me. Now! Cum for me!”

They growled, they whimpered, they thrashed. Her hands held on & she let herself go too, her moans real, her orgasm blooming then exploding out of her. Sweet jism on all ten fingers.

They all lay back a moment. Spent. Shocked.

“You both belong to me now. You will share me. That’s how this will be.”

Silence.

“Nod!”

They nod.

“Good. You can’t lose your friendship over a girl.”

They agreed. She could hear them both wondering who got to fuck her first. Boys. So much to teach.

“One more thing.”

Silence.

“Next time the Gate-Keeper comes for you, to bring you on the set, I come too.”

“How? We never know—”

Squeezes harder the now soft cocks still in her hands.

“Find a way. We’re going there together next time.”

Gives them back their goods. Their hands linger on her chest. Whatever.

Her little friends said there was more to these two than it seemed. She chose to believe them.

The film, as though paused for their play, the gardener clipping & tending & watering, now seems to resume. Which is to say, the black-striped White Tiger approaches her, blue eyes fiercely intelligent & kind.



To be continued in Cenacle | 91 | December 2014



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Ten

*"Try to forget me.
Try to erase me."*

—Pearl Jam, "Jeremy," 1992.

xvi.

She's curled up with many of them, they've dressed her in long leaves & vines, when she seemed to gnaw off the clothes she came in. They take turns with her, knowing she is warm-blooded & somehow troubled peoplefolk, welcome to stay, but peoplefolk don't, not perpetually—

Sometimes they nudge her up, her growling & snapping, to a stream, make her splash & wash, she's scrawny & will eat little but a few nuts, a few berries—a good wash—

The Tenders among them sniff her good, she is disquiet, a kind of peoplefolk unhappy, so they eventually are moved to sing to her, *hmmmmmm*, she calms a little, listens, they are able to cuddle around her for warming as the music comforts her heart—

Other Creatures join in, at will & whim, the *hmmm* now always going, something in her wakes, toward thoughts, toward words, this is good for peoplefolk, to say, to tell—

She sits among them, studies them closely. She is bright, she watches & listens closely, she is like their Princess—

She more willing eats & drinks water, shows her gratefulness by touch, stroke—goes to the stream every morning, not needing so often to clean but it comforts her, lightens her heart—

Still, not quite words. Neither aloud or otherwise. There is no rush among Creatures. But they've known impatience among peoplefolk in the past.

Then she begins to smile. The Creatures are entranced by her smile, not sure how to provoke it but it warms them & her touch often couples with it—

She begins to dream, & to invite them in, clusters of them, touching close, following her in, unsure where, but loving her, tending her, always the *hmmm*—

And in the dreams she *hmmmmmmms* too, deeply, beautifully, they nuzzle close, transfixed, fed by her music, there is no place to know, just the sound, the world of her low, sweet sound—

Then she talks, softly, but sure, she says, "Dream waves" & poof! & wow—

You are lying on your couch & you are smoking good aliens-hash, the lights are off but the one on the monitor showing you the program: *Dream Waves*.

This is the one with that hot blonde chick, the one with the pink stripe in her hair, follow her every episode as she leaves the cave where she lives, followed by the various kinds of animals she lives with, to the water, it's an ocean—she strips off the vines & leaves she's wearing, cute ass, not much else, skinny, but something, you always tempt to pause the picture, jack it good to her standing there nude on the beach, but you don't, unsure why, but now she & the animals are all diving into the ocean surf, swimming hard, deeper in, deeper in, it gets very dark, how is she able to go this deep? But further in till she & her friends arrive somewhere, deeper than the ocean, they arrive to somewhere dry & walk together, each episode somewhere new, & she never talks, not once—

One time, they are watching a brave knight far from his own land, & he is lonely & he wishes to come home, but his commanders won't let him, men of a different faith, his small land is one of countless in their empire, his job to observe & report on the trains running in the area, how often, carrying passengers or materials—

He is lonely & he sometimes rides hard alongside the trains, sometimes riding ahead & leaping recklessly across the tracks as the train oncomes—

Night comes & they are close to his campfire. Maya is arrayed to go to him, a gauzy dress for his notice & touch—

“No.”

He is looking at her closely, telling her so she is not confused his intentions. She does not understand but he is sweetly close to her. The fire sparking forever into the stars as they *hmmm* together, as her friends are just out of the light & the night sings with his happiness—this gift, this song, this embrace—

Suddenly the two of them are there again, come up to the projector's room from the seats down below—

“Maya again?” she smiles.

You nod.

“Why not join us? Why not me?” no accusation, just affection, just curiosity.

“I don't know.” And it's true. Since you sat there cumming together, brilliant blowout, you left & came here, & turned on the computer for no reason, & found *Dream Waves* on the *TripTown* site—was it really a show? Between stories, dives into the ocean, the camera would show her in the cavern with her little friends, you'd tuned it in for hours, all hours, *she lived there*—how was this show made? what did it mean?

“I want to go to her,” you finally say to them. “Just me,” you add, with difficulty for them, not yourself. “I need your help.” Unhappy, both of them, really, they nod.

xviii.

Kinley is back to teaching. It was inevitable. He & Christina had left the Island, hired a strange boat docked there briefly, left off on a mainland, a long while simply traveled, a little food, a little water, a lot of sex, but eventually slowed in a village, artisans, fishermen, bonfire dances at night—

“What century is this, Kinley?”

“Does it matter?”

“No.”

“You like this place?”

“Yes.”

Thus Kinley conjures up classes for young & old. Skills like hunting & cleaning game, crafts like carving & furniture making. Arts like painting & music. Things always learned casually, by who knew whom, now cohered & gathered. Those with skills a little more venerated, a little more self-aware.

Christina kept close, then closer. She was not as well-liked in this village. She thought of Maya, wondered if she “sniffed wrong” to them—

“Why me, not you?”

“Why?”

“They want me to leave, Kinley, & let their daughters have at you.”

He laughs. Acknowledges this, is indifferent to it.

“Christina, we’re through with this.”

“Tell me.”

“No.”

“*Tell me.*”

He sighs, hoists her up around him as he stands in their hut’s kitchen, gets enough of her dress & his trousers arranged to swiftly penetrate her deeply as he continues to speak steadily & calmly. “I love you, Christina.” Deep hard thrust. She bites her lip.

“I could have one or more of the tasty girls they are making sure sit up front in my classes”—two quick thrusts. She moans & tries not to.

“But we’re not here to stay & I’m not leaving with you crazier than you are”—thrusts so hard she yells, then pulls back oh-so-slowly, mouthing the words “now cum for me” which she does so hard she crashes him to the floor. But smiling.

“It’s not that I’m selfish about you.”

“No.”

“Or that they’re better than me.”

“Not that either.”

“A couple of them even took a look at my ass.”

“More than a couple, I’m sure. It’s a sexy fucking ass.”

She smiles. He’s trying.

“You can have one if you really want,” she whispers, suddenly interested in this.



“Why?”

“Can I choose?” she insists.

He nods. Lets her have this battle.

She shows up at the door that night, dressed for full lips, full breasts, good hips. Sniffs for Christina but does not ask.

She is a painter, a really good one. Has brought a canvas, brushes, paints.

“Undress me.”

“I? No.”

“Undress me. You’ll paint me in the nude.”

She protests, makes to leave, doesn’t. He does not move to touch or kiss her. Simply lets her undress him & he lounges in the bed.

She sets up her canvas, red-faced, half-scared. He smiles at her steadily.

“Would you prefer me hard or flaccid?”

“Hard,” she whispers.

Suddenly the Gate-Keeper calls, “Cut!”

“Cut?” says Christina, who’d been in the closet, watching & er, touching too.

The Gate-Keeper walks onto the set. A short man, muscular & pudgy both. Picks up & tosses Kinley’s trousers to him.

“Thanks, boss.” Gate-Keeper nods.

The girl looks terrified.

Christina helps her pack up her art things. Embraces her. “I’m sure he would have enjoyed you,” she says comfortingly.

“Again?” says Kinley.

Gate-Keeper nods.

“How many more scenarios? Futuristic village starship. Underground sex Valhalla? Remote, timeless village where nobody has ever thought of school as a concept?”

Christina tells the girl to go, since this is going to get heated.

She doesn’t move. “I was an excuse by those of us who didn’t want you around. My . . . father. When you dimmed out the lights to bed me, he & his men would be in here with accusations of rape. And ropes.” Her look was not pleased. The sight of his cock hard for her made her feel her bonds all the tighter.

Christina is little taller than the Gate-Keeper but she steps forward to smack him hard, one in the face, one in the gut. Bent over, he groans & breathes hard.

“OK, OK,” he pants.

xix.

Tis negotiating with a snake, behold these proceedings. We address a long piece of cream-colored parchment, a purple line running down both its vertical sides, toward me, the snake up there, his lines approaching me at the bottom—

They began to curl & loop as they get nearer, wilder & wilder until they arrive, these crazy lines, in the form of a great purple hooded snake—

“Sign!” I say.

“Sign!” I command, to seal our deal that the snakes may come again, that we will refrain our strong poisons kill them.

There is peace. This is what I sought, among confoundingly stubborn men & snakes alike, an end to this war. It is sealed; it is done.

I return to my tent, close the flap behind me. You are lighting a lamp that we may sit together awhile.

I’m not sure how you came to me & you do not talk. A bad night, not long ago, when my efforts seemed all vain. You were in my bed under my covers, nude, when I returned, staggering from a few hours spent with some Travelers camped near here. Not that these warring sides knew or cared Travelers.

But I valued their smoke, & their company. Travelers never had war in their bones as most men did. They sought calm & play among folk, & ever closeness to the green. They comforted me, & had taken to traveling nearby when I was in my hard negotiating.

I thought you one of them, sent to sweeten my smoky comforts. Young, underfed, but pretty, willing, a touch to your nipples & pussy told me—

So twas funny when I didn’t with you—I held you, held you for all my life, supped upon your warmth, your sweetness, how you enjoyed my embrace, you began to sing softly to me, to *hmmmmmm* & I slept, slept well, smiling hopeful. And you gone by my waking.

A gift. Thankee. It was a month or more later, same kind of hard day, late night with Travelers & their pipes, stumble back, you among my blankets. Not a word.

What this. How. I wanted to ask you, them, someone. You old enough to be a Traveler’s lover, soon wife. Did I do wrong? I did not summon you.

Finally, the third time, me feeling how hard your ever more familiar touch made me, gritting hard below to resist, I talk.

“Are you a Traveler? Do they send you to me?”

Your fiercely beautiful purple eyes hold mine in your ’witching smile, long, longer, longest.

"I'm Maya," you say simply.

I nod. "I'm leaving tonight. I wanted to tell you goodbye at least. But—" She smiles.

"Now I don't. I don't claim you, Maya, but I would keep your company for awhile yet. Please." She makes to undress but I shake my head. "Your soul is a mystery to me. I have no right to enjoy the mysteries of your body."

We lay together as previous, but I am worse disturbed. I feel her hand on my hardness, stroking gently, as never I had quite known, & she, she *hmmmmms* me to burst, & she crawls down to lick me dry, then curls in my arms smiling to sleep.

Before dawn, I am packed on my back & walking from the rest. These men & their snakes will have to keep their own peace.

Maya is small & I carry her while she still sleeps. The predawn woods are quiet. Yet . . . I am watched. Watched closely.

At dawn, miles away, a pause for breath & water. A clearing.

Maya sleepily pokes at my hasty fire.

"Tell them come."

Looks up sharply at me.

"Your friends. Allies. Guardians. My assassins. Let them come."

"No. Friends," she says & with more of that *hmmm* magic she summons a number of Creatures, bunny, bears, hedgehog, leopard, others—

They come to me, sniffing & looking me over. No simple woods animals or pets.

So I address them in my man's common tongue & hope for the best.

"Maya is my friend. She has given me comfort & company & now we travel together. I hope I can call all of you friends in time too."

The White Bunny with strangely compelling eyes hops into my lap, small but potent. Looks me up & down, sniffs twice. Seems satisfied as she leans to nap in my grasp. The rest find their many places in my lap too or next to me.

Maya smiles.

xx.

Kinley & Christina travel vaguely by long empty roads, finding food & rest & sex enough along the way.

"Kinley."

"Christina."

"When? Where?"

"What?"

"Where are we going? When do we get there?"

"I don't know."

"And you're OK with this?"

"I'm with you."

She laughs & hits him. They kiss, she considers. But he pulls back a moment.

"Something's coming soon."

"What? Tell me."

He points, smiling.

Along the road approaching them comes a strange conveyance. Driven, even more strangely, by two bloo-eyed kittees, pedaling away. A red-lipped goldfish sitting comfortably between them.

They pull up to the smiling Kinley & shocked Christina. "Tis a Boat Wagon," he explains, sort of.

Kinley opens the door to the back seat of the Boat Wagon, she gets in, him after her. Then he immediately safety belts them both.

"Safety first, Christina," he says smiling.

The Kittees have been watching with amazed bloo eyes & once satisfied, they turn back to their pedaling & driving.

"Kinley."

"Christina."

"*Tell me.*"

"Well, they are mentioned in the little books."

"The ones in your coat?"

"Yes. These."

Kinley starts to page among them but Christina stops him. "It's OK. I trust you. Where are they bringing us?"

The Fish turns to look at us, smiles, speaks.

"To help."

We lean forward, listen. She's a pretty fish, beautiful red lips. Christina thinks a thought she'd never had toward a fish before, shakes it off, listens.

She talks in a sweet & soft voice.

"There is a game, called The Realist, which is played at parties & picnics. Someone is secretly selected as The Killer & at some point in the event begins to 'kill' people off singly or in groups. Whoever survives to the dawn wins.

"Perhaps there is a tournament where winners advance to the next party or picnic.

"But then the Realist begins to actually kill people at certain parties & picnics, & it comes clear that there is a real killer Realist. There might be a good Realist to oppose him, & their paths approach—"

She stops suddenly.

Christina's hand on Kinley tightens.

"Kinley's the good Realist?"

She stares at them. Not smiling. Returns to looking at the road between Kittees.

"Kinley."

"Christina."

"This?"

"I think so."

"Can I say no?"

"Yes."

"And back to the vague road?"

"I guess so."

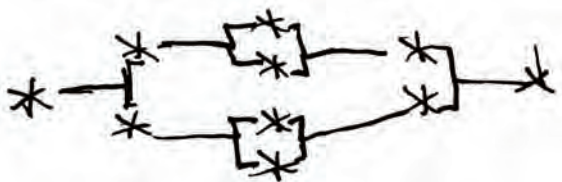
Christina sighs. She misses Maya. Even sharing Kinley with her wasn't so bad.

"How hot can I dress for a picnic?"

He laughs. "Hot as you like."

xxi.

Sitting at a table mapping out a series of stories.



Versions & sequels, it gets very complicated, I can't finish it.

"Rebecca."

"Raymond."

"What is this?"

"It's *Labyrinthine*."

"What is *Labyrinthine*?"

"It's your current book."

"Why?"

"That was the last one."

"Why do I write this?"

"You like to."

"Like to?"

"Want to. Will to."

"Why?"

"Because it fascinates you. It's fun."

"What else?"

"It's what you do best."

"I read *Blue Period* this week, from 1998."

"I was there."

"You & I began our romance. I struggled to understand it."

"And you did."

"And I married you, I think in *New Period* the next year."

"Yes. The acid many-marriage."

"And then in 2005 I married in my common world. You were now 25. She was just shy of 21."

"Yes."

"Two wives."

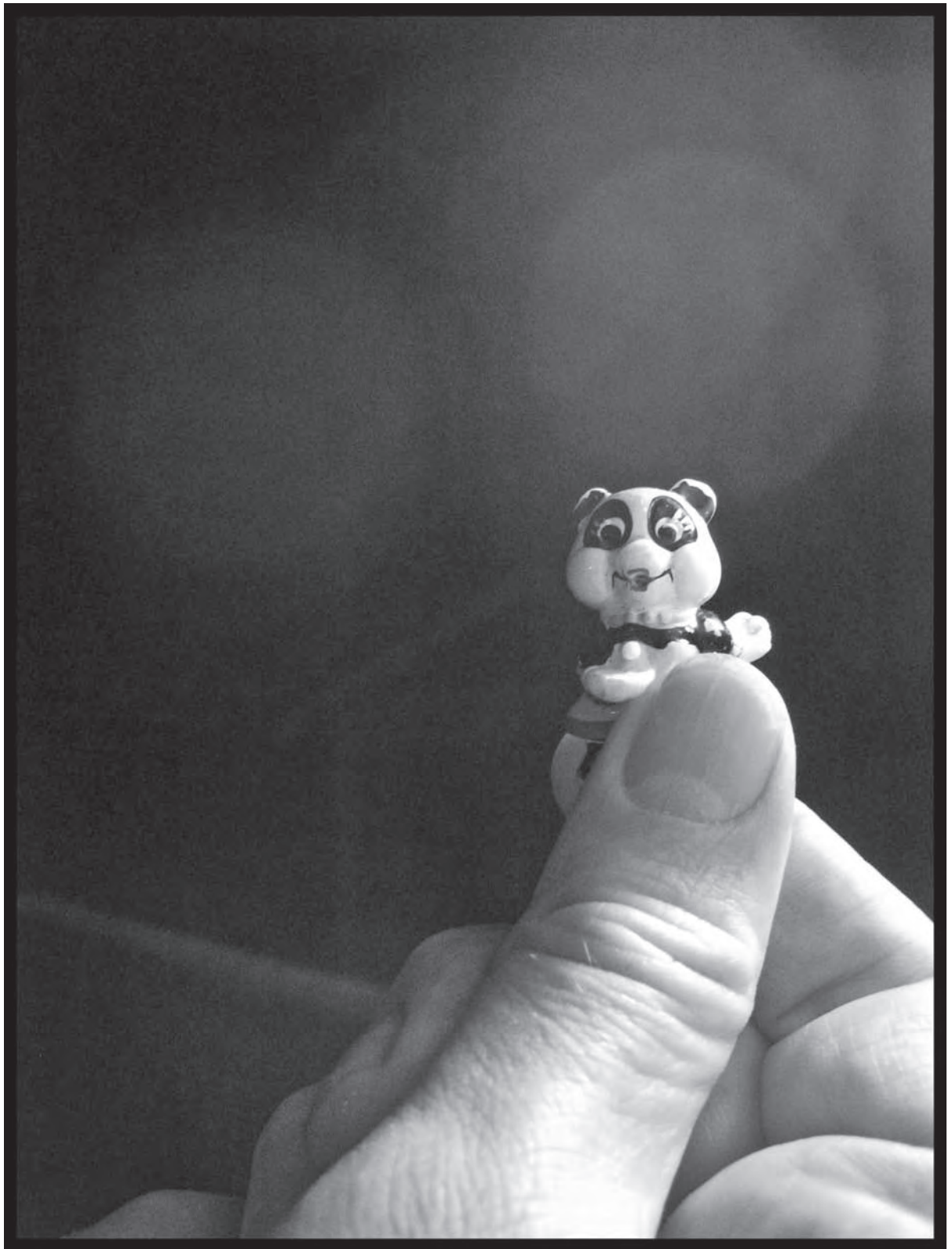
"Two worlds."

"At least."

"She likes these stories. Some lovers didn't."

"Good."

"I'm still wondering why, Rebecca."



"That's what you do. Wonder why, & write."

"Is it good?"

"It's you. You breathe, you eat, you walk, you make love to her in that world, me in this world, you write. You write, Raymond."

"It's my gift."

"This world is your gift."

"This is my thank you."

"Yes, Raymond."

xxii.

To get where we're going, I need a boat. Nobody tells me how to figure this shit out. Jazz doesn't help when she could.

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"An island?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't fucking know, Jazz."

"Who is bossing you?"

"I'm not sure."

"Who?"

I sit at the table in this shitty motel room, its excuse for a desk. Not too close to her. Still.

"I was sent to bring you back. Something went wrong. You know that."

"I got old, Toby. Why didn't you?"

"Jazz, look in the mirror."

"Why don't you tell me? Be my mirror." She laughs but not so much.

"The longer we travel, the younger you get."

"Is that what you like?"

"It's what *every* guy likes, Jazz. But that's not the point."

"What is?"

"When we get there, you'll be the age you were that night. With the van."

"The failed gangbang little sister night."

"Yah, that one."

Jasmine sees no lie in him & he doesn't seem to know more than he's answering.

So she asks: "Ashleigh?"

"She's there."

"She knows I'm coming."

"I don't know."

"Does *she*?"

"I *don't fucking* know."

"What happens when we get there?"

"That's up to him."

"Who?"

"Your master."

"I don't have a master."

"He's waiting."

Jasmine takes her bag & is in the bathroom about half an hour. Showers, cleans up. Comes out dressed, no halter tops, no cherry lipstick. Brown hair tied back. All business. Hotter than fucking ever.

Toby nods. She's trying. OK.

They leave the room finally & there is no car waiting, as there had been the other motel departure mornings.

And have to get to the water.

"Wanna hitch?"

"That might work too well with you."

"Thanks, I guess."

They walk out to the road, looking at what the highway shows them each way.

Toby nods. "There."

"What?"

"That diner. It will bring us some of the way."

"A diner?"

"Yah. It's one of theirs. The name."

"Black Dog Diner."

"Yah. It's one of the few clues they gave me."

"Clues, Toby?"

"Yah. Look. Jasmine. Maybe if we do this, get there, something good happens."

Starts to talk. Stops. Nods. Takes his hand. Black Dog Diner it is.

She's hungry, & not for the junk food from the machines she's been living on. Pancakes, eggs. Toast, waffles. Milk. OJ.

"Too much you'll lose that jailbait figure."

"Aww, Toby. You so sweet." Her grey eyes twinkle.

He sticks to coffee.

"How did you end up in that bar?"

She's chewing, toast in one hand, knife dripping jelly in the other.

"We couldn't get out, Toby."

"I got you & her out, Jazz. That's why I don't understand why you were in that bar."

Jazz puts down her knife, finishes her chews, gets no more. She reaches across the table for Toby's hand. He hesitates, sees only calm, sincere need on her face. Takes it, small, in his larger.

Closes her eyes. Begins to breathe slower until a steady pace.

A waitress approaches, Toby shakes her away with a smile, the kind he saves for older women, hint of a guilty flirt in it. She nods, moves away.

Jazz talks softly. Like she's mesmerized herself. Toby's not surprised she can.

"It goes back to that day of the van."

Toby flinches. Real guilt. Her hand remains moveless in his.

"At school I saw my friend, the boy who tutors me. We sort of have a crush on each other but he won't make a move. Just sneaks looks at me. He doesn't know I dress for his looks."

"A boy, Jazz?" Toby can't help but say.

"He's not like other boys. He's sweet. I dunno. I guess I like different kinds." Her voice fades soft.

"Go on," Toby squeezes her hand.

"I gave him a poem by Cosmic Early. It's sort of a magick text. If he figures it out, it will tell him some things about me. It will help."

"So you went home."

"Yes. My mom & stepdad had to go out of town for a funeral. So me & Ash were alone."

"What did you do?"

"I was where I used to go when I was bored. The chatroom."

Toby laughs. "Those old guys stood no chance."

"They were lonely, confused. Horny. Harmless."

"Didn't they bore you?"

"Yes and no. The ones I liked I kept."

"Did you tell them anything?"

"No. I'm not stupid."

"There's a but here—"

The Black Dog Diner lurches slowly into motion. Rolls from its reserved parking space onto the road, moving along like a truck hauling a long wide freight. Eventually the sense of moving is little more than that on a passenger airplane.

"Go on, Jazz."

"He came that last night. He seemed agitated. I don't remember much what we said but he gave me this bad feeling. Like foreboding. It wasn't sexual with him, like the others most of the time. It was concern." Toby steels himself for the next part.

"You didn't take us the first time."

"We . . . didn't?"

"No. We were taken to Global Wall in the White Woods, separated."

"How did you escape?"

"The White Woods was destroyed."

"It was?"

"For a moment. So the night went differently. We were home & you took us."

Her hand remains calm in his. But her grey eyes are open & steady staring at him.

"Your turn."

Toby tries to pull away but Jazz is much stronger than she looks. "Tell me."

Smiles at him. Kindly. No blame. Inwardly Toby convulses, feels something for this girl, little to do with her pretty face or hot body. Perhaps what that boy she liked feels. He's a shitting dickhead though. *Fuck. OK. Whatever.*

Close his eyes, takes his deep breath.

"We used chloroform to knock you out."

"The first time."

"Yes."

"The time that didn't happen."

"Um. Yes."

She squeezes his hand, go on.

"Billy was driving. The weed & the Scotch was going around. We'd never done anything like this as a group.

"Denny wanted a taste while you two were lying there in the back of the van."

"No."

"the fuck, Toby? You gonna have 'em both & make us circle jerk around you?"

I say nothing. Denny is the only one who challenges my lead in our group. Fucking hot-headed wide receiver.

"Wait till we're at the cabin," I say definitely.

Just to up me a bit, Denny reaches over, pushes up your blouse a bit, we all get a nice look. Then he stops.

"Would you have done it?"

"I don't know. Yes. No. Alcohol. Frustration. We'd parked near your house before, & didn't go in. Your parents."

"You were dumb fucking jocks but not stupid."

"Yah."

"Then we crashed, driving too fast up a mountain. There were lights, & a spaceship, it was fucking crazy."

"You were all up there."

"Yes. It's how we ended up in that van." Toby smiles sheepishly. "Aside from being good solid dickheads."

Jazz laughs. He's not trying to impress her. He's apologized so that's relaxed him.

"OK, you can tell me."

"It was my first girlfriend. Her name was Rosie. She was only here for a year. She wouldn't tell me so much except that she wasn't staying."

"And you fell for her."

They fell for each other. Her family was Spanish & Catholic & he was a boy & an athlete. And a boy.

Before him, Rosie had found boys funny, & easy to resist. They didn't know why her family was different. What she was. They saw tits—& hers were nice—& an ass—even nicer—but these didn't begin to tell—

Or why her family had to relocate for a year. Their house burned to the ground. Best to leave because of it for awhile. And whatever her dad did, this town had another office.

He was sweet. She wasn't surprised he had a sister, or that they shared a wall between their bedrooms.

"I told her about the dreams I always had of the ships overhead. She didn't laugh. Not even close."

It was a desperate move to calm her, to show her she hadn't made a mistake. Coming with him to the cabin, shortest skirt, lowest halter top. They didn't drink much, she did more than him.

They began at the table, he made the one chicken dish he knew. She was delighted. Then the couch, the fireplace. Her kisses would have been enough for him. Not pushing. Not pushing. He could have jacked off in the bathroom, driven her home, whatever. Her face, her smile, enveloped him. Her body near him nearly choked his mind. His sister's phone calls only told him two things about this moment: tell her she's the sexiest girl he's ever known, & get *down there & lick. A lot.*

But she had explained her family's faith, how much it mattered, he nodded, it was OK, it wasn't, *it was OK.*

But she was on top of him on this couch, pulling off her halter top, her black bra beneath, burying him in her slow wet kiss, now a hand on his jeans, pushing rubbing, oh shit, *oh shit—*

"Rosie."

"I want you."

"But."

"No."

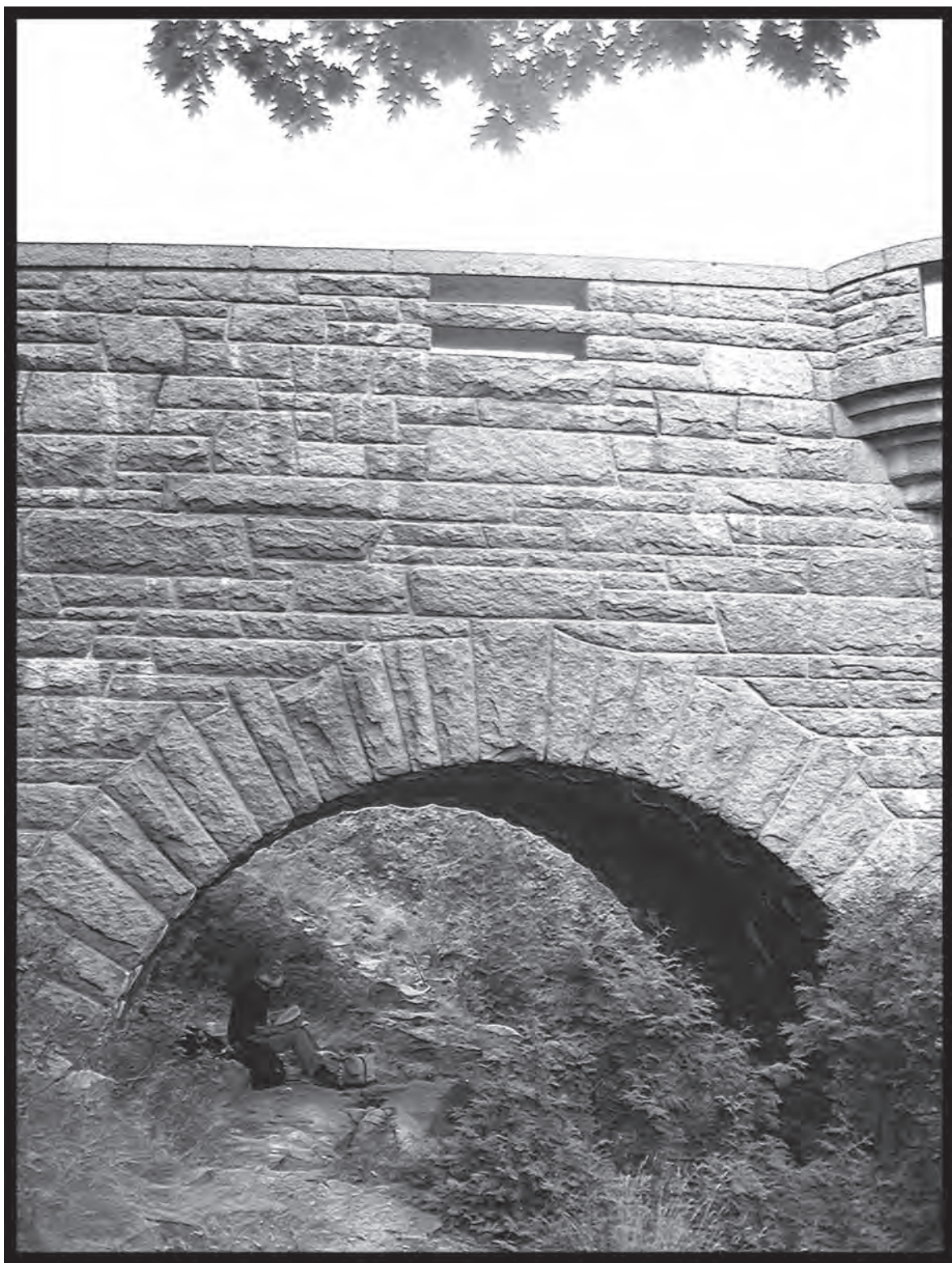
"Your family?"

She led his hand between her legs, "feel there, feel it, how wet am I?"

"Very wet."

"Are you going to tell me no?"

Before he passed out she was leading him to the cabin's bed. Made him finish undressing her, & had his rags off in a couple of good tugs. He didn't have to know how with her, she twisted



with him close & kissed him deeply as he slid into her, as she guided him in, as they moved with each other deeper & slower, slower, until not so slow, & faster, & harder, & deeper, & her moans so low in her throat, pulling him in, pulling him harder in, did I wear a condom, is it on? Yes, I feel it, how did it get on? *Ohhhh godddd* she made us cum together, I don't know how but I feel that power of us as one—

Jazz shakes me. “Keep going.”

“She moved. And she was gone. And she had told me that was how it was going to happen.”

“But?”

“Nothing. She was gone. And for a whole school year I had only been with her. I was alone.”

“So you joined the football team?”

“Yah. It wasn't a very good team. I showed up, I was big & willing.”

Jazz nods. Smiles. She's listening like Rosie would. I *hate* remembering her.

“It wasn't anything special, we played hard, we shared girlfriends, we drank a lot. At some point the six of us knew.”

“About the dreams?”

“About how they weren't dreams, Jazz.”

They say it's all about getting your ass examined. That's stupid.

“They were from somewhere far away. Their planet had died or something. They were in our dreams, but these were real somehow. This is how they traveled. They were trying to figure out if our world would work for them.”

“I don't understand, Toby.”

“They wanted to know whether they should come here.”

“Now? Like land?”

Toby's look is anguished, frustrated. “They don't relate to time like us, like we do, like it's a single straight line through things.”

“What then?”

Like they had no leashes on them like we do. Double, triple, sideways, forward, backwards.

I tried to talk to them. They weren't hurting my body, but I did feel a great pressure in my head.

“Please explain to me. You're eternal?”

“Yes. In your words.”

“But your world is gone.”

“Yes. We killed it.”

“So you want to come to our planet now?”

“Now?”

“Yes? Now?”

“No. Then?”

“Then?”

“Then? Yes. We travel like a field in the sun.”

"We found out we could keep them away by drinking really heavy, Jazz. We couldn't not sleep. But we could drink till we passed out & be too gone for them."

Jazz nods.

"Other things. Passing out from violent sex."

"Violent. Or rape?"

Toby shrugs. "There's enough girls like it rough. We shared."

"But then Ash & me?"

"That was me. I fell for her."

Jazz laughs, relaxes again. "A lot of guys did. She couldn't help herself."

"She didn't try."

"No."

"So," Jazz summarizes, "you six were going to rape Ash & me so that the aliens in your dreams would stay back?"

"Yah, you two & gallons of Scotch."

"But the crash?"

"We'd never seen them while altogether, or in waking!"

We drove off the road, flipped. The rest ran. I didn't. You two were still out. I checked you over. You were OK.

"I ran."

That night, they have separate rooms. To compromise, Toby lets Jazz suck his cock in the bathroom they share. She is slow, she slurps, she moans her pleasure, she swallows & swallows. Stands, straightens her frock, cries a little, leaves.

Um. Yah. Save the last bit.

Toby crawls to his bed & sleeps better than he has since Rosie's arms so long ago.

xxiii.

"Tell me how this fits, Beckah."

She smiles, nods.

"I'm in a movie theatre to see a movie called *Fun*, a sort of alien invasion movie, but nobody seems to mind how it extends beyond the theatre, & I find myself in the movie, climbing rocks, look down to a settlement, & hurry down to warn them of the invasion."

I pause. "But then the people in the theatre are gossiping & not paying attention. I yell, 'Quiet!' They look at me & say 'this movie is so bad!' & I say 'I paid good money for it & I want to see it!'"

"But tho I can make them quiet down, I can't make them understand this movie is *real*, it's outside & all around them. I keep hurrying out of the theatre to warn & back to my seat to

watch.”

Rebecca smiles. Waiting though sly.

“Finally, it all makes sense to others. They get that we’ve been invaded & the world is destroyed in many places. The rest a lot of prison camps.”

“Not everywhere though.”

“No. Some places people have collected & learned how to repel the attacks. It’s by using music. Music cripples them, to a degree. So people collect LPs, the only kind that can be played without electricity. CDs can’t, the rest can’t.

“There are dance parties in these liberated cities, they go on night after night, weeks, months, more records are gathered. People are sent from city to city, with records, with portable turntables.”

Rebecca laughs.

“But there are more talkers in the theatre, & I have to argue with them & it delays me from my duties. There’s panic at the settlement & a group flees to a spacebus which flies away, but the aliens use powerful lasers to shoot it down.”

“Are they killed?”

“No. They float down from the sky to the dancefloor below, & begin to dance like it’s a choreographed Broadway show.”

Now she’s laughing even more.

“Then something & something else & the movie’s over, just a purple-tinted nebulae on the screen.”

“Wow.”

“And I go outside to the wreckage of the dancefloors in the Woods, every hundred feet or so, & I find my notebooks & my green windbreaker jacket. I look at someone else & say, ‘wow, lucky’ & get on the elevator & get off at the lobby & walk away—”

She kisses me now. Pleased, despite herself, my question. “Just because.”

I nod. Glad she still likes to kiss me. “But how does this fit?”

“Fit?”

“Yes, how does it fit here?”

“Into *Labyrinthine*?”

“Yes.”

“Does anything not fit, Raymond?”

I lean forward into this notebook, watch this pen forming letter after letter, word after word, on down this page.

“It fits because I say so?”

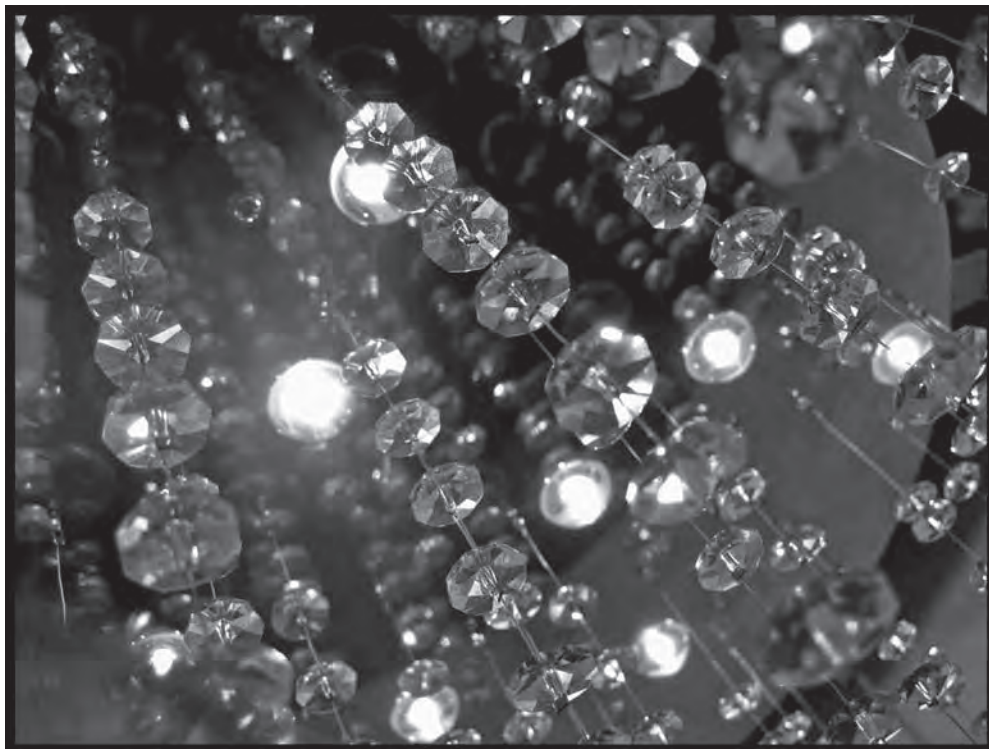
“It fits or you *wouldn't* say so.”
 I nod. “It matters too much.”
 “Yes.” Glint to speak more.
 “And?”
 “You’re funny despite yourself.”
 I nod thanks.

How does it fit? Perhaps it’s the movie that shows after the midnight shows of **RemoteLand**—goes on about 4 or 5 AM when even fewer remain & who would think something important might happen?

But Self & Ralph & the girl that possesses them know. And they watch. And they wonder how much of it is real? Should they go outside? It’s been a long while. What will they find?



To be continued in Cenacle | 92 | April 2015



Raymond Souldard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Ten

*"Try to forget me.
Try to erase me."*

—Pearl Jam, "Jeremy," 1992.

xxiv.

They stand, the boys zip up, the girl tugs down her short white skirt far as it goes, not much. Shy, suddenly, when moments before she had them wet, twisted, fingers & lips & orifices unsolvable among each other, a sort of three-headed groan monster, she wants them to lead. And each to take one of her hands of course.

The lobby is dark. Door locked from outside before midnight showing of **RemoteLand** begins. 'Goers learn to prop a rock in it to keep it open. It's painted orange & everyone is told. So they can get back in.

She hasn't been outside the theater, is the truth. Didn't come this way. Doesn't know what to expect. Sex with these two boys is sweet & easy compared to this.

Behind them, in the now-seemingly empty theater, the next film begins its first run.

The title it doesn't list anywhere is *More Fun*—is it a sequel? I don't know. Is it the next day? I don't know.

I am in a pickup, in the passenger seat. Next to me, two friends, one a heavy blonde man I knew a couple of decades ago, his name is Bill. Between us, another blonde, a girl. Pretty. But we're not calm.

We're on the run. Not sure what. The air itself is troubled, visibly ruffled, like it's damaged.

Driving slow past a shopping mall, imploded, rubble. Smoking.

"Drive."

"Why? That's all we've found, for a thousand miles."

"Drive!"

The truck speeds up some, but not enough. I reach by the girl, grab his throat.

"Fucking-drive-or-get-the-fuck-out" squeeze harder with each syllable.

He floors it. My hand withdraws, slowly traveling across her tight t-shirt, braless beneath. She holds her breath to keep from reacting aloud.

I was alone, camped in the Woods, a clearing I sometimes dreamt was shaped like a temple, if the moon

was full. Every way into my clearing was rigged to snare the intruder.

I heard them before they appeared. They were fighting. She was ahead of him, so tripped first. I disengaged the spiked net so she merely tumbled into my arms. Her sweater still buttoned up back then, him no longer earning a good look.

Her in my grasp, but still one hand free to point my gun at him.

“Don’t hurt her. We mean you no harm, I swear!”

“Sit. On the ground. *Now*. On your hands.” He did. Already, his claim of her was slipping. She shifted in my arms, but only for comfort.

I chose to keep her, & he was part of this choice for the moment. I fed them. Handing him some dried meat, fruits, berries. Fed her myself. She chewed slowly, holding my eyes. Turquoise eyes. Chewing slowly.

Had they really been together? For a little while, it seemed. She lost her people, needed a man’s protection badly.

But he didn’t take it from her & she didn’t find him attractive enough to offer herself. Settled for traveling together.

I could probably have simply left with her, or at worst wounded him enough to leave.

But I didn’t. The rules of this new world weren’t clear. I’d been with girls before, but this one was a thousand times more. So he was a kind of buffer while I sussed & decided. I pretended to acknowledge they were together in a meaningful sense, & to accept this. She wasn’t the kind of girl who begged, or even asked, as I said.

I simply teased her. Kept feeding her by hand, as that first time. Found casual reasons to touch her, mark her mine for later take, if I chose. If *we* chose, really.

By the time we were passing by that imploded mall, she’d chosen.

But I hadn’t. To claim her how I could would de-cock him in a way men don’t survive unchanged.

I’m not telling it well. It was the broken air too. It was the burning landscape. It was whether only one man could protect a girl like this.

She watches me constantly from the side of her face. Won’t look fully at me but won’t look away.

I treat him like the man he isn’t as we make our campfire at night. Show him how I lay my snares & traps. For food, for enemies. She watches but I don’t teach her directly. I’m still choosing.

He knows nothing about survival. Once she withdrew from him, for good, it’s like his light doused & all left was smoke.

I could shoot him dead. Wound him crippled. Toss her over my shoulder & find a starlit clearing to have her. Pretty tits, high ass, tight pussy for my straight razor & long-lonely cock.

But I don’t. Days go by. We find a truck. I’m no mechanic but it’s only got a flat, a donut spare solves that for now, & a bent chassis, so we have to steer a little off center to go straight.

We drive & drive & drive. No hordes of zombies like we were told would ruin the world, or emerge from the ruining hand of men. No, most people were dead in the first month, their bodies disintegrating to dust weeks later. Nobody to bury, or to rise up.

The rest were left with a world of canned goods & enough batteries & portable generators to survive.

Not dead but, for a long time, weaker. Lethargic. Like this companion of mine. Surviving but nothing more.

And most never shook it off. See, that's the problem. She & I both did.

I tell it slant like this because it's how I figured it out. In pieces, not enough of them. I still don't know what killed most of us.

He floors it, briefly present, & we race through broken air. Then there's a noise from the engine. A crack! pop! & the truck seems to come loose. We slide wildly in our seats &, when the truck rights itself, her sweater sleeve is caught in the steering wheel.

Terrified, she screams, pulls, the truck veers hard to the right, we nearly roll but he presses the brakes easy enough to slow us, & we stop.

That night, another snared & trapped clearing, dimming embers of a fire, she crawls into my sleeping bag, damn near rips it sliding in. Kisses me just once, her tongue down my throat so deep my lungs get a taste, one hand pulling up her dress, the other tugging down my shorts, & more words than I've heard all these days: "put it in me now & screw me hard, or take your gun & broken truck & fucking go." I comply. One look into her turquoise eyes as first she cums, then me, then her again, tells me she's nobody like I thought.

Luckily, he hears our loud sex-noise, takes my gun, & goes.

xxv.

Pack up, drive on. She's calmer now, not happy but at least paying attention, not just blindly furious.

Tank running low, limp to a filling station. Not as simple as they once were. Gasoline, power, food, water, hire a whore, an assassin, try to find others to travel with, campsite, smoking tents. Only rule: check your guns & weapons at the door.

So we're in line for fuel, long line. She talks, still hasn't much, tho I know she has a tongue & a voice from our sex hours.

Wants a soda. "Chervanill," she says, some angle of accent I don't know. I pay one of the boys hanging around to wait with our truck; he leers at her. I don't blame him but he's not getting any.

Hold her hand in the market, a half-fallen-down building attached to several large tents. She likes this, it's a gesture of possession, of safety. Get her her drink, pay more for a clean cup & straw. I listen to conversations, looking for some entry, something useful in all the hate & ignorance—

Meet a man with maps, good ones, rare ones. He wants good money in return, & her in a private room for a little while. She won't look at me, would go with him if I said.

"No."

"No? You're wasting my time. You know someone will take her sooner or later. With me you get some value. And I don't just like to hurt for fun."

"No."

His face softens. He's young, these aren't his maps fairly. More desperate than bad.

"Take me with you."

"No."

He unfolds one of his maps, it's very old. Old words on it even tell how to use it.

"Songs. You have to sing the right songs or the landscape remains cloaked. You pass through unknowing its truths."

She's not looking at me hard. Willing to risk him for these maps.

"You touch her, one of us will have to die because of it. Am I clear?"

Nods. Cock's not that hard up yet.

Her turquoise eyes find mine. There's a vague smile in them.

xxvi.

He says we have to leave the truck. Not sell it, not even give it away. We have to travel by caravan. We stay two days till one passes through.

Travelers are generous & kind but will not take on most who ask. He makes us wait at a distance while he negotiates. They agree.

Travelers don't sell their women or girls, or use them for bait or bargaining. They assess them when they join up, what skills & arts they have, what crafts, & set to teaching them what they don't know. Men are taught but only if they can find a willing teacher.

Our companion is little seen. Won't tell me how he spends his days. I make myself useful & repair things, clean weapons, wash dishes, build morning fires. I finally tell one of the elders when he asks.

"We're bound somewhere. I didn't think she would make it whole."

"You could stay with us instead."

His offer is made with little enthusiasm. He sees my path better than I see my own.

"You'll lose her eventually."

"Even if I stay?"

"I'm sorry."

I try not to believe him. But her smile & confidence grow day by day. The other is rarely around. What do I offer that this secure family of Travelers does not have & better?

Finally, our companion comes back. Holding a leather book filled with pages upon pages of numbers.

"We're close. We need to break off tomorrow morning. Tell her."

"She may not come."

His expression is fury. "Do you want to live this dangerous, dirty life always? Does she? *Tell her.*"

She returns to our bed late, tired, smiling. Rolls naked into my arms to sleep, willing on nights when I am.

"He says we're close. We leave tomorrow."

Her soft body stiffens but no words.

"I can't make you. You have a kind of home here."

Nothing. Then: "Can I make you stay?"

"No." She rolls away from me but still holding my hand. By when I wake up she has us packed & ready to go.

xxvii.

"He was my postman."

I wake & it's still night. Quiet. The camp is guarded all hours so I don't divide my thoughts to her safety, as I have so long. Almost. Remind myself not to.

"Who?"

"He brought me the letter telling me my father died."

I listen.

"It was a hot day, you remember. I invited him in for a lemonade. He liked my halter tops, I let him look. Nothing else. No words. But I was feeling weird that day, & the letter he handed me looked disturbingly personal."

The tent is dark, not a candle, not a crack in the seams. Helps him to sleep & stay alert both all night. When we fuck I want us to cum together, it's a discipline I want us to have. I listen now with that level of attention. A bad noise, a misspent cum.

"It was from my Aunt. She & my father raised me together. She still lived in that village, ran the big garden of the hotel. She was kind of a witch, tho her practices were her own."

Takes my hand in hers, twines our fingers. Breathes. Talks on.

"He & I had become separated. There was a war. He made sure I was safe. Years later, I came back to Aunt & her garden."

Words rushed, trying to explain years in a few seconds, a couple of sentences. I squeeze her hand, tight, once.

"I loved him. I always thought of him. He was a tinker, very smart, very sweet."

Harder breathing, what comes.

"He'd gotten old, gotten sick. By when he made his way back to her, it was to die in a bed, with a loved face nearby.

"She tried her tricks, tried them all. And it was quick, no time to find & fetch me.

"So she told him she'd make sure I knew. He wished not, but agreed. Had one request of her.

"Tell her who she is, all of it. It will help her."

She has something in her hand, makes me feel it too. "Her letter. The rest. I stopped reading at that

moment. Put it in my pocket. Why should my postman see me learning what I am?”

I feel it, poke my finger inside the envelope, several pages.

“Then all of this happened. He protected me, the postman. He could have run, over & over, but he didn’t.”

“Then why me?”

“I wanted a man who could read that letter to me & be strong enough to handle it.”

“Why do you think that’s me?”

“You could have had me from that first day. Shot him, forced me. You know all this.”

I’m silent. Measuring futures & possibilities. Honest with myself, & hating it, she’s in all of them.

“Should I read it now?”

“No. Don’t ask. Sometime after now, just pull me somewhere private, & tell me it’s time. I always have it near me.”

Then the letter is gone from my hand, and she is atop me, & I am driving deep & slow inside her, & thinking, as much as I have left, there is no possible future without her.

She makes me cum first, forces it out of me, laughs, holds me close, her turn a slow moaning cum in my ear. Laughs more.

xxviii.

Write it deep believing, that’s how I see it tonight, another year begun, my pen moving, pages one then the next—

Deep believing, this is what I am, what I do, world emerges from these pages, we possess each other, the moment, the hour, the passing years—

Been reading old notebooks of these stories, what it was, what I was, what it is, what I am. Seeing where the old rivers still have rivulets by which to connect now.

Connect is what I want, resume, continue, remix, renew.

I want to give deep believing to it all, find ways with characters, locales, welcome them back, & carry on, find a way. I can’t always do this in my commonplace world, there are people I love who yet live & yet lost to me.

So Art where I can do something when I can’t always do something outside the printed page.

Does this make sense? Is it enough? It’s only one angle on all this, not enough by far to keep it worth my efforts, & yet atwist in the rest. A trace here & there.

Today I looked up at a rock wall, covered in ice, water dripping down within the ice, dark-colored drips as though descending fishes.

I watched the ocean & loved it simply. Its swishing sounds are beautiful. It’s beautiful to watch. The

sand carved abstract by wind, water, how cold the atmosphere, the ways it reacts to all of these.

Nature creates Beauty by what it does. Beauty emerges from its actions. *Art is what it is.* What belief, deep or otherwise, does it need?

I can only return to & continue these pages, moment by hour by year. *Art is what I am, I believe.*

It is my will that crosses the last gap.

Does this make sense? Is it enough?

Yes. I choose it to be.

xxix.

One more: when I writhed in that hotel room, angry at what I'd helped the worst of life create in me, what rottenness I let stink slightly still in my mind's nose, was the white birch outside my window that kept me along the hours. In a parking lot, near a closed-up newspaper building, raining, me ranting & watching, ranting & watching, was the White Birch kept me along till I unlocked that door, walked into the winter cool, touched that White Birch, & kept walking back to my pen & paper, on & on—

xxxi.

It was a place where those running or hiding could come, & the harder the run, the more terrified the hide, the deeper it went. I wondered if some ever left really, there were ways to stay even if one's purse was empty, ways to clean one's self, scrub as hard as was needed, if one wished, spoke a word—

Thieves, killers, brutalizers of every kind? Yes. Only their past days & activities snapped off at the door. It wasn't possible to carry on like that here. Something prevented it, something in the roots & walls & windows & doors of the place. The food. The water. The air itself.

And if you left, thinking to resume elsewhere? It wouldn't work as well for you. The lust for another's possessions, to hurt him for his merry grin, her for her thick lips & darting eyes, it was blooded. Still there, nothing kills it till the man lies bones & buried, but thinner, scattered—

Other thoughts occurred. The world was less a brazen cage to be moved through. Kindness? Empathy? Can even the deepest green magic in the world grant these, or revive their corpses in a grim man's heart? Not wholly. But not wholly not.

The sun needs just a break in the grey mass to shine through. Any moment now.

Some rent little cottages with two rooms & yards. Some have never had yards before. Little gardens in back. A few fruit trees. Learn to tend a living thing not man-shaped, nurture & love it. Eat of it or see it decay eventually back to earth.

How it responds to shine, to water, to your voice & touch. *Learn & learn & still more to know.*

Her name is Evelyn, & she is a brunette, my first in a sad history of artful blondes. She moves me in because I have nothing to bring but my clothes, my man's body she hungers, & a small satchel I can't lose ever.

This place she lives, these little cottages, the smiling poor folk who live in them. Gardens, trees—I don't know how to assess it.



"These kind of folks do not have such housekeeping?"

"Such?"

"Quietly prosperous. Safe. Smiling on neighbors. Nobody in fear."

"You like it?"

I nod. I'd only meant to walk her from the tavern to her door, wherever that happened to be.

I hadn't. Not really. There was one, we were very young. Her red hair, her freckles. Me wanting to worship her. Her wanting suck & fuck, with a laugh. I would have but they moved. In a night, gone.

Always looked for her. Why I traveled. Why I learned to fire guns, fell trees, fix furniture. Sing old old story songs. Dance. I kept thinking she'd show up & I would be ready now.

Had I since? Yes, there'd been two in a night. Mine the young hard cock to orchestrate them. Enjoyed me. *Loved* each other. At least now I knew how it felt.

And every so often but whenever one sought mine eyes in hers, tried to synch both our hearts & our bodies, I came, & left. Quickly.

Evelyn does not have red hair nor the blondes I've said of.

Her body is still young, breasts small & high, pussy a trimmed design, licking instructions? I comply. She enjoys.

But she keeps me in between her thighs longer & longer, me nearly cumming, her riding me up & down my own crests, laughing, something, when ready we moan it deep & out together. One night of it. Two. Weeks of it. Neighbors smiling, greeting me by name.

Then a night the door slams open & a big bald bruiser comes in. Loud, laughing. She lifts me through the air to her closet, deepest corner. Goes out to him. Some shouting. More. A gun shot.

I wait. He'll kill me or me him, or her already the murderer.

She comes in. Smiling. "He's gone."

I walk into the main room of her house, expecting a warm corpse. Something.

Nothing. Sits me on her couch, still smiling. Has an old & much-treasured box in her hands. To show me. Reveal me now.

She's a Traveler, I learn, as most of these folks are. The man had not been. Had claimed her by a recent occupation of this town, now over.

Her box full of picture postcards. These her prizes.

"Not mine mostly. Others pass through. I tell them about my collection. They want to contribute. Build something among our kind."

They are different shapes & sizes. Some of thick, crude paper. Some of much more velvet stuff. Drawings of inns, of forests, of gardens, of mountains. Of a region's important face.

Her hands push her box to the floor as they crawl upon me. She wants sex, hard, fast. I want to know what she feels for me.

"I'm no Traveler. I'm just lost. Looking for someone."

"I know," she whispers, pushing me to the rug-covered dirt floor.

"You're not her," I whisper, my fingers betraying me on her breasts, hips, smooth slides into her cunt.

"I know," she whispers. "But I'm here. Maybe we can find her later for you."

xxxii.

We travel, the three of us now, my man jealous & unsure, & our guide, who'd risk all for half an hour with my bare ass raised high. Twenty minutes. Five.

But he doesn't get it. I let him close enough for a sniff of the girl, especially when my man has recently well-enjoyed me. But no more. Still, enough of a vague promise to keep us together bound somewhere good.

We'd sit in countryside nights between towns, studying the maps.

Why not an inn? It was me. Most men were no longer like the postman, or my man, or even the weasel guiding us who had a hidden gun on him & could have used it.

I would have let him just to shut him up wanting it. But some men get addicted. Would mistake a pity fuck for love.

They were afraid, because as we got closer to somewhere in those maps, fewer the laws.

That last night before we hit the sea air, I felt them following all day. Feigned fatigue & illness frequently to stall us. A couple of sleeping herbs in their drinks.

I presented at his tent. Didn't trust any building in his region. His predecessor had.

Bearded, long-haired. But furs. A cock in them somewhere but it all was to awe challengers or their women.

He smiled. Not cruelly. We talked before we fucked.

"How do you know I won't kill them & keep you?"

"I know you loved your wife."

He starts.

"I know you didn't have a chance to say goodbye."

He lunges but at himself.

I bid him douse the lights, wait. I undress, sit on his lap, feed him what I had brought. Some drink too.

"I am not her. I would not insult or fool you. But tonight we will say goodbye to her & you will let her go & keep her."

I'm back in his grasp before either groggily wakes. The path to the water remains safe that day, & we arrive.

Where we're bound, the Island, is no sane place. But it's where he wishes to go, what drives him.

And the weasel-faced one? He smells another man's seed on me & wonders darkly. But says nothing. Knows there's prizes & powers to be gained where we're bound. The kind to claim my sweet ass, & my man's too, if his will & whim. And it might be.

I know better than either of them, but say nothing. Choose the power of silence, watching, listening.

Wonder if my long ago dreams of this Island have any truth in them? That I remember every last detail like the spit in my own mouth?

xxxiii.

Party after party. No real Killer. Just this strange adult game of hide & seek called The Realist. Christina grows bored. This means more often horny. This attracts the attention of more men. She tempts. Tempts. No, not really. Wishes she did. Be more fun to make Kinley a little jealous. The regular kind, not cosmic gate-of-the-universe kind.

"Why are we still with him, Kinley?"

"Who?"

"*Fuck. Who? The Gate-fucking Keeper?*"

He looks at me plain, clear, like he only usually does as he's cumming in me.

"Where are we, Christina?"

"A hotel room. Dressing for our next pointless weekend party."

"Why aren't we in the Gate?"

Oh. "We . . . left?"

"He's hidden it from us. This is the Gate but we can't see it."

I think. "So we want back in?"

He nods. "He outsmarted me. I thought we were free of him."

"Is The Realist his game?"

Kinley's quiet. Again. More.

"It's not his film. But it's like he's something to do with it."

I'm not always a tender girl, mostly because I heat fast when the man is close to me. With Kinley, not even that close.

But, fuck it, I move from the bed to the room's old armchair. Hold out my arms. Kinley kneels before me, folds into my embrace.

"So we find the Killer & we're free of him?"

He nods silently into my chest.

"And he . . . drops us off at the Gate?"

Doesn't nod.

I lift his head to look at me. "Kinley, I'm with you. No matter what."

"The Gate is our chance to understand everything. The Gate-Keeper showed us more than we ever would have known."

"But how does this silly game show anything?"

"I don't know."

That night, we pull up in Kinley's red '70 Z6 Camaro in front of a house more like a castle.

Kinley is dressed in a dark tight suit, one I've convinced him to wear.

"We need women crawling over you. A few men too."

"Why? Don't you want all the crawlers?"

I laugh. "What I want is you happy again so you fuck me as I want."

"And?"

"It won't happen till this game is over & we're living in a tent in the Gate, traveling with those strange kitty kats & their dry-land fish."

He laughs. "I love you, Christina." Doesn't say it often enough for me.

"I love you too. Boxer briefs. I want your goods nicely packaged for marketing."

Me? I bring two dresses. The short tight black one, & the shorter, tighter red one.

The crowds are there. The daytime picnics are sweet, but then come the all-night drug-fueled sex raves. A little desperate for me. Like: will The Killer come tonight? The Real Killer? Like: will we be good enough? *Why not?*

What I don't tell Kinley is that I think I can find him. I think I know what he goes for. We're not at this party randomly, or by the Gate-Keeper's choice.

He doesn't kill at every party he goes to. Sometimes kills in only the regular symbolic way. I've figured all this out, in sweated clinches, with men and girls both, in the many parties we've gone to. I've had to lick a few bare cunts, a few trimmed ones, a few hairy ones too, swallow more than enough cum, but I've learned from people at the parties where he killed. Who he killed.

They were believers, arrogant, feeling like they were part of something special, *like they were special*.

Then I met a girl he hadn't killed. And she was disappointed. She would hardly tell me anything for a grope. I got down into it & licked her to cum over & over. Next party, I rolled her over on her flat little tummy & got my wet tongue in that tight asshole of hers. A couple of knocks at the door of our bedroom, I just pushed deeper in her, made her cry loud her orgasms. The knocks went away.

We'd have baths, smoking her really good hashish. She knew I wanted to hear her story about him. Just didn't know why.

We're shown to our rooms, as guests are offered at the more elaborate Realist parties. Since we dressed at the motel already, it is only a matter of dropping off our two small bags, washing our faces, & leaving.

But he stops me at the door. Again, the look in my eyes. Almost doesn't talk.

"What? Tell me."

"I could be the Killer if we needed."

"You are, aren't you? At least sometimes." I don't pay attention to the rules.

"I mean the real one. I think that would end his hold on us."

Wow! Smacked & not the fun kind.

I pull him into my face by his ear. "Kill one person for real, Kinley, & I will close my legs on you forever."

He's about to shrug when I say, "And my heart." That does it. I kiss him anyway, & we enter the game. Separate quickly. Easier for me to operate.

I find her fairly quickly. She's been looking for me. Her perfect tanned face is wrinkled as we find an unused room.

Shaking. Hard.

"What? *Tell me.*"

"He's here. *He's here.*"

"Tonight? This party?"

She's terrified. She's . . . giddy.

"You want him to this time?"

She nods. Her dress short as mine, much lower cut. My tongue rebels & remembers the taste of those sweet hard nipples. Sucking the tiny clit till she glowed with moans & cums.

I think. Fast, hard. What would Kinley do? I say the opposite thing.

"Both of us." I smile like it's brilliant of me.

She jerks from me. Her candy pretty face sucks on mine for trick. I hold myself. Think of romantic wanderings through the Gate, sex in the Kitty Wagon in the back. That Fish's lips. *Mmm.*

She weakens, nods. Her green eyes, wet for a moment, dry & harden to our task.

"Why didn't he kill you?"

"I . . . I don't know."

"*Tell me.*"

Now sad as burying her first hamster, says, "He told me he was wrong about me. I didn't want it enough."

"Want what? Death?"

She nods.

Wow.

I remember to breathe, & tell her to breathe, & bring her into the mirror-lined bathroom so we can touch up each other's makeup which, other than clit-licking, is how I think quickest to renew our nutty bond. She calms, we make out a little, I wish I could borrow Kinley's pretty cock to fuck some sense into this girl. Ah, well, can't chance that Kinley's cock would like it too much. Or that I wouldn't want to give his cock back.

These parties appeal to different kinds, sort of a wide-ranging lunacy. It's not just the rich & pretty & well-drugged. That said, nobody's allowed weapons, & behavior that gets too gangish or thuggish leads to ejection. From what I've seen, ejection is one-time only & done, & it hurts.

So there's the million-dollar skanks & the booty-shakers. Bored suburban wives. Some fruity *artiste* types. No open sex; that's what the empty rooms are for. No out & out rape either; the men, even Kinley, get a little shot on entry. Dulls the worst of their cocks' impatient or twisted wants, just enough.

She leads me to where he was, out by the Olympic-sized pool. BBQ pits. Loud, tuneless techno. But jolly. A sort of frazzled jolly. I saw too many faces I knew or vaguely knew.

They wanted the real Killer.

"Look! It's him!" she screeching whispers in my ears.

I look. Among the tight suits, the short hair, the long hair, the tattoos, the earrings, the laughter, that

whirring buzzing sense of many men in one place, both relaxed in mind & frenzied in cock, I look toward where she is pointing to a man who is for just an elongated moment one more pretty boy, one more cock among cocks but then, oh no, *oh shit no*, this whole fevered dream of a night & the life I've been leading some years now crashes in my face & through my body as I fall near senseless into my friend's beautiful, slender, but surprisingly, happily, strong arms.

"It's him," I moan.

"Who?"

Jack. Fuck me twice. *Jack.*

xxxiv.

He looks at me the same time & everything falls away.

"Breathe, Christina."

"Huh?"

"*Breathe.* You're scaring me."

Oh. Shit. Fuck. A part of me is trying to cover the rest of which is trying to undress me for you knowing you haven't had better since me & what—wait—

"What?"

She's scared of you. Well, she's always been scared of you but she likes the thrill & danger of it. Or something.

"Why are we here again, Kinley?"

"Is that his name? The one looking at you. Damn, Christina."

"Yeah. Seriously. I mean, *no, fuck, what the fuck.*"

All this goes through my eyes mind mouth & body in about two seconds she finds herself drug off by Christina to a bedroom floor. Sounds of occupation on the bed above.

"*Christina.*"

"Is he the Killer?"

"I don't know. I think so."

The fucking in the bed gets louder. Moans are good cover.

"Did you see him kill anyone?"

"No. But he came out of the room. And later she didn't."

I have to decide. I don't know *how* to decide. Jack wasn't crazy. He wasn't even that interesting, especially in bed. I wasn't picky then, just a guy with a big cock & a small brain so I could forget about Kinley—

But Jack was special—and I was stupid to fuck up what he had with that girl Penelope—it's like I had to make everyone suffer like I was.

And his world was strangely intriguing. Like some sort of underground network. Mostly parties but not completely.

Now what. I get up. Watch the bleached blonde get the cream eaten out of her for a moment, then I walk back outside to him.

"Hi Jack."

"Christina. *Shit.*"

"Yah. Go figure. You here with Penny?"

"Um. No. She's at the hotel."

"And you?"

Jack laughs. His eyes darken. His face surrounds her, more fully & completely than it would seem possible, & silence, & just their breathing. Again. Again.

"I'm here to stop him."

I laugh. I explode. My tits would fall out of my dress if I didn't hang on 'em tight.

Jack stares at me. A nice millionaire's poolside. Pretty people all around.

What are we doing here, Kinley?

"I'm sorry, Jack."

He smiles stiffly. "Yah. Why are you here?"

"Same. Stop the party pooper."

His eyes are quickly remembering my body which is not much covered from a lot of good remembering so I retrieve my equally sexy & underdressed friend.

"Jack, this is."

"Hi Jack, I'm Is."

"Hi." They laugh. Shit. He does that. One tooth too many & you're liking him. I try to remember the bad parts. Um, mostly, the cocaine & suicidal unhappiness?

Oh sure. Them.

So I pull Jack & Is both into the bedroom. Happily, the previous couple had cummed, paid up, & gone.

"OK, Jack, here it is. Kinley & I find the Killer, stop him, & get our freedom back."

"Kinley? Your teacher?" He laughs hard & cruelly.

"Yah. *Fuck*, dude."

He stares at me. "You were a stupid coked up cunt bitch who helped me fuck my life. What part of that would you like own?"

For a moment I think of Kinley talking about the Gate, about origins & secrets of the world, & about how he is so happy to be sharing them with me, & I finally, fully, gather my shit up & say: quietly: softly: finally: *fuck you*.

But instead of whatever else I'd do if I wasn't me, I grab her hand & his hand & drag them out to the poolside crowd of puffy pretties.

"I've caught this party's Killer. This pretty book right here. Now everyone give him a good hand." And they do. They applaud him even as he might be *the* Killer.

I bring them back to my room, swear them to screaming to stay still, they do, I come back with Kinley, my adrenaline gone so I'm really surrendered to it all—

"Jack."

"Kinley."

"Hi. I'm Is."

"Is."

"Yah. Let's go with it."

"You're not the Killer, Jack?"

"No!"

"Is says you are."



"Is? Who?"

"Her."

"What kind of name is Is?"

"What kind of name is Jack the fucking party slut killer?"

"No. Fuck! What kind of name is 'Stina the party whore skank who ruined my life?"

Pulling them off each other, Kinley half-considers letting them fuck their way out of it. Only half. Getting her this tame & unferal was too much work to lose.

Kinley finally makes Christina & Is leave. Hates to do it. Wishes Maya was there to help. But yah, OK.

He & Jack finally sit together on cum-stained bedclothes.

"Where do we start?"

Jack sighs. "I don't know that we do. She loves you. She's with you. I don't care. I don't object. I wish you good."

"But?"

His face darkens. "But nothing."

"Penny?"

"She's fine. Good."

"Where?"

"Hotel."

"While you chase the Realist Killer?"

Jack stands up. "She's gone."

"Gone?"

"Yah. Something. I'm not sure."

There's a pause.

"Did she leave you, Jack?"

"No."

"How long has it been since you've seen her?"

He looks down between his knees.

"I don't know."

Kinley starts to ask another when Jack interrupts. "It was at one of these parties."

He thinks. They were sitting together in the second row of the Nada Film School theater, as the midnight showing of **RemoteLand** began.

Her hand in his. Penny's. Penelope's. His Penelope. Whatever had been, the ships overhead, Christina, the Bridge of Glass. The S&G Pizza window he'd crawled out of. The fact of him waking up there in the first place. The gunshot that had waked him.

Her hand in his. Blonde, green-eyed. Hair in a braid down her back. She's wearing a long violet dress. For him.

She'd come with him. Found him. *Was with him.*

The movie shows its classic car crash in reverse opening scene as Jack wonders if he is dead.

"No. It was earlier. At a movie theater. The party was in the film."

Kinley is now sitting close to Jack who's sweating, eyes closed, rocking.

I'm holding your hand but your attention is on the film screen. My hand slides along you, cupping your breast, stroking, stroking, you smile that soft smile of yours, like you are enjoying, but you keep watching too. *Why am I doing this?* I try to watch too. I try to remember who I am.

The party in the film was very strange. Not too many men & women among the other kinds of aliens there. There's no dialogue, just very eerie & erotic music. I look at you again & you are watching almost like you aren't there.

Your hand in mine & I have to know what you are seeing, Penny.

"I followed her in."

"To the party in the film?"

Jack nods.

"This is all **RemoteLand** to you, Jack?"

He looks up at Kinley, sharply.

"Yes. I'm trying to find Penny & bring her back to the theatre where we were."

Kinley tells Jack to wait & he goes to find Christina, who is just at the door, eavesdropping.

"He's nuts, Kinley."

Kinley nods slowly.

"Isn't he?"

"Where's Is?"

"Oh. Well, she was very spooked so she left."

"To where?"

Christina looks vague. "I don't know? She was spooky. Cute but too spooky."

Kinley's look is plain. "The Gate-Keeper is doing all this."

"Aren't we trying to help him?"

Kinley grabs Christina's hand hard. "We're going. Now."

"Wait! What about Jack?"

"Do you really care?"

"Kinley, just stop. Talk to me."

Kinley's look is twisted & weird.

"*We're in his film.* I don't understand it."

Christina goes back into the room where Jack is sitting, slumped over, head in hands.

"Jack."

"Xtina."

"No. You know that."

He smiles.

"We're leaving. Come with us."

"I can't. Penelope."

She looks back at Kinley.

"Kinley agrees with you. We're in this film. Why would Penny have come here?"

"I don't know. We were watching it. Holding hands."

Christina drags Kinley back into the hallway.

“OK. Let’s go.”

“And Jack?”

“How do we help him?”

“The Gate-Keeper has his reasons.”

“We haven’t found his Killer.”

“Yes, we did. Jack.”

“He didn’t kill anyone!”

“No, but I think he’s the one the Gate-Keeper wants.”

Kinley goes in one last time & sits next to Jack.

“You can leave me,” Jack says. “You owe me nothing.”

“I think you’re who the Gate-Keeper wants. I think I know why.”

“Because I chased after Penny?”

“Yes. He lured her in because he knew you would come.”

“Why?”

Kinley smiled. “Because Christina & I are leaving. Because Maya is gone. Because it’s your turn.”

The two men shake, hold their grip a long time. “Where will you two go?” Jack asks.

Kinley laughs. “First motel down the road.”

xxxv.

“Cut!” I cry.

“Cut?” Jack & Kinley say same time.

“Just kidding. Come in here, Christina & Is.”

They’re looking at me. “Yah, it’s me. The Gate-Keeper’s boss, you could say.”

Since there’s one big bed, they sit alongside it. Kinley, Christina, Jack, Is.

I look at Is. Nice fucking tits. A little too peroxide for me. Too much makeup. Still. She blushes at me. That helps.

“You need a name.”

“Is?”

“That was a bad joke. But . . .”

I put my finger on my chin.

“Could be Is is short for Isis? The ancient Egyptian goddess?”

Is, or Isis, smiles. “There. That’s the first fully right thing I’ve done on these pages for a little while.”

Kinley extends his hand to me. “I’m Kinley.”

“I’m Raymond. Hi.”

Christina smirks at me. I nod.

Jack is simply glowering at me. “I disappeared from this story for hundreds of pages. I’m back. Fine. It’s a little rough, but it’s OK. You did your research.”

“After finding I couldn’t just wing it.”

“Yes.”

“What then? What’s wrong?”

"I was rushing, stumbling."

Kinley talks. "What can we do?"

"It's not that. I just felt I had to stop the narrative & say, apologize."

Kinley nods. Is is looking at me curiously.

"You're the writer?"

"The Author. Yah."

"Why are you apologizing to us? Don't we do whatever you want?"

"Yes. But."

"But?"

"Look, it's a collaboration. I try to write what is meaningful & sensible."

She looks harder at me.

"Do you want to fuck me?"

"No. Yes. No more than every other pretty girl in a short dress."

"Or long," smirks Christina.

"Why am I here?" Is asks.

"You were a minor character helping Christina."

"With a little girl-on-girl action as a bonus?" Smirks herself.

Damn smirks are sexy.

Kinley nods like I spoke.

"Now what?" asks Is. "Kinley & Christina are leaving. Jack is looking for Penny. What about me?"

"What would you like?"

"Why is my name Isis?"

"Your parents were professors."

"Where are they?"

"Back East?"

"Do they know where I am?"

"Not really. You left home when you were 16."

"Why? Were they abusive?"

"No. They loved you but they didn't give you the answers you needed."

"Meaning?"

"They were skeptics. More or less happy not knowing why."

"Why?"

"Yah. Why. Why are we here? And: where are we from? And: what are we supposed to be doing?"

"They cared. They just didn't know."

"Did they love me?"

"Yes. And your sister."

"Where is she?"

"She died very young. She got sick. Then you came."

"So that's why they are as they are?"

"Yes."

I'm about to give Is some nice jeans and a top when she shakes her head. "Do I like sex?"

"When it's good. You're a little lazy."

She nods. "Do I love Christina?"

"Christina is your friend. You haven't had too many. She makes you feel like you're worth something more than tits & ass."

Christina nods silently.

She also thinks you're hot as fuck.

Christina nods again.

"Anyway, you know she belongs to somebody."

"That obvious?" Christina complains & pouts. Sexier than her smirk. Kinley nods.

"Why did I come to this party?"

"You came out to California looking for sun & God. You weren't a virgin but you'd only been with boys. And they were fairly quick."

"Too quick."

"Yes. Of course. So I met a man?"

"Well, you ended up at a sort of commune."

"Was I a virgin? *Decide.*"

"Yah. Though you'd sucked a lot of cock. Seemed like the same thing only more?"

"So I was stupid."

"You just wanted life to get interesting."

"So . . . commune?"

"Yah, it was up north."

"How north?"

"Washington State."

Kinley & Christina & Jack all exchange looks. "Christa."

"Who?" asks Is.

"Tell," they say.

"She lived on a commune. She met Bowie the spy & he took her with him."

Christina snickers. "His harem."

"You're a harem of one, Christina," Kinley says. She laughs, as rarely.

"So I was on a commune?"

"Yah. For awhile."

"Did they treat me nice?"

"Lots of group sex & light philosophy."

"Why did I leave?"

"You were affected by Christa leaving. People tried to forget about her. You hadn't known her well but you were upset that nobody would talk about how she left or why."

"So what did I do?"

"You announced you were leaving & why. Gave a big speech at the communal dinner."

"What did I say?"

"This is my last meal with all of you. I'm leaving in the morning. But I'm not running away like Christa. Nobody is coming for me."

"We haven't talked about Christa much, have we? Like she was very important to us, & now she never was?"

"I left home because people didn't deal with shit. Go into things too much. Pain. Why I ended up here because it seemed it was different here."

"Since I'm going, it's not for me to decide what you do. And I still care for you all. I just have to go."

"And what did they do to me?"

"They would have kept you, even hurt you to do it."

"But?"

"Someone helped you."

"Who?"

"Helped you escape."

"Who?"

"Been helping you all your life."

"Who?"

"Her name is like a long *hmmm* or a series of click-clicks & noises."

"What do I call her?"

"Samantha."

Again, Kinley & Christina & Jack look at each other. "*Maya*."

"Who?"

"Samantha helped her too."

"So there to here?"

"You hitchhiked for awhile. Sucked a few cocks for rides. Carried a knife against more. Sometimes didn't use the knife."

"But here?"

"Yah, that part about wanting to meet the real Killer."

"Not him?" She points at Jack. We all laugh. Including Jack. He stops first.

"You were just tired. Feeling numb. Chasing the Killer, instead of maybe being his victim, maybe not, was exciting. You became obsessed."

"Am I still?"

I look at her seriously. "I don't know. This is the collaborative part of this book. Do you want to keep on chasing the Killer?"

Her eyes are a striking grey like cat's fur. Pretty, despite the makeup.

"Not for him to kill me. How would that help me if I really want answers?"

"No Heaven?"

She shakes her head. "My parents are right to look for meaning in this world, not beyond it."

"But?"

"This world is more than they could imagine."

I look at Jack. "And you?"

"Me? I'm looking for Penny."

"Can Isis help you?"

They look at each other.

"You were right. I didn't want death enough," she says, almost shyly.

"It wasn't you, Isis, it was me. I chickened out on fucking you. I was lost. I needed to feel something but despair."

I ask: "Can you two look for Penny without fucking each other along the way?"

They nod, Isis more enthused than Jack.

"You'll find her, Jack."

"Yah. Or you'll forget my story for a couple of years, & 300 pages."

Isis takes Jack's hand, gently. "He won't. This scene is his apology. And me. I won't fuck you but I will keep your spirits up." Jack smiles, mostly at her face. Isis nods to me, & she's wearing a set of tight blue jeans & a tight shapely pink blouse.

"Better?" She nods. Jack stares at me.

I look at Christina & Kinley. "I think you miss Maya."
 "Does she remember us?" Christina's half-serious.
 "Enough. Anyway, you know where to find her."
 "Boat Wagon?" Christina says, & Kinley looks positively hopeful.
 "Say your goodbyes. Then through that door."

Christina & Jack stand & face each other. "I'm sorry, Jack. I hope you find her."
 Jack smiles. "We'll meet again at some point. It's *that* kind of book." They laugh.
 Christina hugs Jack & then faces Isis. "Well done, sister. The rest of us sometimes aren't much more than T & A."
 Isis laughs. "No, you're not. I'm not either now."

Hand in hand, opening the door, Christina & Kinley walk through. The Tangled Gate so tall & massive. No door behind them 't'all.

Jack & Is walk through that same door back to the party.

xxxvi.

"Rebecca."
 "Raymond."
 "That went OK."
 She laughs. "Yes."
 "
 "Yes?"
 "And this?"
 "This?"
 "I don't know. I seem to want another scene with us."
 "OK."
 "I'm uncertain next."
 "That's OK."
 "
 "Is this still fun? Big fun?"
 "Yes. When I devote righteous hours to it, like tonight. Not try to pack too much into an hour. It deserves better."
 "Yes, it does."
 "Help me."
 "You don't need any. You know this."
 "Help me anyway."
 "OK, Raymond."

xxxvii.

Toby hops off the Black Dog Diner & offers his hand to Jazz. She steps down safely, but keeps his hand. He smiles a little bit, just.

The air smells pleasantly salty as they assess their where. A seaside village, not much of one. They walk through its not-much main street to arrive at the water. Still hands grasped. Toby trying to sort wanting to protect her from wanting to fuck her in every alleyway they pass.



No promising boats in the harbor. Toby begins to swear soundlessly but Jazz just dazzles him with her smile & leads him away from the harbor. The shore is more rocky than sandy but they slowly make their way.

“It’s OK, Toby.”

And it is. There is a small cove they come to & a pretty if odd sight. A small boat pulled up, wheels on its corners for land travel. ’Tis waiting.

Two black Kittees, bloo-eyed, red collars, white paws, are in the driver’s seat up front. Between them, a beautiful red-lipped Goldfish. All looking toward the hand-holding Jazz & Toby as they slowly approach.

Not a word as Jazz leads them right up to the Boat Wagon & they both climb in the back seat. Jazz smiling even more as she buckles them both in. Kisses his cheek, one, the other.

“Safety first, Toby.”

Finally, he smiles too. All this? Why not. Better than the UFOs.

But then Toby unbuckles & gets out. Gives the Boat Wagon a strong push into the water, then splashes & clambers back in. His smile to Jazz, to the Kittees & the Goldfish, is big, genuine, happily goofy.

The Kittees paddle them steadily out to sea, never a word. But the Goldfish turns to look back at them with a pretty smile.

“Are you comfortable?”

Toby & Jazz nod.

“It’s a nice trip.”

“You know where we’re going?” asks Toby. Jazz’s small soft hand hasn’t left his for a moment.

“To the Island?”

Toby nods. “Do you know why? Did they send you?”

“You needed a ride,” says the Goldfish. Sort of an answer.

Toby nods.

The day passes peacefully, the ocean calm, the steady paddling.

Toby dozes in Jazz’s arms for a long time, but starts awake to black clouds above & wild & wilder waves. He panics but Jazz holds him close.

“It’s OK. Look!” She points to a figure in the sky fast approaching.

It’s a . . . a . . . Sea Dragon? It’s OK?

He is impossibly big & yet when he is close none of the others fear. Lands on the sea close & gently swings his tail toward them. Despite the raising waves, the Kittees are able to paddle onto his tail & on up, & up, & up, to arrive on his great back.

“Let’s go, friends!” he says in a crackly but surely laughing voice, his wings beating faster & faster, *thwup! thwup! thwup!*, up into the skies, not slowing a moment until they burst through the stormy clouds to lovely sunshine.

"Thank you," whispers Toby, so very quietly.
 "My pleasure," growls Calgary the Sea Dragon pleasantly.

xxxviii.

Bowie & Iris have not returned to the mansion & its party yet. Iris is very patient. *Very.*

"Bowie."
 "Iris."
 "Very patient, Bowie?"
 He nods.
 "We don't have to go back."
 "Yah, we do."
 "You're not going to lose me."
 "We don't know that."
 "Look at me. Now."

They are sitting on the hill near the mansion, gotten no further away nor closer back.

Iris makes them face each other, cross their legs to twine them, wraps her arms around Bowie's tall, lanky torso. Hugs him, & more, & more, till he hugs her back. He does, helpless to Iris's touch.

"Tell me a story, Iris."
 "A story?"
 "What you were like when you were small. Who you were."
 "Why?"
 "So I know this isn't a good bad dream. So I can quiz the real Iris later if you're just her simulacra in my drugged or passed out mind. In some alley or prison."
 Iris laughs but not too much. She closes her eyes. Bowie nods, closes his.

"When I really think about it, deeply, I can sort of remember all my lives, all the me's scattered through the centuries."
 Bowie nods, breathes slowly.

"It's like we live lives that are different but the same."
 "Like what?"
 "The hole in our bedroom walls, in dreams. The caves & tunnels under the Tangled Gate. The Creatures."
 "But I'm not with all of you."
 Iris laughs. "We've already talked about this."
 Bowie sighs. Iris is trying to cheer him up. If she can't do it, it's not possible.
 Opens his eyes. "OK. How do we do this?"
 Opens her eyes. "You're ready?"
 He sighs. "I can't lose you, Iris, no matter what my father does."
 Iris smiles for every charm she's worth as she stands, reaches hands to Bowie's, pulls him up in a nice steady swoop.

Hands tightly clasped, they walk down the hill toward the big house.

xxxix.

30,000 feet above the Earth, floating along on unimaginably powerful engines, directed by great wings, 100 or more people sitting quietly in the half-lit plane's cabin, two people steering the flying ship. Amazing, commonplace.

Writing this book, I've got more or less a third of its pages with me, in a smaller notebook than the big one all the pages live in. Modern commercial air travel necessitates that one pack neatly & with much space economy. Decreases the annoyances when passing through security, when living several hours fairly tightly with so many others.

Many people sleep, since it's a smooth travel most of the way. Warm in cabin. TV screens facing each seat. Soda & snacks.

Is this part of the narrative? In a way. That is, I've wondered at these authorial pauses before, & concluded they belong as much as the rest.

Nearing 9 years writing this book, 2378 hand-written pages. Most published in my journal *The Cenacle*, read on my radio show "Within's Within: Scenes from the Psychedelic Revolution," excerpted in *Scriptor Press Sampler Annual*, online at *The ElectroLounge*, read for years at the Jellicle Literary Guild meetings.

Began this book while living in Seattle, then Portland, then home come to (when there) metro-Boston.

But not writing for more than this, for money, or greater distribution. For fun, heavy & light.

What then? Something about defined, contained moments. Low airy hum in the cabin, miles passed in seconds. Many kinds of lights, power lights, indicator lights, reading lights. Yellow, orange, blue. Countless little TV screens, all different.

Grey rug, textured like tiny squares. Sleeping faces, staring ones, watching ones, reading ones. Airline is called JetBlue; I don't know why.

I'm listening to the "Hippie Vibes Show," #21, on my iPod, Polly, B-52s just finishing, had Polly since I'd guess about 2003, nearly 12 years? Wow.

My sneakers are old, worn, but still wearable. My blue jeans new. My eyeglasses, Lennonspecs, got in 1997, over 17 years ago, at an optometrist shop in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Moved with me out West, back East, out West again, back East again, attended 11 Burning Man Festivals I went to, 1999-2009, & I hope 2015 Firefly Fest up in Vermont this coming July.

Things I wear, carry along, like this pen, traces to 1981 & Hartford, CT, Espresso black pens, look different now, different company makes them, write the same, more or less.

My green cell phone, Gumbee, had now 4 or 5 years, repaired once—my Thoughts Pad, full of writings like this, & *Many Musics* poetry, yellow pads in it, I think I've had it maybe 20 years—

In my bag, my MacBook Pro, Eurydice, about 8 years in my possession, quite a few repairs, still rocking, still very important to my presswork—

"Lifevest under your seat
Chaleco Salvavidas Debajo De Su Acento"

Coca-cola
 cherry zero
Family Guy
 Fynn McCool.
 Calorie Free Cola with Cherry Flavor
 and other natural flavors
 E V E N M O R E S P A C E
 Correction: EVEN MORE S P A C E

Calgary the Sea Dragon flying the Boat Wagon safely to the Island

Bowie & Iris walking toward the door, hands clasped

Kinley & Christina entering the Tangled Gate, approaching the Fountain for a drink

Maya purring in her sleep amongst her many Creature friends

Peaceful till landing in 30-45 minutes,
 high above the continent—

~~"Diamond Lill, Diamond Lill,"~~

xl.

Genny tosses & turns in her Queenly bed in the Castle on the Island. Her various witchly girls sleep twined with her. Naked, by the Queen's insist.

The red-haired one her favorite. They spent a lot of hours tonguing deep between each other's legs. Keeps this girl shaven clean for her preference.

Genny isn't staying, & she sure as hell isn't going without Preacher. But when they are in his bed, she's slow, nearly cold.

"What is it, Genny?"

I'm so sorry.

"I love you. I'm sorry I brought you here."

"What is it? Why can't I be with him? *Tell me.*"

"I don't know."

I grasp your slender torso by my fingernails driving into your shoulders.

"Please."

"Tell me. Or I'll send you out like the rest I don't want anymore."

"No."

"Tell me."

"Your food. It must be."

"I'm poisoned?"

"I guess so. It's your role."

I roll off the bed, plenty big for the nest of girls I keep, or kept.

"Tell me."

"You turn away the King & he finds the demon girl."

I want to scream but don't. Think, Genny. *Think*.

"How long?"

"M'lady?"

"Till it wears off. You'll fetch me clean food. Dispose of the poison."

She makes to protest. I shake my head.

"Do you love me?"

Blue eyes down, perky nipples hard on her pretty high breasts. I can taste her wetness across the room.

"Yes," she says barely.

"Will you do as I say?"

She nods. Smiles. I feel a cock I don't have harden on me for that smile. Press on.

"When we leave, we'll take you too."

"Take?"

"Do you want to come with Preacher & me?"

"Come?"

I nod. "Preacher used to have a harem. I don't imagine he'd mind tasting you along. *Taking*, I mean," & I smirk. I feel better already.

"The King?" She does the shy demur thing again.

I crawl onto the bed, right on top of her, kiss her tongue deep, slowly, & again, & again. Twine our fingers between her thighs & she moans for me. I whisper barely not silence. "Don't . . . you . . . want . . . him . . . to *fuck* . . . your . . . wet . . . tight . . . cunt?"

She orgasms, & again, & again as my fingers drive into her.

A yes, then.

To cover our intent to go, we continue to do everything as we have. Merry is but one of my several girls & they all turn at pleasing their Queen. Yet, & still, my visits to the King are cold. I notice him more often around that girl. Sweet face, sweet ass. I'd like her for my harem. Mostly I want her out of his bed.

Merry brings me what she is able, small fruits & nuts. I half-starve but the poison leaves me.

Comes a night I am not appointed to visit. She & I leave the nest of girls, separately, & down the silent hallway to his room.

Empty.

"He keeps her elsewhere," she whispers.

"Where?"

Merry looks at me like this will end her to say, like she has not trusted my will even now. Breathes hard, takes my hand, leads me to a far room. Locked.

Merry smiles at me, twitches?

"Go."

"You're coming?"

"No."

"Why?"

"This is my world. Not yours. The Gate-Keeper is letting you go."

I start to talk but her finger to lips she pushes door open for me.



Desiree Madrid

She's face down in his pillows, sweet ass high, him entering her from behind, slow deep, slower deeper. *Slower, deeper.*

Doesn't feel me behind him at first, my arms around him, my breasts pressed against him. For a moment makes to pull out but I say: "No. Harder."

So he begins to fuck her harder & harder, her moans giving way to cries to crying as he fucks her harder & harder. "Now cum for me," I whisper, still wrapped around him. He moans too. "*Again.*" He cries & cums again. "*Again!*" He fucks her 'till he is spent & she is passed out.

"My Queen."

"*Genny.*"

"This role."

"No. That ass."

"Yes. No."

"*Yes.*"

"What now?"

"We leave."

His look leaps from shameful to hope.

"They'll let us."

He nods.

"Dress."

He has only a regal red robe.

"Fine. It'll do."

I look back as we leave at her fine fucking ass.

"Miss that?"

He smiles, smacks my ass. Good thing I lost a couple of pounds starving out that poison. Then again, no. *He loves me.*

xli.

Self. Ralph. Cordelia. Holding hands, walking outside. Had to pass through the Hotel Noah first, of course, it containing within it the Nada Theater or Film School.

But now outside. A city street. Still pretty dark. Street lamps, wind-blown detritus. Calm. Still. They walk.

Come to a nearby establishment. Sign atop door says, "Luna T's Cafe." There are unlit neon signs in the window. A poster: "Noisy Children, Back at T's! Fridays & Saturdays, 9:30 p.m. No cover, as always!"

They sit, the three of them, her in the middle of course, on the low stone wall in front of Ts. Holding hands. She shivers.

"Do you want to go back to the Theatre?" one asks her.

She shivers, shakes her head.

"What then?"

She looks up & down the street, dark, empty, streetlamps, smiles sharply, nods to her knees. "Take turns down there, warming me."

Which to go first? Well, he wants to leave us for Maya, so he should know what he's leaving.

She has no panties on so just a matter of her spread thighs & positioning himself between. She isn't very wet at first, being cold, so he nods to his partner to kiss her & get some action going up there. And . . . better. That & his tongue's persist. He laps her to a nice small squeaking orgasm, then they trade turns. Second orgasm's bigger. Feeling warmer now, she's pleased.

She takes her turn on knees before each of them but playfully won't finish either one. "Take care of each other. I'll watch," she says, very pleased.

Were they not best friends, in acid & beyond, was she not the first girl they ever loved who was also real, & let herself be touched, had she not horndogged them out painfully much, well, who knows? One gingerly kneels before the other, looks at her pretty face, she licks her lips at him smiling, & he kisses the other's cock. Kisses, licks, uses his fingers gently. His friend surprises both of them & moans. Takes it in slowly, like he's seen her do, to him, to both of them. Then opens his mouth & throat & closes his eyes & pushes forward, sucking his friend's cock in, & in, & in, sucking harder & harder & harder 'till his friend is thrashing & she is moaning too, to help, & he cums, & he sucks, & he cums, & he drinks, & he cums, & he drinks it all, sucking & sucking until he has it all & they are both shaking & shaking.

Looks up finally.

"You OK?"

"Yah. Thanks. You?"

"Yah. Did I hurt you?"

"No."

"My turn?"

Both smile as awkwardly as possible. Love each other. Mostly, *love her unreasonably*.

"Yah. Let's."

xlii.

[There is a handsome blonde boy I am new friends with. He is a very important friend to me & it appears we are going to long travel together.

[I'm at a counter & the strange girl finally appears, but I forget where we're going & hurry back to him to ask, he click-clicks & noise-noises, no *really*?

[We are close—lovers? No. I wonder that & conclude: No.

[We get on the bus together, he has no bags or really anything, I have my knapsack, notebooks, pads, brushes, pens, the single small canvas I allowed myself.

[We sit across the aisle from each other, smiling, but shy. I think: did he try to kiss me? Did I at least get to know if I wanted more? No, I'm unkissed still.

[His smile over to me grows heavy-lidded & he naps. Sleeps deeply, mouth open a bit, pink tongue poking out over his teeth. I feel it more clearly now. The curiosity. The tingle. *The want*.

[But I draw myself instead. The layers of clothes I wear to shroud my breasts, my body. I touch it at night, my eyes closed, exploring, what feels nice, what feels *really* nice.

[But it's not enough really. I can't surprise myself. I can't romance myself. I can only get relief.

[So I follow him. He smiles, seems to wait for me. I raise my finger to wait, he nods. I hurry back to the Queen's room. Rucksack, notebooks, canvas.

[I follow him around that strange corner & feel different. Older? How? Hurry after him until we get to the place we got on this bus.

[The Queen would touch me in ways that blurred me with pleasure. I loved her, a little, but knew she yearned the King. She taught me to make her moan, & I would, but she would moan for him.

[My next drawing I have fewer clothes on. I always seem to do this. Undress myself, picture by picture.

[He does not stir. He is a boy, a pretty boy, not like the Queen yearns. Had I gone with them!

[We arrive to a city, a big city, & the Gate-Keeper has more cameras on us now, following us from the cavernous subterranean bus station. He holds my hand as we find the escalator, as boys & men look at me from all sides, look at him too.

[Through the shops, out the glass door, onto the street, hands clasped tighter. I let the Gate-Keeper's cameras lead us, he is patient, showing us walking street after crowded street, letting his cameras lose us, find us again, focusing on his wondering face, keeping away from my impatient one.

[The cameras follow us into a hotel, darkly lit, wooden, quite old, up flight after flight, me leading, finally to a floor, a door, & inside a very big room, maybe it was many ones back once.

[We meet the friends we've been coming to. Mostly boys hardly men. They fawn over him. Do they want to lie with him? Does he know how?

[There is one among them of substance. He's the chief poet in their clan. His books of poetry lie around this big room, among its crates & old cushions, next to its elaborate stereo & jazz records.

[I pick one, let its pages open. Lines:

How old is the sky?

*What do penguins like to do
with refrigerators?*

My eyes are blue. I love Mac and Cheese.

Pages on:

*Before five went to school.
first time.
Cried for an hour, looked
at fish.
At twelve, it will
happen someday.*

"That's his second book. Nobody liked it. His first was great. It's why we came to him. And his third is great too. You gotta be loyal."

"You're a . . . girl . . . too?"

She nods. "I figured you needed a friend. They've kind of taken yours."

"Oh! Him. We haven't. We don't."

"But you like him?"

"I guess. We've traveled here together. He seems kind of innocent."

She laughs. Not meanly, but I guess I get her point.

We're sitting against a wall while my boy & the others & the chief poet figure out what jazz record will make them most excited.

"Have you . . . with one of them?"

"Just him. I think I was his first girl."

"Oh."

She laughs. "I'm glad it was him. We taught each other. He was very gentle. 'Till I wanted more."

"Will he want me to?"

"I don't think so. That second book. That was when we were all doing stuff. When we stopped, he wrote his third book. It was much better for everyone."

"Oh."

[I wonder why I am here. What does the Gate-Keeper intend for me?]

"Would you like to see me with her?" asks Cordelia with her strange smile.

Self & Ralph say nothing.

"I'm serious. I think we three need a little adventure before we let you go chasing after Maya."

"Is this so you can find the Gate-Keeper finally?"

"No. Maybe. She's cute."

"Are you tired of us?"

"No."

"What then?"

Cordelia closes her eyes, her hands each holding one of theirs, either side of her. Holding gently. Speaks softly & slowly. "I'm not sure what I am or what I want. But you two are my best friends & I want to keep you until I can't. Can we go?"

They nod. What else?

To be continued in Cenacle | 93 | June 2015

Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Ten

*"Try to forget me.
Try to erase me."*

—Pearl Jam, "Jeremy," 1992.

xliii.

There is a square brick building on the other side of the tracks, yet near no station stop.

If you cross the tracks to the building & push in the unlocked door, you will come to a seemingly empty room.

And yet this building is of great importance, for it is where the Gate-Keeper comes to edit his film **RemoteLand**, where he will spend sleepless months at a time on this work, sometimes nights upon nights on a single scene—

Then, done, he will cause everything to be packed back up into trunks & cases to be traveled elsewhere for his purposes.

Sometimes, tho, he will feel worn, & dull, & so need to shoot something short & complete, or possibly a fragment, & determine later if it borders his masterwork, integrates, or not—

He'll accumulate these bits & pieces until one lucky evening when he is out at his editing building, & there's mushroom tea, & a basket of fruits & nuts, cheeses, a container of taboule, to boot—even seemingly immortal filmmakers need to keep up their strength—

How, you might ask, does such as the Gate-Keeper get his ideas & inspirations? Well, it helps to have a friend like Benny Big Dreams.

Gate-Keeper would visit Dreamland whenever his **RemoteLand** filming responsibilities would yield or necessitate a break. A catnap here or there, a sabbatical.

He'd use a camera he & Benny contrived for the purpose. To the touch, & eye, it was a soft lovely wooden device, light in the hand.

"You could just record by your eye," Benny smiles, knowing his old friend's answer.

"I prefer a camera in my hand," Gate-Keeper says, knowing Benny knows.

Benny lets Gate-Keeper roam the common areas of Dreamland, where images pool & belong to no one person, being, place or time, roam & film—

"Safe travels" Benny sneers fondly—

This all to explain this night & the work Gate-Keeper is reviewing—hence—

There is a third world market, stalls, animals, noise, friendly chaos. All this generally filmed for a bit & then a focus on one man, covered in roots, vines, spiders, yet unperturbed.

The man stands seeming casually in front of a door that is entrance to a whole other place down below, a kind of hotel for the very elite, run by the poor & indigent of the city, & so Gate-Keeper follows through the door & on down into the hotel, too shiny for him here, yet an inner itch heads him on to what turns out to be a ballroom, filled to overflow, men in tuxedos, women in long bright gowns, & the speaker at the podium is human-shaped but not human—

Speaks: "One learns, not right away, that one is part of the neural network flow, that humanity as physical bodies no longer exists but is preserved & perpetuated as data which, within which, appears to be a beautiful, peaceful, green green world!"

There is clapping, lots of it, till he hushes with an urgent hand.

"But this is only one possible path forward from here. You all know this. And it is not the most likely. But that is why we are here tonight."

More wilder cheering & the Gate-Keeper grimaces & drifts along from there—

The hotel peters out rather oddly, not just a wall & done, more like trees, small, weak ones, then less weak, we were in a hotel, now a kind of menacing woods, at least menacing at first, the Gate-Keeper films randomly as he walks along.

Comes to a building in these Woods, a large one room ramshackle structure, climbs a set of broken steps, on in—

Immediately he realizes this is the wrong room & he should go. It is a fairly empty room but there's something odd here, something on the walls, floors, ceiling, on his hands: numbers, letters, symbols, words, Gate-Keeper panics & is unsure where the door is, he can't focus on the individual characters when he tries, finally pushes through the half-found door outside—

They don't leave his skin or the ground around him. Not on the trees but everywhere else.

He moves quickly through the Woods now, impatiently, knowing he could call on Benny at

any point, *or simply wake up*, but he refuses, these numbers & symbols & formulae on his arms & body & camera & ground around him—he pushes on—

Finally he blinks, blinks harder, & he's out of the Woods, & here is come to something.

The air is troubled, rippled, *wrong* feeling. It's night-time. He is out of doors. There are around him piles of bodies, silent, high piles of bodies. Are they dead?

He films, high & low, close close to the bodies, the faces are mute, devoid of living personality, there is a switch on his camera, he flicks it, & the camera can now sniff the bodies, if they are dead, it is still uncertain they are—

And there are enemies around, he realizes, he cannot stay here, he has to move, but these bodies, he pushes at them, strikes them with his camera, they are slow, sluggish, but begin to rise, to move, there is a cave nearby, a tunnel away from here, & we move along, & further, & faster, Gate-Keeper feels powerful, feels like he is *all* of these people at once, all of them is him, he is moving all of him along—

Gate-Keeper sips his mushroom tea, nibbles his cheese, & watches what he filmed.

On his left hand, the forehand, are still the moving numbers & letters & symbols, constantly moving & changing, he is awake, yet there they are.

The fragment ends suddenly & now a classroom. High school? I am myself, an ancient old man who does not look older than 45 or 50, sitting at an uncomfortable desk, in the front, & a glance around tells me they are all young. The girls in tight jeans, halter tops, mini-skirts. The boys more indifferently dressed. I don't know what they see when they look at me—

The teacher looks like the one from back in that ballroom, still human-shaped but not human. He reads from the book I notice all of us, including me, have open on our desks.

“The half-dead bodies were roused by the stranger to march with him, through the caves & tunnels, as tho a destination, as tho he could bring them somewhere & rouse them back to life.

“They limped & staggered behind him for what was likely miles until they came to a central great cavern. In its center, a very tall tree rose up high, high, & its top seemed to disappear into a blurry shimmer—

“No longer led, since the stranger had no more ideas, & was exhausted, the half-dead bodies shuffled around until they fell in random places on the rocky floor. Oddly, but surely, the bodies moved slowly toward one another, eventually mimicking the piles the stranger had originally roused them from.

“Those watching all this were very quiet, though they sniffed with great interest.”

The Gate-Keeper stops the film at this point & a train rolls loudly by, rusted cars heavily weighted with freight, shambling by. He opens the shade next to the door & watches its passing from the shadows. The mushroom tea has focused him to his work; he feels calm & peaceful.

Sits back in his armchair, the train passed, daylight nearly gone. Nods, makes a clicking noise, & candles in every part of the seemingly empty room, empty save for his chair & work-station, light up at once.

His armchair is grey & old & leans back crookedly, but he has grown comfortable with it over time, & rarely tumbles out.

Speaks to you. "This whole idea of a film thousands or tens of thousands of years old troubles you, confuses, whatever. And myself, what am I? You wonder. Where do I come from? Am I a man?"

Not very tall, somehow heavy yet also well-muscled, bald, his eyes a shocking tender blue, he gazes 'pon ye quietly, no smile or frown.

"I didn't begin at the beginning tho I ended up there. For a long time it seemed like I was picked up & flung from one time & place to the next, every so often, & I would film, & then be flung again to another time/place."

He laughs. "I have two theories about my origins. The first is that I am from one place. This would make sense, that I come from somewhere. The second is that I come from numerous places. Like the Princess you so enjoy. Known as Iris, as Chrisakah, et cetera."

Bows his head, as though thinking. Raises again. "I don't think either is so easy to prove. I am not from Emandia, or elsewhere, like her. And I am not nearly immortal, like her kind.

"I am growing older. Yet not always, not continuously. Sometimes I arrive somewhere & am a little younger. But only a little most times. Whoever flings me can only de-age me so much."

The one-room building is now fully dark, save for the many candles. Even these struggle to illuminate it. Gate-Keeper snaps his fingers & all the lights go out. The room calms.

"Oh, & my name. Such confusion. This book introduced me & then later the Tangled Gate. Am I its keeper? I don't . . . think . . . so. I think my name refers to my film. I think who titled me does not understand that films aren't literally real, & thus I keep the Gate at its entrance.

"I don't . . . think . . . I began . . . as a filmmaker either. Sometimes I think I only wish to know this. But mostly I make my film & delight in it." He turns from you, & me, & resumes his work.

xliv.

Kinley & Christina are still sitting at the Fountain, each having cupped a handful of water for the other to drink.

“What would happen if we didn’t drink? Just walked in?”

“I don’t know, Christina.”

“Dumb to try?”

“No. I think it helps, but wouldn’t hurt if we didn’t.”

Christina nods. Feels so much happier now they’re here.

“What now?”

“Well, it would be good to find Maya & see if she’s OK.”

“And if she has quills or feathers yet.”

Kinley laughs. He seems happier too.

Christina says, “That means Creatures.”

Kinley nods. “But I don’t think we should think of any of this as a linear prerogative.”

“Linear?”

“I mean, I don’t think things happen in an intended or intentional order here.”

Christina makes a face. Kinley snickers.

“I’m saying way too obscurely that we can *wish* to find Maya, & carry this wish along, but we can’t set out to find her.”

“Oh.”

“But I think we will.”

“What about the Kitty Wagon?”

Kinley laughs again.

“I think it will come along when we need it for our wish.”

Christina nods, stands, holds out her hand. “Well, we can walk right now. And it will come along some . . . other . . . right now?” Kinley is pulled up, nodding, “Exactly! I think . . .”

Going past the Fountain entails a choice. Two paths lead away from it. So: left or right?

“Which?” they ask each other simultaneously, & laugh again.

Kinley’s look is now strange. “Both?”

Christina’s look isn’t strange. “What? How?”

They sit back down on the Fountain’s edge again. Kinley thinking hard, Christina spooked.

For the first time, Kinley realizes he is not wearing the dress suit he had on for the last Realist party they went to. He’s wearing his overcoat. Checks its inner pockets. Secret Books!

Christina tries to calm. Remembers she wished for this. Wished for the Boat Wagon & Maya too, but them not yet. But this is better than those parties.

“Can they help us, Kinley?”

“I’m sure they can.”



Come Stay in Impville!



“What about all that time you spent studying the Gate from the Tower?”

Kinley nods but says nothing. But rather than her waiting while he studies the Secret Books, he hands her several.

“We need the fine brain inside your sexy body to figure this out,” he says fondly.

Pleased, & tasked, Christina nods & begins to study them too.

xlvi.

The Boat Wagon atop Calgary the Sea Dragon’s head, or shnoggin as it’s called, is borne along many miles over the sea until in the distance a bit of land comes into the view.

“The Island, Toby!” Jazz says happily. Toby nods, but isn’t so sure. Still, her hand is still in his grasp, & so he wonders if it so much matters.

Yet, too, he’s bringing her to her Master, or former Master, & to her sister Ashleigh. *What does it mean? Will they take her hand from him?*

Calgary continues to fly them steadily toward this land. *Thwup! Thwup! Thwup!* Jazz pulls him closer, nestles herself in his loose grasp.

No, he concludes, *they won’t take her from him. No.*

“What is it, Toby?” her bright eyes now upon him.

Takes the plummet, talks. “I don’t know what will happen when we get there, Jazz.”

She smiles at him, rivens him, mends him again. “It’s OK. I’m not worried.”

“Why?”

“You came for me, Toby. You’re not who you were. You’re going to protect me. I’m going to protect you too.” She kisses him softly on the cheek.

Is this romance? Is it some other kind of love? Toby has no words, or ways to explain it. He doesn’t kiss her back, cup her breast, make a move to twine with her. Instead, to stay his inner fool, he smiles lightly at her.

Calgary begins to descend to the rocky shore of the Island. “Nearly there!” his funny friendly growly voice announces.

Calgary lands us in the foamy shallow water, & the Kittees drive the Boat Wagon down his back & along his tail & back into the water. We wave & thank him, he nods & smiles & *thwup! thwup! thwup!* flies off to the sea.

The Kittees paddle the Boat Wagon to a sandy gap in the rocks. I get out & help push us further up on land. Jazz unbuckles & I help her out. Her smile at these small gestures could make a late-blooming gentleman or knight of me.

The Kittees & their Fish Friend remain in their seats, though, & I realize they aren't coming any further. I'm sad for this a bit. But nod & help them push back into the water.

"Thank you," I say, humbly.

The Kittees' blue eyes stare me steadily & the Fish says, "Keep her hand close. See you again."

The Kittees start paddling & eventually their strange little craft is on its way. Jazz smiles & throws them kisses.

I splash back to her to follow the Fish's advice.

xlvi.

One more editing session & the Gate-Keeper will spread out his mat & sleep. Simply sleep, no filming, no Benny Big Dreams.

Among his side projects is one very dear to him. It seems to have been one he's been doing a long time. A TV show.

[*Trip Town?* you ask, eager to know finally that it & **RemoteLand** are, indeed, connected. We're not going to find that out right now. Soon, though. Maybe.]

It's called *Clarendon Island* & it's a show in love with the small details of its characters. Maisie, the blonde girlish protagonist. Shane, its large-eyed handsome brown bear. The trio of Faeries who come in & out of the story unpredictably.

He will spend stretches at a time filming episodes of the show. Or, rather, stretches of story he will later edit into episodes.

How to explain? The Island is real, not a set. The performers live there, created for the roles they play, & yet aware they are playing roles. Some will, have, come & gone over the years. To other lives, to the rest of the world? Something.

So they know him as the Camera-man, not the Gate-Keeper. They don't know of his life or projects off the Island. They are always glad to see him when he comes.

Does the show go on when he's not there? Do they rest, or rehearse, or suntan on the gorgeous singing sands of the beach? He does not know. He isn't there to have such conversations, ask such questions. They are glad to see him when he comes, & all to their places, & the Writer/Director cries, "Action!"

Ah yes, the Writer/Director. They have been separate people at times, even more than one of each.

The current one considers himself an *auteur* of sorts, whose scripts are more like scriptures to be revered deeply.

The film he has now to look at is from his most recent visit. A strange one. One of tumult & change.

Nobody was on the beach when he arrived. Unusual. So he'd simply walked up the beach

into the Woods, & still found nobody. Eventually I come to the Boulevard, & guess to keep walking to the Cafe where he often works.

The shops along the way are closed up, though it isn't nighttime. There are no sidewalks, just wide street with shops on either side. No cars though. No people or anyone else right now. Nobody.

There he is, no surprise. Sitting at his usual table in that courtyard, head of dark spiky hair & large square black glasses bent low to his work. No doubt: a stubby pencil & a small blank book, colored cover shiny with spangles & stars.

Considers. Waves a hand & calls softly. "Hello! I've arrived!"

He looks up briefly, sees me, says nothing. Resumes writing. I'm used to this often being the case. He's kind of a nut. The cast complains. I nod, listen. Maisie pouts. We've considered each other more than once over time. Not yet.

Maybe when he quits to go make feature films or write novels. He can't stay perpetually. Yet I need a writer & director. It wouldn't work otherwise.

The courtyard is empty but him & many tables. The cafe adjacent is closed. Even the nearby stone chess tables are empty of players.

I take a black metal chair & sit across from him, him scribbling for life on the round metal table between us. Its strange perforated design of circles, diamonds, clovers, more obscure shapes. Nearly a language?

"Where's everybody, Abe?"

No answer.

I hit the table with my fist. His pencil, book, & glasses jump & skew.

Looks up, those bleary brown eyes he gets when composing. Barely sees me.

"We're leaving."

"Leaving?"

"Yah, going to a new Island. I'm writing the season-ending episode that explains it, sends us on our way."

I lean forward & tap his black square glasses into place. He smiles, still vaguely.

"Why?"

"They're not happy here. So we're going to travel."

"Travel?"

"Maybe one Island a season. I don't know. I'm going along for now."

"Were you going to tell me, or was I just going to show up to an empty Island?"

Obscurely, he shakes his head.

I sigh. "Is that the script? Are you done?"

“Almost.”

“Finish. I’ll wait.”

So he resumes his scribbling & I sit, well, I sat then & waited.

When he finished, he was very excited, just got up & ran off to the shore. I guessed the cast & crew were waiting there for him.

So I followed, but reluctantly. Would I follow them, was I that committed to this?

See, here’s why I followed, here’s why I bothered. It’s because I remembered watching this show when I was a boy. It was in my small bedroom, on my black-&-white TV, I got it at the Goodwill with my paper route money. It worked good, especially when I saved up too & bought one of those TV antennas you turn with a dial.

And I watched *Clarendon Island* on this TV of mine. What? Me? A boy? How from then me to me now? A boy to some kind of thousands-year-old film-making Creature?

I try to remember as I follow him to the shore.

I remember even bits of being a young man. Those paintings I did. The buzz in them. How I stopped sending paintings to my dealer but, eventually, resumed painting. But then the paintings became something else. I guess I begged the buzz a little, before it left.

For it was leaving me for awhile.

This has never so vividly come back to me like now, while I’m chasing that crazy Abe, why remember tonight? Why remember this vividly?

I asked the buzz to give me something more than paintings, something big I could spend many years on.

This is what I did: I went out in the White Woods, I knew what they were, & I brought a very full bottle of mushroom tea. More than I’ve ever dared. Way more than.

I came to a clearing I knew was magical, more so than just being in those Woods at all. In full moonlight, the clearing seemed to be shaped like a temple. The temple almost real enough to walk into.

I walked into the temple that night, right through the door, into a room bright, glaringly bright. At first I just stumbled around. Nothing.

“Help me! I need more than paintings that freak people out! I need something grander! Give me something I can spend my life on! Please! I know you are going away from me. Help me first!”

I walked through that room, crying like that, until I noticed there was a door on the other side, & I staggered toward it, & pushed through it, & fell to the floor.

Quiet a moment.

Looked up. A kind of office. Walls lined with books. A fireplace. An armchair. Something in that chair.

A film camera.

But my boyhood? I still have that black-&-white TV set, I keep it at a restaurant I sometimes run for amusement. It's a good way to show humble to an occasional inquirer I have to deal with.

So that's why I'm here & following Abe, because once I watched this program on TV & was a boy. I was a boy somewhere, I had a paper route, a room, a TV, an antenna. *It's true.*

I hurry.

xlvi.

He arrives to the shore of the Island, sees noone. Looks up. The Sea Dragon is already far up in the sky. I simply filmed it as it flew farther & farther away.

Thwup! Thwup! Thwup!

Sitting in my editing hut tonight, sipping my mushroom tea, I am sad again & anew. I don't suppose this is a film I would do much with. Just a movie stub souvenir for me alone.

Will they film the new season without me? I don't think so. I think they will summon me when I'm needed. It's how it's always worked.

You see, I had to find *Clarendon Island* in the first place. I mean, I was a watcher & it wasn't until I began my work, had *long* begun my work, that I could get near to it.

It was why I helped to conceive *TripTown*. [*Yes! Connection!*] Helped because I had a secret purpose that my partners didn't.

It was the cross-over episode between *TripTown* & *Clarendon Island*. The moment when I skipped from one to the other.

I was simply the hotshot director of **RemoteLand**. Why would I do a TV show?

They were younger than me, I guess, newer to the work than me. Came to me thinking maybe I would remember their names for some future need. No chance I'd hire them right now.

Came to my diner. Long hair, tie-dye rags. But serious. OK.



Didn't like coffee. Juice. OK.

Had an idea for a TV show. A network maybe interested in it. My name involved in *any* way would sell it.

"What's it called?"

They were silent.

"It's called *Trip Town*," I suggest.

They smile, pleased, scared by my bluntness.

"I'll write the two-hour premiere episode. Then I'll hand it over to you two. You'll write every episode save a few for guest writers. Good ones. Not TV writers. You'll coach their crazy literary ideas into workable scripts."

They nodded, wordless.

"I'll return once a season to write the season premiere. Bank on it."

They were trembling. Close to crying.

"Now go sell it. My script will be in that mailbox out there in two weeks. The red handle will be up. Fetch it but don't come in."

OK, I was being a little mean. But I wrote it. And the next season. And the next. And when it was cancelled they came to me desperate & I told them who to see to finance syndication.

And along the way I wrote the crossover episode that got me into *Clarendon Island*.

Of course I was made to agree to take one of them with me. The one sailing away on that Sea Dragon with the whole cast & crew. Abe.

I'm done. This hasn't calmed me down.

Maybe I'll let Cordelia finally come on set. Maybe she's ready to be my new lead actress.

The boys can come for now, I guess. They're sweet. Her flavor is . . . something else.

xlvi.

Well, "new lead actress" again. She was the first on *Trip Town*. She was the reason it got on the air, & I'd guess part of the reason it was cancelled.

Those hippy writer kids sold the network on the show, & it was mostly by my name & guarantee to write the season premieres.

But I didn't have a script. I didn't even have an idea to go on. I *wanted* to write on *Clarendon*

Island & my challenge was to create a show singular of itself, but eventually ready for my cross-over idea.

Eventually it came together but at first it didn't.

I don't have an actual home anymore. I stay instead, when I do, & it's not often, in a strange hotel in a mid-sized Northeastern US city.

Maybe it's sentiment. There was a period of time, after that strange moment in the White Woods, its clearing, Temple, film camera, when I doubted.

How to tell. I walked out of the White Woods with my spooky magic camera but I didn't know what to do next.

I didn't have a home, just a rucksack. Some jeans, underwear, thick button-down shirts. A very few books. A radio, pink, shaped like a white-faced cat. AM-FM. Cassette player too.

I walked. I walked & walked. I had a canteen, blue, shaped like the old Kool-Aid containers. Souvenir of my childhood. Saved up for it. Drank a lot of Kool-Aid then. Now only water. I walked for miles & miles, slept maybe two hours a night, wherever I was—

Eventually I ended up in that mid-sized Northeastern US city & it was no more interesting than the highways, villages, towers, schools, factories—

I filmed it all, & especially the forests, rivers, swamps, & so on between those other places—but it wasn't a story, a narrative—

But the hotel. It was tall, very tall for this not-so-big city, & I couldn't see its top, there were always clouds up there, *always*—

It occurred to me that I should walk into that hotel & get a room & sleep a whole night. Maybe it would help.

Called the Hotel Noah. I stood there in that dusky evening, it was late April, a cool night, stood there trying to figure out how old this hotel was, & I couldn't figure it out, anymore than how tall it was—

So I walked through the front door, first time of many over the years, & always have found it disorienting entering, the indoor glare of the chandeliers that felt like summer sunshine, the low *hmmmmmm* that was ever present, that comforted, the lobby sometimes longer, sometimes wider than other times, & the shifting mirrors embedded in the walls, each one different, more than a funhouse, much more, these were more than image distorters, much more. One would show you hundreds of years old, another as a kind of embryonic starchild, a third as a sort of Creature, or sometimes Beast, shifting, shifting; that first time I fell to my knees as I took it all in, I felt paralyzed & wanted to leave—all I'd wanted was a room!

Then someone was helping me up. Gently, firmly. Smaller than me, but I felt strength in his hand, his arm. Even as I stood, he still kept his hand on my arm.

"It's OK," he said softly, gruffly.

"What is . . . this place?" I panted.

"My name," he replied slowly, "is Cosmic Early."

He led me to a room he said was not being used, next to his. I was still weak, not knowing why. Like a nurse or servant, he led me to this room & undressed me from my travel-smudged clothes. Led me to the bathroom & gave me a discrete washing down. Pulled the curtains closed, turned on the bedside lamp, & got me tucked into bed. Pulled up a chair next to me.

"Shouldn't I check in?" I asked weakly.

He held up the room's key. "It's taken care of." Smiling.

I wanted to know who he was, what this place was. I wondered why I didn't want simply to leave. But I didn't. It's like I had been walking for days & miles to arrive here.

The truth of the matter is this: I told Cosmic Early my dilemma, & he offered to help me. I didn't know then he was some kind of legendary underground reclusive author. That *nobody* knew he lived in this hotel. Here he was known as someone else. Liked. More than liked. Here he was part of things, & that other writing life was totally partitioned.

"Why did you tell me?" I asked much later.

He laughed. "It wasn't anything complex. I needed a friend, a confidante. Another man, like me. Mortal, vulnerable, full of questions. I could tell you were smart, maybe a little lost too." Gate-Keeper laughs. "That all sounds nice. And it's true, we're friends now. But that's not why in the first place."

Silence. "I had to tell that story, get it out, & it couldn't be in one of my books, under my name."

"Why?"

"Because they wouldn't read it. It would never get to her."

"Who?"

"The girl in the story."

"You mean Cordelia?"

"Yes."

"She's real?"

"She was."

"And your friend?"

"Yes."

"The whole thing?"

Gate-Keeper grimaces. They are sitting in his room, seated opposite each other across a small table with a chess-style board between them. But no chess pieces. Each one looks nearly identical to the others: inch-high panda bears, guised in flouncy skirt, big laughing eyes & mouth. Paused between games at the moment.

“I guess I never thought it was true. You told it so dispassionately, like a fiction you were proud of. But a good fiction, no more.”

Early touches one of his pieces & it cackles softly. “It was a long time ago,” he says softly.

He read it, his rough pages, over the course of three long nights in the very earliest days of their friendship, & it formed the basis for what Gate-Keeper wrote as *Trip Town*’s series premiere.

xlix.

But when I told it on *Trip Town*, I shifted things a little. It’s like I listened to that long tale told those late nights in my hotel room over our strange game, one move each per night, & it shifted a little in my mind, a word for another word, a phrase, a bit of the narrative—

All for *Clarendon Island*—

“It was years ago yet I wonder if they do it even now. Dosing the fountain waters of Iconic Square with LSD. Lightly, like brushing the drums of many minds, not pounding them awake.”

I nod. He continues.

“I watched. Many many days I watched as people dipped dry hands or dusty feet into those waters. Pretty girls splashing their faces & laughing. Old folks tossing in coins & smiling in the spray.

“I watched the years of watching turn toward wanting again. Old gleams. Old furies. Return of violence, return of tenderness. A medicine come not from the stars, nor from dreams, but within, where there is no higher & there is no ground.

“But more. Iconic Square’s in a major city, little known, surrounded by government offices & corporate headquarters. That spray touched important cheeks, drip dropped from the hands of diplomats, into treaties & disputes, what abiding fears bleeding tomorrow’s canvas.

“And I wondered. Sitting on a bench, shadowed by an oak tree, watching, dosed high on the sunshine & the smiles & the sweating musicians who played better & weirder through the afternoon, music the rags a poor man will wear proudly, music is heartache at rest, playing less & less for coins & bills, more & more for sky-smacking bliss. *Fuck*, I wondered. A light dose if it touched your skin casually. Enough to change a mind, soothe a heart, jar a sure hate? Breaches in the web, if you believe in webs & who does—

“No, it wasn’t me. I wasn’t so brave, or connected to the powers over the pipes. I found out by accident on the day would have been my last. I drank there while going. A bridge in my mind, a note in a plastic bag in my pocket. Drank there on whim, twice because a tug in my heart still saw a chance the rest didn’t. Wavering thing.”

Trip Town begins with this scene, more or less, even when I found out these were later notes. He told me the story out of sequence. But this is what I heard first & I could see the scene so clearly.

I called him Preacher in the show, never another name for him. Before the show's title card, he is in a place that is shadowy, high-ceiling'd, tall windows but they are smashed & boarded up. The only time *Trip Town* appears on the screen is next, white letters, black background.

His dark clothes of the opening are gone. A white t-shirt whose tie-dye splotch spells Beatles, LSD, Noisy Children, Phish, Clarendon Island, shows a girl's smiling face, one after the next, sometimes several. Torn blue jeans shorts. A red baseball cap on his head.

Coming out of one of the tall buildings is a woman, arguing heatedly on her phone, carrying a scruffy clutch of papers. Her face is not shown clearly, close-up on her cracked lips, far away so her figure just glints—

Many faces drinking, touching the water, hands cupping, smiling, I let faces dry show in black & white, wetten, begin to color in, deeper & deeper, like skin sponges absorbing & changing—

I let the scene film on, show Iconic Square deepening in color, & the mild opening music deepening, piano, drums, heavier drums, fiddles, electric guitars, the scene sops itself up, begins to repeat itself, people blink in & out & in & out—

Someone told me this scene was considered one of the most legendary of any TV show premieres.

It only mattered to me how it played into my long plan. The next scene worked it more.

Early read on, his voice tremoring a little, sweat on his cheeks. But he read. I listened.

"I'd known the place I'd be going for a long time, good to be able to arc over this hour to where you will end & some other beginning, a bridge not too big or trafficked but it was high, so high, oh so high, look at the sky *high oh so high*—

"The river below forgotten I looked straight up & kept looking, crawled off the bridge into a hidden grassy area, tugged there by my heart, & kept looking up, twisted around to see better, this is what I'd wanted so long, to look up from this place. Become a mind as common where all are welcome. Heartache at rest.

"When had I stopped looking up? What day? Which hour? Whose word had made me look down & never quite so up again, was it hers, yours, my cum still on your lips, saying you loved me, & goodbye, still nude with me on the floor, still taut for fucking?

"I'm not fucking *her*! You fucking *dreamed* her!"

“Was it him, you, that letter you wrote far from me, *coward*, about your disease & your decision? Your talking cassette labeled *Last Songs* that I listened to the night you passed from me, & the last of our hungry hours arguing if Godd’s best final proof is music, oak trees, or fine young ass?

“There were other reasons, & many excuses, & every last one fell unnoticed from me as I watched the sky into its inexplicable dusk, into its crying passion told each night as stars, I passed through seeing up & up, become up, finally up, *swinging high, oh so high, from the strands above the stars that dangle them down so low*———

“Dirty, broken, remade, smiling, I swung until the dawn, finding myself where I’d ended & begun in a new way, unexpected, fine, & I knew enough to trace a path back to that fountain, those few splashes of sweet drink, & I returned to marvel.”

Another long scene, Preacher loses his clothing over the course of it, & the bridge is quite high, in fact, & there are many human remains on the rocks below. The sky moves from a nice ordinary blue to a fierce crimson, to something wildly blaringly colourous that falls into his skin, even as the evening comes, stars fall to him too, clutches in his hands, glowing burns on his skin, the music eerie, a piano, an electric guitar, some odd percussion, the night stretches & twists, the bridge changes & comes & goes, we ran far over the usual lengths of TV scenes, since, really, only two so far, & only one remained.

Early was exhausted with this telling, took the water I fetched him in a couple of deep gulps, a cough, a belch, a vague hand wave at me as though I would stop him, & he read what he’d brought to fini.

“I didn’t leave for a long time, though rarely drank again. When hunger got me & my cup was empty. When it got cold & I chose not to tent with the huddled rest. When my dreams obscurely advised & my heart lightly tugged, & then tugged a little more.

“When I left it felt tragic. A car wreck full of burning bodies large & small. The delighted king when barriers to his blood lust fall, when his word & fist sum to first & only beautiful truth.

“I left & am now far gone to that fountain in Iconic Square. I dream on it still, on weak nights, & wonder who opened the taps, how did they find the way to let the elixir in? *How?* Why the light dose? Did anyone figure it out like me? Does it go on? Are the grim men on TV, at podiums, doubting a little? Are tall buildings now governed by secretly grinning goofs?”

This scene was what I was arriving for. It shows Preacher, now dressed in what look like skins, singing, *humming* his way through a strange & pathless pale woods, sometimes entering a cave from which emerges not Preacher but a Beast, then later him again moving along, sometimes faster than what seems possible, speeding, speeding, become a Creature of some kind, a White Bunny, a little panda bear, like our game back in the hotel room, a tiny tiny thing—

Then a black screen & words:
There are only two tomes.

*One tells the sky.
One sings the earth.*

These words burn themselves blackly out & Preacher's gruff low voice is heard for the first time, saying: "Are there fewer fists in the world tonight? *Does it still try to save us all?*"

He passes out at my table, & this time I help him to my bed, & stay close to him, thinking toward how this will make *Trip Town's* opening episode, what clues I'll deeply embed in it, not even knowing he's told me hardly a third of the story.



To be continued in Cenacle | 94 | *October 2015*



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Ten

*"Try to forget me.
Try to erase me."*

—Pearl Jam, "Jeremy," 1992.

l.

Trip Town was for a few episodes a novelty that record numbers of people tuned into. Shocking even to the network showing it that something involving the likes of me, a cult director at best, could reach & touch so many people.

The demand was so great for that two-hour series premiere that they showed it three times in a week, pre-empting other shows.

When the next episodes were broadcast, enthusiasm waned a little. Not completely; my colleagues could make good television, but it was I that had conceived the thing; they tended to work less ambitiously. I liked what they did, though it wasn't close to my work.

Then, to thumbnail it to now, I returned for the second season premiere. It was a flashback episode, a sort of prequel to what I'd done the first time. Again, I re-invented the show by my will & whim. The network loved it, whatever *it* was.

But it was the third season premiere that went far further than the rest. It was the episode that featured Cordelia, Gate-Keeper's lost amour, & it crossed-over with *Clarendon Island*. I'd found her & I'd found a way to enact my plan.

And I did it very simply, as it turned out, after trying & failing with more complex ideas.

I built between the two shows a *Bridge of Glass*, & thus all could pass back & forth, *including myself*.

The setting is new, a vast old apartment above the S & G Pizza. Monday nights, free slices between 11 pm & midnight, shitty dollar pizza at best but look out the lines on Monday nights at 11! People would eat their slices in line for next. All in good fun, although I did emphasize the fattening cheeks & asses, the wet chewings, the loud swallowings—

The apartment. It's a safehouse, really. A party house. Well, both. People being smuggled through would have a good night there, music, drugs, sex. On their way to less comfort, to hiding.

Some people believed thereafter it was real, the aliens, the safehouse, the parties—

I mean, a lot of it *is* real but not so simple like on the TV. Not everyone was so fucking pretty. Not everyone orgasmed in time with everyone else.

But that's just the premise, before the first commercial.

Come back from that, close up of a man fucking a girl against a wall, camera showing tangle of fingers, cock, panties, miniskirt—her moans are real, are pleasurable, there's none on his face as he drives in & again & again—

& then sees them, above her blonde head crushed by him against the wall.

A . . . what? . . . he drives in her slower, she'd kept her blouse on, her skirt just lowered. He reaches around & just simply tears it from her body. It's a party. *She's not his girlfriend.* He . . . drives . . . does . . . drives in more . . . not . . . fucking care . . .

There? On the wall. One, two? What are they? Her moans are too loud even for this party, & still he won't let up . . .

An inch high. A black & white pandy bear, in a frock? Laughing, no, cackling . . . *cackling*

He turns around, pushes her head down there, he can't remember how experienced she is. Whatever. *Suck, bitch.*

Cackling & scattering all over the wall, high & low, he can't count how many, scatter & move in all directions & he panics to follow, his cum is on her face, pretty expensive lead actress tits, raises her head finally, that hour's ratings spew all over the records.

[Cordelia ad libbed it, of course; she was supposed to suck him off, finish, raise her head. But she tongued his cock free just as he was cumming, jerked ever so slightly, so he would spew her tits & face. Same move that night long ago with Gate-Keeper. Her wordless message to him now.]

After the commercial, he is in a corner of the party nervously watching a really long joint get passed around—

Calms after the neighborhood boys in blue appear, each snap off a piece of the long joint, into pockets for later, & bid a night to all—

There's an old man in a floppy hat, sitting next to Jack, not sure when we learned his name but of course—

The old man talks aloud, hard to say to whom or even if whom—

“My task was to lay down the stones, from the highway, through the Woods, along the water & arriving to his hut. Small round stones, each one unique, a thin white path to follow even by deep night's moon glow—

“Eventually I came inside & saw how twas the angels food cake they'd medicined, several pieces came my way, so light, so dosed.”

The old man roughly stands & grasps, drags, hugs Jack as they leave the apartment & down the stairs to the street.

“Late on, whoever was serious, not laid, out, the Doctor leads the few of us through a secret panel in the living room wall. Leads us in, & a whole new cake. A whole new party,” he cackles softly in Jack's

ears, “whole new party,” & grabbing Jack’s face directs it roughly to the S & G Pizza neon sign hanging off the building, & his apartment above that. Fucking neon blinking in his dreams.

But that. *Fuck me, that.* Cut to commercial.

It’s a Bridge of Glass. It emerges from his apartment’s front window, the one about 10 feet higher than that fucking neon sign.

Emerges & arcs into the night, nothing to uphold it, a miracle of surreal architecture, there & not there both—

But it wasn’t done just there yet—

Yes, this was the *Bridge of Glass* that, only that one night, extended all the way to Clarendon Island—

How did he do it? He told nobody in the *TripTown* cast or crew, nor the press, nor anyone—

The *Clarendon Island* episode received Gate-Keeper cleanly even as *TripTown* was left with a Bridge of Glass—

Gate-Keeper alone used it to get somewhere, it was why he’d conceived it, literal & figurative cross-over—

Nobody the next day knew quite what had happened. Really high ratings, as usual for *TripTown* season premiere. Not as high as season 2’s, certainly not season 1. But sure to be all sorts of strange hijinks in *TripTown*!

Gate-Keeper jumped because he knew the network was done with *TripTown*. Not enough blood, not enough starlet titty. Good American soap titty too, not surrealist maybe titty maybe lines from the *Book of Job* spelled out in cow shit—

They were ready for him, finally, the show he’d idolized in black & white on his 13” screen, darkened bedroom, can of Sprite, bag of pretzels, come on just after *Dukes of Hazzard* & *Incredible Hulk*—that show was ready for him to take over—

li.

Jazz & I are walking along the rocky shore, hands tight, here is where I bring her to them, they take her in, take her back, this is why they let me retrieve her, this is what I agreed to—

I make us sit, crosslegged, facing each other, my view of her against the whole ocean & horizon, hers of me & the Island.

She is so heartbreakingly pretty. And her smile is for me. She doesn’t care why we’re here, just that I went & got her when it was all lost in her heart.

“I’d given up, Toby.”

“I know.”

“I’d fought. Lost. Kept losing.”

"I know, Jasmine."

"But you brought me *back*. Through fucking *time*, Toby. You loved me enough."

"They sent me."

"Do you love me, Toby?"

"Yes."

"Say it, Toby."

"I love you, Jasmine."

"We're going to free them, Toby."

"We?"

"Don't you think I know they're trapped?"

"Trapped."

I stare at your brilliant beautiful grey eyes & say softly, "I have to go somewhere & jack off really hard to what I want to do to you."

Your eyes laugh, mocking, gorgeous, follow me shaky down the rocky beach, I finally find some rocks & a shadow—

& toward some sweet fucking relief. But:

"Do I feel good to you?" In my shadow.

"*Oh*."

"Tight? Smooth?"

I start to whimper. "Please, Jasmine. I love you."

"I love you." She's in my arms, somehow she's stripped us.

"I can't. We can't."

"We can. Here we are."

I hold you, hold tight onto you—

Something, electric, high & sweet, she's *hmmmmmmmmmm* long, high & low, we are twined in this music deeper & deeper, she is ocean, I am Island, both, neither, I feel her breathing, feel her heart beating, feel the sweat on her skin, this is between us, she's been trying to show me, we're an us, whatever was, whatever was—

"We're an *us*, Toby"

"We're an us."

"Tell me."

"I can't fuck you yet."

She laughs, delighted. "Why?"

"We're not free. Not yet. Which means I have to protect you. Which means my cock isn't on fucking you wild but on protecting you." I'm silence.

Jazz gulps. "Nobody ever thought it through with me before."

I stand, offer my hands, hold her lightly. "Let's go to them now."

lii.

It began in a dream, maybe, the kind that washes into waking, do you know those too?

It'd happened before but not like this, not even close. A football game. You know, the kind you watch on Sunday afternoons on the TV, maybe 4 or 5 of your buddies & a case of beer, two. I don't. I watch them alone, get some fast food burgers & a bag of onion rings, a diet Coke so big it needs its own zip code & town hall—you know—

But this was me in a dream, & I'm not propped up on my too-old mattress, its old blue blanket & sometimes a crimson & gold one too, shades closed, just me & the black-&-white TV with the Antennae 2000 attachment I bought. Now I sorta get in 3 stations instead of sorta getting in 2—

Whatever—not my point—I'm dreaming & *I'm in the game*—

For awhile, just a magically good seat, like a camera that floats bodiless among the players, following who has the ball, cutting between players, eluding, leaping, tackling, getting tackled

Then it's like—see—*I'm not in my shitty apartment anymore—I'm one of the players*—

I don't know how to control it at first—I don't play those video games everyone likes—it just seemed like I would be one minute watching the play, the replay, listening to the dumbass announcers, & then I'd be one of the players, huddling up, the quarterback barking out numbers & words that made no sense, the break, the formation, the looney tunes speed the plays moved at—

I'd be in the man's body like it was my own, but I would *still be myself*—it's like—*I don't know*—

But it was a dream—I'd wake up—a really good dream, & *I'd wake up* in my shitty hovel jobless, collecting unemployment

I'd dropped out of art school, out of music school, out of a literature major—I was living poor because my money was running out slowly—I couldn't ask for more—*wouldn't*—

The last time it happened like this—a good fucking dream—but *a dream still*—I woke & I tried to get it down on paper better than I had—tried to get all the details down—

I wrote: “Maybe it's a playoffs game, I don't know, but the crowd is so loud I can't hear my thoughts. It feels like late fall but I'm sweating, everyone is. Very humid, chilly & humid. Late in the game. Before I fall into this dream I'm excited, I've got my big soda, tub of cherry vanilla ice cream in my little microfridge, big orange bag of cheese puffs, two burgers, bag of onion rings, feeling set, locked—

“I don't sleep this time. I mean, it's a real game, I'm awake, & the real shit happens, I'm in my shitty hovel until late in the game when now I'm on the field, cheering, sweating, the tight uniform on my good muscled player's body. I feel aches & pains all over, but power, so much power in me—

“But we're losing late in the game & it looks perilous. Under 30 seconds, no time outs. I'm in the back field with the tight end. The snap, the quarterback shifts to the left even as the line & we in the back field shift to the right. He flips it to the tight end who races to the line, just in the sideline, its bad though, since the defense isn't fooled, is coming at him full force, so he cuts back to the left, like he'll take any gain, but he flips it to me, it catches the whole defense off guard, “run, straight in, motherfucker, run!” he screams as four players collapse onto him, & my way is clear, I run like a ray of light, straight into the end zone, it's about 30 yards, run like my waking body never could, & score the winning touchdown!”

It's night. The 11 p.m. news is on. I keep it on to see who won the game. I'd fallen asleep, right? What was the score?

It was close, back & forth scoring, & it looked like my team was going to lose when, less than 30



seconds left, the QB drops back to the left, flips the ball to the TE to the right who, just before he hits line for no gain, cuts back to the left too & suddenly tosses to the running back nobody'd noticed, who runs like a blaze into the end zone. Touchdown! Win!

I was him. T-Bone Williams, they call him. Second year running back, a back-up with moments like that, mad speed & perfect execution. But also lots of dropped balls, missed blocking assignments. An off the field taste for sexual adventures with barely legal girls. Across state lines, fucking in motels, maybe weed, E, L, none of that was proven. All vaguely good fun until the girl he put on the Greyhound bus back home was a governor's daughter, met her when she strayed from the tour of her future (that fall) Ivy League school. A short-skirted wink over 18.

Dream. Not dream. Me. T-Bone Williams. Winning touchdown. *Shit.*

Who to tell? Did I want to? Yah. I did.

Friends? Don't fucking joke. Family? They thought I was hitch-hiking, with my non-existent friends. Well, she did. I had a grandmother. Famous artist. Why those schools kept letting me back in. Why the next one & the next one let me in. Why I wasn't out of money yet.

I had a cousin too, a girl cousin. I counted on my fingers. She'd just turned 18. It had been awhile.

We hadn't talked in awhile. Since she told me quite vividly what we were going to do the next time she got me alone. Fucking other guys, several boyfriends, nothing had thinned her want of me.

I hadn't turned on the computer she'd given me in months. She bought it for me & told me she was going to pay for my online access so I could contact her any time, day or night.

"If my face is in a pillow, my ass is spread, & some guy is fucking me like his cock is Superman, & you ping me, I'll be talking to you in 10 seconds & he'll be finishing outside," her soft, low, breathy voice assured.

Turned it on, sitting on the corner of my unloved cluttered work table. Made noises, came on.

I'd used computers, come to hate them. Doesn't matter why. But the chat program opened & I clicked on her name in the one-name friend list, & typed, "Gretta."

Hoping she was out, anywhere, just *away*.

"Shit. YES."

"OK."

"How are you?"

"I don't know."

"Are you alright?"

"I guess."

"I'll come over."

"No."

"Where?"

I really want to unplug the thing & throw it through the window. She doesn't know where I am.

I type. "Where you kissed me."

“OK!” I shut the thing off roughly.

I haven’t been farther than the little store next to this apartment building in a long time. I haven’t seen Gretta in much longer.

Unlike that game, it’s cold here, plain old cold. I need to put on clothes. There’s some from the last time I did laundry. Dust on the pile of them.

Some grey boxer briefs, loose on me since I eat little & stupid. A pair of old blue jeans, also loose, tightened with a belt she made for me. Leather, symbols & stones & bits of metals carved & woven into it.

Shirt. For her too? Why? But OK. The tie-dye one, its shifting image, LSD molecule, Phish symbol, Beatles image, a White Bunny with fierce eyes, many others, & a low *hmmmmmm* too, created to enmesh with the ambient sounds of wherever I was—old black socks & sneakers, the long overcoat I hadn’t returned to its owner, enough money scrounged from the corners among my piles of books & LP records to get me on the train to city & back. A thick hat, thick brown, coarsely knitted, looked like an upside down nest on my head—

House keys. Yah. Protect my black & white TV. My cheese puffs & soda. My dust.

It’s a long walk to the train, one I hadn’t made in a long time. Suburban streets, Sunday night quiet & drowsy. Drinking football all afternoon, work fuck work tomorra—

Then the graveyard & I don’t want to & the voices & the spirits & the jiggling stone markers & the trees too close & concerned & then I’m stumbling out & down Carnal Street, at a fast stumble, empty factory buildings on one side, boulders & train tracks along the other. A brick gun club. A popular restaurant. 10 good hits of acid made this street magical, the tall street lamps, the spider’s webs everywhere, the moon too close—

The train into the city, overly bright, dirty, more crowded at each stop—

A corner seat, a slouch deep into myself, hands deep in my overcoat’s pockets, just riding & waiting, until I feel what’s inside the lining of this coat.

Small. Square shaped. I pull one out. It’s a blank book with a crimson colored cover that wraps around it, closed with an elaborate string & button—

The edge of the pages are grimy, like the pages within have long been filled by pencil—

I tempt. *I so tempt.* Would he mind? I don’t. Yet.

Another train. Rolls over a bridge with the city skyline in view. Like old, I throw my kiss of gratitude to it. Habit. Whatever. Do it.

Berlin Before the Fall, that’s what it’s called, this conglomeration of cafes, bookstores, bars, restaurants, all clustered around a famous school. The one T-Bone plucked that governor’s daughter from, strangely.

A brick-floored courtyard near an ancient coffeehouse called Cafe Democracy. Tall trees at each of its four corners. Round metal tables & metal chairs populate it.

She's not there yet. Courtyard is empty. Row of stone chess tables next to courtyard is empty.

Table on the side bordering the stone tables, a metal fence between them. Third table from the corner. A pillar embedded in the fence where I'd set my soda cup. When I'd come here.

I sit. My fingers still holding the book inside my overcoat. *Not yet.*

A tall brick bank next to this courtyard. Both sides actually. But the one to my left has a digital clock atop it. Helpful when the Lucy has you forgetting what time & space are. Nice reminder.

Years sitting in the late spring to early fall. *Years.*

She came with me often back when. As the years passed, as she blossomed, as boys chased & missed her. She was, it's true, the only person I'd let sit here with me.

Others tried. Girls I was fucking. Teachers obsessed with me. Real friends & fake ones. Nope. Only Gretta.

It was because of the first time. She'd run away from home to come see me. Tracked me down, I don't know how, though maybe it's obvious.

She'd brought her guitar. Arrived to my table with her old blue suitcase covered in Grateful Dead stickers & others, got from the Goodwill. Brought her guitar in its beat case. I'd gotten it for her one year, one of the many annual years we saw each other at our shared grandmother's house. That's it. Once a year from when she was small & me five years older, we met & spent a long weekend together at that strange old woman's massive ancient house. Along the way, Gretta had fallen for me. I knew. I didn't.

I knew. As we explored that massive building, having adventures, most possible only in dreams or hallucinations, I knew.

It was a year since the last one. She'd found out I wasn't coming this December. So she'd run away to find me.

She kissed me. First & only time. I simultaneously tasted deep & recoiled.

"No."

"Please."

"No."

"Please."

"I'm going to put you on the first bus back."

"Wait. No. Please. I won't."

"Promise?"

"Maybe."

"Promise?"

She wore tight old jeans, & a flowery scarf over a tight top. Her hair dark, long, her eyes darker. She was ripe already.

I sent her back that night anyway, because I knew if I didn't, she'd never be let to return.

That soft, sweet, innocent kiss poisoned me. Or maybe my “No” did. I buried it under everything I did after that.

She came every few months. She wanted to try again, but didn’t. Poisoned too.

Still not come. I start to doze a little. Remember the summer nights in this courtyard. When the chess tables were filled with players, young & old, crusty Fall veterans & their nerdy jokes. Tourists in from Cowtown USA thinking they could beat the Chess Master \$2/Game easily. Usually couldn’t. Better & worse guitarists on the cobblestone sidewalk, watching intently the fine asses of college girls passing by in packs.

So many kinds. Long hair, short shorts. Skirts pornographically tight & brief. A blur of moving bodies, chattering, chewing gum. Occasionally a look at him, a smile.

That one. Long light brown hair. Tight jeans. Aching pretty face. High breasts under a couple of tissue-thin layers.

She keeps walking like all the rest, but she also pauses to look at him & smile. Push her hair away from her ear. Walking now gone, but also approaching him, eyes on him, then quickly down. Gone but sitting on the other chair at his table.

Awake, summer gone. Cold. Empty courtyard. Here she sits. Smiling shyly at him.

“Hi,” she says.

“No,” I reply.

“Maybe?” she winks at me. Fucking winks?

“I’m waiting for someone.”

“Oh.” Feigning disappointment.

“What are you?”

“A girl?” her eyes wide, blue as the tissue covering her shaven cunt.

“Stand up.”

“Stand?” Real or simulacra, not a girl used to waiting, or being turned away.

“Go to that table over there up front, near the street. Sit there, watching who & what goes by. When I call for you, come back & tell me.”

She smiles, looks around. Reddens a little.

“Go. Now.”

She does. As I say. It’s nice to see. Whatever it is. Anyway, Gretta’s coming.

I keep waiting. Fingering the book in my pocket.

Waiting, Gretta-bird.

liii.

A grizzly man sits down at the table next to mine. Empty courtyard but me & the sexy hot Iterate up there, & he sits next to me. I don’t look his way save to notice on his upper forearm a faded tattoo that seems to spell “anomaly,” wrongly I think. Deep, old tan.

But he starts talking anyway. I appear to be listening no more him than anything else—cold winter wind in the trees, occasional cars & buses blaring by, my own beat & breath.

“I was on the same train you were. My train car was fuller though, every seat taken, totally quiet though. Felt like a ride to the final punishment. What the fuck-ever that could be.”

He laughs, a throaty thing that seems to stumble back on itself.

"A woman across from me. Youngish, like she has to try a little harder these days. Light brown hair, pretty-ish face, worried. Not the flat game face of all these other bitches."

Now I'm hoping Gretta will be just a little later. Hoping this guy will get my silent point & go. I've seen these cracked orators hundreds of times around here.

"Short skirt tan, mid-thigh when tugged all the way down but, see, she was sitting, & she was mind-humping one of those little gadgets they all have now. Cute little fingers typing at it in a blur."

Pauses. Clears his throat. I hear him pulling out a plastic package, a pause, snap of a lighter, some kind of smoke in the cold winter. Exotic. Weed? Not quite.

"That skirt slowly rode higher & higher up her thighs & I was snared into watching. Speculating. Panties? What color? Thong? Bikini? Boy shorts? Or not at all? Uncut bush? Trimmed landing pad? Bare & beautiful?"

A few long drags. Adjusts more comfortable in his seat.

"Which?" I say. Turning to look at him full on.

Smiles. Nods. But not surprised. Like this was always the point where a silent auditor talked.

Speaks slowly, softly. "The train was traveling above ground into the city. But you also know we passed through a few tunnels. And train-cars aren't all that well-lit."

"Well?"

"I couldn't tell. I mean, I wasn't staring for fear she'd just twist herself away, scream, whatever. But every time I looked, I'd see something different. Bare lips, black panties, nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Like a Barbie doll. Smooth nothing."

I say nothing.

"Call your friend back over."

"Why?"

"So we can hear your report."

As though she heard, she returns. Barely gives him a look but her pretty cheeks are several shades deeper pink.

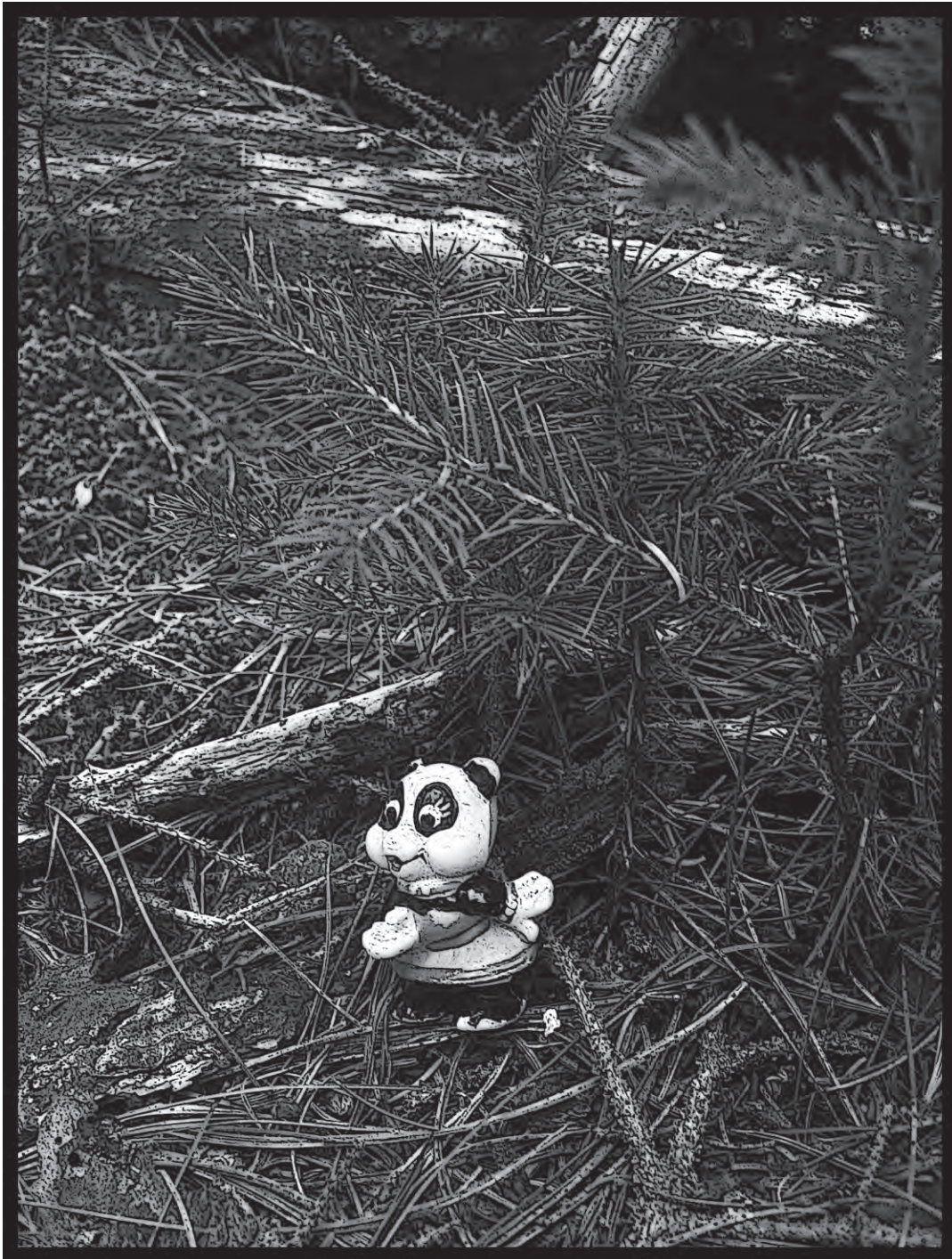
"What did you see?" he asks. She looks harder at me, lips parted. I nod.

She pulls out a folded piece of paper, & hands it to me. I don't make effort to show him.

Folded in quarters. Unfolded, it shows the street before us, faintly as though an unimportant layer. The tall brick building across the street, bare trees nearly as tall in front of it. Man-high iron gate in front of it.

A moony winter light layered over it, & I can't help feeling it's shifting back & forth, moving with the actual breeze I feel on me. This would be strange & magical enough but.

There's a tree branch hanging down from above the picture & into that cool breeze that flows into this courtyard & through this picture.



And there's more but it's faint; small, indistinct figures on the sidewalk. I can't be sure they're even there. A bunny, sitting up on her haunches. A shaggy pup next to her. A . . . very big-eyed little fox? Maybe others even fainter, or too small to pick out.

I look up at her golden brown eyes with impossibly long lashes. "How?"

Holds mine own eyes, then looks down again. "It's your shirt. It's why I came over. I kept listening when you sent me over." Motions to the picture in my hand. "It came easy."

liv.

That's how it was, all that happened in our grandmother's house. Mansion, whatever. It came easy, began one night when I couldn't sleep.

Our first night there? Second?

We three had seen each other just once, it was dinner that first night.

A long wooden dining room, table nearly as long. Tall tall strangely curved armchairs with seat cushions that felt gelatinous.

Gretta looked like a pretty girl but dressed like a boy. She had several old shirts on, the topmost one read "R a M o N e S" & showed the four hideously beautiful band members slouched against a vague brick wall. Blue jeans with worn knees. High-top sneakers looked older than her.

We shook hands when introduced. Her dark eyes looked up to mine, laid a moment with mine, her smirk part hello, part flirt. I didn't know then connection could happen in a flash at any time.

I was a boy in a big spooky house who'd grown very deep inside himself in the last few years. The school I'd been locked up in, or so it felt, had caused me to scavenge within deeper & deeper, find it strange in there, adjust my needs & hungers to survive.

Our grandmother was probably not as old as she seemed. She wasn't one to converse.

That first meeting, assuming we both knew her, she introduced us to each other. "I'm pleased you both came. I'll do all I can to help you enjoy it here."

At dinner, the three of us several chairs apart from each other: "We'll always dinner together. The kitchen is always open to you otherwise."

That first night, only night, she saw me to bed: "Every door is open to you here, Jaime. Don't hesitate."

At the door before closing it: "Don't be afraid to let my Gretta-bird come with you. She's more than what she seems."

That night, or the next, I couldn't sleep, or maybe I was dreaming I couldn't sleep but, either way, I got up from my too-big bed in my bedroom crowded with ancient old furniture, windows shaded by heavy dark crimson curtains, looked like they weighed a ton each, pushed open the door, deeply glad that it wasn't locked, & padded in my Beatles' *Rubber Soul* t-shirt, fragile, torn, *so prized*, & LA Dodgers' shorts, found the hallway lit low by strange wall fixtures.

She said every door was open to me but I hadn't tried any yet. Every book I'd read told me that I should head to the basement or the attic.

Pulled out my prize coin, found in the strange Woods my school was near. One the one side of it, a bunny with a bright-eyed face, sitting up on her haunches; the other, a sort of panda bear with crazy eyes & brilliant smile. Bit smaller than a quarter, but heavier, almost wooden in feel, tossed it. Bunny

side. Attic.

I found the stairwell at the end of the hallway. My bedroom on the second floor, I climbed I don't remember how many flights of wooden ramps in that virtually black stairwell.

Reached the top finally, through door, just another floor. Returned to stairwell.

Luckily, looked up. A bare square outline of a door above me. An almost invisible piece of line hanging down from it.

On my tiptoes I could just reach it. But did I want to?

Took a deep breath, another, pulled. Nothing. Pulled again. Nothing. A third time, it budged half an inch at best.

Bloodied my fingers pulling but eventually it came. A door that revealed a folded ladder that came down most of the way to the floor.

Bloody hands & all, I climbed that shaky ladder up to the darkness above. It was then I remembered the flashlight in my pocket. Could have used it on those ramps. Oh well.

Solar-powered, bright-yellow, shaped like a five-sided brick. Light & slim. Yes, I'd stolen it. It was very useful in those Woods.

I found . . . a living room. A big fireplace took up most of one wall, couches, armchairs. I was disappointed, a little, until I came to the long mirror at the other end of the dim room. My usually powerful flashlight wasn't helping very much.

A ceiling to floor mirror. I could see myself in it. Beatles shirt, Dodgers shorts, etc. But the room in the reflection behind me wasn't the room I was in. It was a library of some kind. Walls of books.

Waved my hand around, reflection did. Stuck out my tongue & it did same time.

Oh, but then he, not me, beckoned me close with a finger. Smiling while I did not. Closer, closer. Till my head was leaning against the mirror. Till I was entering the mirror like it was no more than smoke to pass through. I was now in the library. Looked back through the mirror. There I was. Urging me with a wave to go on, explore more.

This was one way I discovered it could work. There were many variations & kinds.

Tricksy too. An adventure could seem to last hours, but only seconds would pass where I started. Or I'd come back & it would be nearly morning.

I tried to learn the moves & maneuvers to travel smarter. For example, mirror doors would usually cost me an extra hour each time I passed through them.

Or I would not lose any time but arrive to the next room older. Once so old I could barely walk enough to return. A couple of times a child unknowing what it was all for. My self on the other side had to swallow his terror & smile sweetly & coax me back.

That's why I called the girl with sitting me in this courtyard an Iterate. Because when I entered the next room through those mirror doors, I also remained behind. Both were me & there could be many more until all of us returned to me in the first room.

So this was how it began, my adventures, & I loved them more than anything else in my life, save for my times in the White Woods, maybe more, & they would have been my secret always save for the time I returned all of my selves to the first room & found standing near the entrance, silent, smiling, dark eyes, in & through me, my cousin, Gretta-bird.

lv.

Jasmine & I continue our travel on the Island. We climb from the rocky shore up to the Castle.

I am calmer. The kind of calm of people who feel they're about to lose everything they possess.

No matter how tightly she holds my hand, how willing to do whatever with me, because she honestly *loves* me, honestly *wants* me, honestly *likes* me, no matter how she promises that Ashleigh & her former Master can't take her from me, I feel hopeless.

She simply holds my hand & climbs with me. Smiles at me when I allow myself a glance at her beautiful face.

I've not been here before. This is where I was told to bring Jasmine. I'm not sure what all this is or why we're here.

It's winter here, cool but not cold. I take off my letter jacket, red & gold, from high school football, & bury Jasmine's small torso in it. She protests but I can tell she likes my gesture. About a billion times smarter than me, but her heart is mine. Mine hers.

There's nobody around as we walk around the Palace grounds.

"Where do we go, Toby?" she asks.

"I don't know. They told me to bring you to the Island."

Jasmine stops me.

"Why?"

"Ashleigh. And your old Master."

"Did you talk to them?"

"Not exactly."

Her mind's wheels are clicking. I'm too spooked to get horny by this.

"Tell me, Toby."

"It was a dream, Jazz."

"A dream."

"You remember. How the aliens came?"

"I do. But my sister & old Master?"

I stop, kneel, try to think. "I don't remember it clearly."

Jazz makes me stand, hands on my shoulders, her loving fucking grey eyes in mine.

"Toby."

"I can't."

"Yes. You can." She looks around, decides, & then is leading me to a stone bench at the edge of an open area. It is covered in small shiny stones, looking like they've been set into an elaborate pattern. What is this? She's not flirting with me or adoring me as she does, no, she's very focused on my face. Our hands are lightly clasped.

"This some kind of super juju Jazz hypnosis?"

She laughs. "JuJu Jazz. I like it."
And she nods. Shit.

I'm not sure what she does, I guess it might be a sort of *hmmming*? But she's led me back to the dream that brought us here, & she's followed me into it—

In it, the van doesn't overturn. We make it to that cabin.

Everyone agrees that Ashleigh needs to be had first. And to make sure I don't pussy out, they want me to go first.

But the me in the dream doesn't want to do this. *Really fucking doesn't want to do this—*

But all these guys are roaring drunk & if fucking these two cunts will keep the aliens out of their heads for another night, they will. *That's worse than thinking about this.*

Ashleigh's groggy but still out of it. They want to gag her but I shake it away. Figuring if I can get her free, screaming might help.

Thinking further, I tell them to back the fuck away from the bed. I sound pissed which they take for alpha dog possessive & horny. I know they'll just stand nearby, jerking off & waiting their turn.

I have to maneuver their position. That means giving her a line to the door.

I roll her roughly over, & pull off her halter top. Neon pink bra. They're ready to mount her as a pack but again I bark.

"Come on, Toby!"

"No. I'll share but she's mine. Do you fucking get me!" I scream.

They nod. Anyway, it's not like I'm not sharing.

"Push that couch up against the wall."

"th' fuck?"

"Do It. And get in it. Take your fucking clothes off too. Once I'm done I'll call you by turns."

They start to grumble so I simply pull off her short skirt, push back her thong to show sweetly shaved beaver. "Get on the couch or you don't get any."

They sit. Of course they could have just beat my brains out & taken turns but they're pack-fascinated with the idea that I'm "sharing" her. It's a ritual now, not a gang rape.

You're starting to wake up. I tell one to put on some fucking music. Chemical Brothers. Loud. *pound pound fuck fuck*

I'm on top of Ashleigh, feeling her struggling terror. I whisper urgently to her, "when I say now, you run for the door & grab Jazz in that van & don't stop running & screaming until someone has taken you into a police car. Nod. *Nod!*"

She does. Her eyes cloudy but she recognizes me. I know that I'm not the kind of guy who turns her on because I'm not rough *enough*. Would she be here without the chloroform? At least maybe. But always

her choice to come.

She's clear enough to put on a show with me & to know I'm serious about her escaping.

I kiss her, long & deep, & I feel her tongue respond, which is when my hand goes for that tight little thong. She loses in this & I jam my two fingers up her not really wet cunt. She moans a protest. The boys like that.

"Come on, Toby!"

"It's not a first date!"

Our eyes meet again & then I roll her on her flat tummy. Ass high. The boys cheer louder. They can't tell how me roughly pushing her thighs apart is mostly her getting into good position.

"Moan, bitch!"

Fuck, she moans.

I slide inside her now very wet cunt & she moans louder. I fuck her harder & her pleasure is getting obvious. The boys are shouting & distracted by more drinks so I roll her over, so she's on top straddling me.

"*Oh—please—please—stop*" she begs, riding me so deeply I'm ready to pass out.

Just then, at that moment, I say, as I'm driving deeper in her than I have, & she's enjoying what she shouldn't, I say, "*now*," & push her light torso completely off the bed & she falls, & she stands. *And she stands.*

"Run! Fuck, Run!"

The boys are just sitting there, wanting to move, unable.

"It's OK, Toby."

I'm lying there with a hard-on looking at her like *this is fucking insane*.

"Then what, Toby?"

"In walks your old Master."

Ashleigh dresses. Sits on the bed where I am still naked. Smiles at me. Grabs hold my half-hard cock. Now hard again.

"Not even in dreams, Toby?"

"No."

"Why?"

I take my cock out of her hand.

"I don't know."

She smiles. Master sits on the other side of the bed.

"You'll do what we say?"

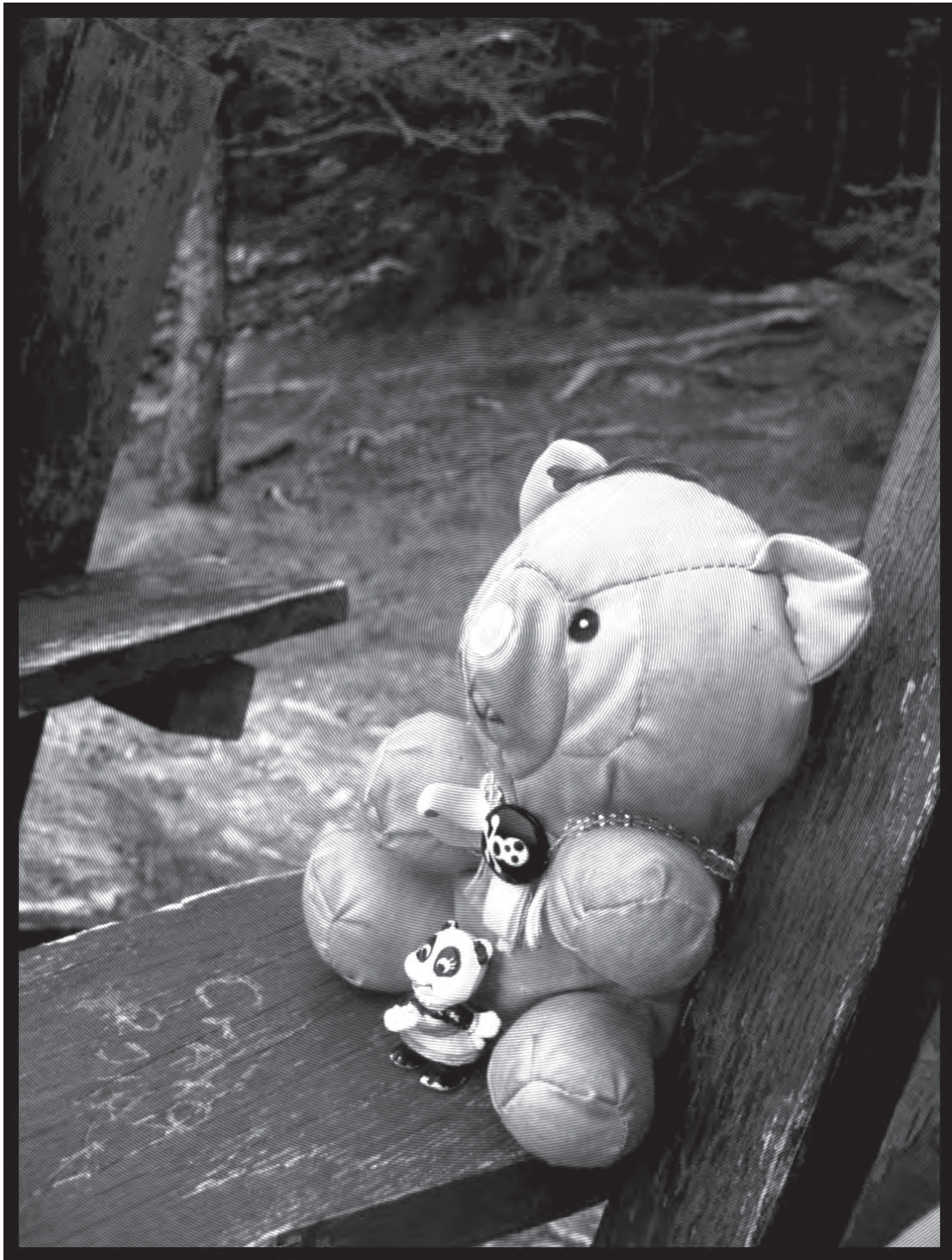
Then I realize they're the Emandians & this is a dream.

"Yah. But."

"But?"

I point to my teammates who seem frozen on the couch, some holding drinks, some their hard cocks.

"Let them go. In waking. For good. Let them live with what they've done. No more. Then I'll do whatever."



They nod. Smile.

“So what happened?”

“I woke up with instructions in my head. How to get to you & where to bring you.”

I come out of it. Jazz is sitting in front of me again. Smiling.

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“For all that. Again.”

She laughs. “I needed to know.”

“But now that I remember, I don’t know what it means. Are we here to bring you to Ashleigh & your ex-Master? Or Emandians?”

She stands. Her smile unwavering. “We’ll meet whoever. I’m just not leaving you.”

I let her pull me up. “I have just one question,” she purrs wetly up into my ear.

Uh-oh.

“Whose smooth cunt do you want to slide that pretty cock of yours into? Hers or mine?”

Then her grey eyes twinkle so delightedly that I start to laugh & laugh.

lvi.

Jack & Isis return to the Realist party but neither seem very interested in it.

I take her hand & lead her into an empty bedroom. Finger to my lips, motion her to lock the door. Try the window but it’s locked.

“Lie on the bed.”

“What? Jack, no.”

I pull her close to me in this dark room. She smells so ready. I can barely think but with my cock.

“Lie on the bed. Masturbate. Make it sound like good slow loud sex.”

“Why?”

“So I can break the fucking window.”

She nods. I can feel her smiling in the dark.

That’s the thing about these parties. You sign a contract to be part of it. However long, stay the length. Not report anything you see. I didn’t learn all this at first, but I did learn it.

If I hadn’t been looking for Penny, I might have stayed around. There were some ideas at play here. Some possibilities—

“*Oh my fucking god harder!*” Is screams & I forget thinking & use a pillowcase to cushion my elbow as I knock out the window. It’s tough, doesn’t break fully.

“Again!” I whisper.

“*Fuck me, you big cocked motherfucker! Give it to me harder! Deeper!*” She then just moans & moans until I get it fully open & use cases to cover the broken frame as we crawl through.

“Nobody’ll come in there for awhile. So we can get away far,” I whisper. She nods.

We're on the side of the mansion, unlit, as I'd hoped. It's a cool night. Is is barefooted & that's OK for the moment.

"Thanks," she says.

"For what?"

"For taking me with you. I'll do my best to help you find your girl."

"Thanks," my mouth says sincerely while my cock is still listening to how this girl fucks even solo.

lvii.

Now having crossed to Clarendon Island, the Gate-Keeper was allowed to participate in its life. And, for awhile, he was overwhelmed.

He retreated, & retreated, & retreated until he came upon, in some trackless part of the Island he'd forced himself off to, an Exxtreem Roadbuss 2000.

About 30 feet long, jarringly silver, shaped like a long loaf of French bread. Buried in weeds & plants. Door open.

"Hello?" he called. Afraid. No. Someone who lived this far out wasn't doing well either.

It didn't matter. There was nobody. There hadn't been in a long time. The Roadbuss 2000 was filled front to rear with shelves of strange books, stranger radio equipment, video monitors, newspaper clippings of obscure wars, assassinations, UFO sightings, unexplained phenomena.

He could not believe there was electricity, when he pulled the main power lever. Suddenly buried in music, TV sounds, film, radio static. A turntable & about 500 LPs crammed into a closet.

And nobody. He was sure; then, as he settled in more, less so. How could someone build all this mad beauty & abandon it? Did anyone else know of it?

Then one day, he looked up, & saw the many broken tree branches above, the shattered platform up there. Ahh, someone had lived—maybe and died—here. When this Roadbuss came crashing down about a hundred feet from above. It had survived so well he hadn't noticed the damage. And it had happened a long time ago.

Had the man, or woman? but probably man, crawled off to die? Or been rescued?

Gate-Keeper just didn't know. There was no blood, no sign that the man had been in the Road Buss when it had fallen. Had he already died, or vacated it for elsewhere?

He was gone. Long gone. And here was Gate-Keeper, in need of a sanctuary & solitude. For awhile.

So he moved in. Had nothing with him but his strange movie camera, & he moved in.

The toilet worked, when emptied, regularly. There was a water tank, no holes, & a clear stream nearby. Several leather buckets. Plus the electricity which, when he followed the line, led straight into an old metal plate in the earth. Unreadable markings on it. That old.

So I inherit this man's home. Him dead or left or gone. He has every arcane book on astronomy & astrology that I could want. Photos of the Mercury & Apollo astronauts. Dictionaries of language & science. A five-volume thesaurus.

More old jazz LPs & rock than I could dream. Miles Davis through *Bitches Brew*. Coltrane to the last note. Middle period Stones. *Sticky Fingers*-era. Early Bowie. First four Led Zeppelins.

I find myself sitting in the far end of the Road Buss most often, in what feels like a barber's chair, padded leather, very comfortable. There are monitors all around me.

This took me awhile to figure out. A flat metal plate, almost unnoticeable, but I picked it up by chance one day & saw how my touch caused the monitors to react.

It took awhile to suss out but I determined that the one to my left showed the live surface of the Sun, when let be. The one before me showed someone composing an endless book, by ink, in a language I could not recognize. The one to my right showed endless shots of a girl asleep, or nearly, in her bed. Long red hair, blue eyes. Beautiful beyond words.

But with the touch plate, & some concentration, I could manipulate the images. The left one was most useful, for somehow, not that showing the Sun live wasn't enough, it could show Clarendon Island, whether being broadcast or between episodes. I could see what was going on wherever I liked on the Island.

The one before me I could, with deep concentration, re-render to show me the book being written in English. I would follow the pages as they filled, never seeing the writer, or the rest of the room he was in, & tried as I could to copy out some of what he wrote.

The third one was always of the girl in her bed. Always night. She would stay up late many nights, I could guess by the white-faced pink cat radio alarm clock on her bedside table. She would listen to the radio for hours sometimes, clear a space onto her floor to dance, eyes closed, sometimes in her nightgown, sometimes nude, a smile unknowable on her lips as she swayed, & touched herself, her taut nipples, her damp pussy, sometimes she would dance herself to orgasm after orgasm before collapsing back on her bed—

One time a spectre came in her window, a sort of man, & he moved into her bed & she wriggled in fright but he began kissing her long & deep & then down her neck & then her breasts, inhaling each perfect one to her moans, then long licking her stomach, tongue slow & deep inside her red-haired cunt, till he was atop her & driving slowly in her moans in my mind despite the silent image, they cum together, cum very hard, & he dissipates in the moonlight—

These helped me to think about other things, find strange meaning in this adopted home, but did not solve my woe.

I'd retreated from Clarendon Island. Crossed over via the Bridge of Glass, them ready for me, & I'd retreated, fled.

I'd tried several new things, ideas I'd been saving for when I got here—they were new—they disrupted what had been seen on *Clarendon Island* before.

“We need some discontinuity for a time,” I said to the cast & crew. “This will help us to get deeper into the story, open it up even more”—& they’d been OK with this, extended me a trust I cherished & wanted to earn—

We begin shooting fragments, just to see what catches—& I work us harder & harder—

Their village gone—destroyed?—a group of people travel together, embody their lost home: trinkets, memories, seeds—& they will, when most despairing so much gone, brew a tea to allow them to cluster dream & live anew in their lost home, touch & remember its details—

They become fisher people for a time, build long boats, fashion good spears, taught in all this by an old old man named Fitz who they seeming happened to meet one day on the road—who convinces them to come with him to the sea, find a new way of life there—

It works, for a long time, until several of their best fishers are far out in waters working when a huge storm hits—

Several of them drown but two, a man & a girl who’d been engaged to his younger brother, arrived half-drowned on the shores of Clarendon Island.

Half-crazy with despair, being lost & several of their own gone, including his brother & her love, they just sit together on the sand, panting.

Shane & the Faeries watch them from afar. Waiting to see what they’ll do.

The two of them had never been close. He hadn’t approved of his brother marrying her. Felt she would distract from the hard task of their group finding a solid way of life.

For her part, it made her try harder to prove useful. She begged Fitz to teach her about fishing, which he was reluctant to do.

She came to his hut but before anyone else had waked. Still in her nightgown.

His hut had a matt & two books & a few strange trinkets.

“I need to learn to prove my worth.”

“To gain someone’s favor?”

“No. Yes. His brother, who sees me as worthless.”

“Are you?”

“I?”

“Are you worthless?”

“No. No! I’m willing to work, to learn. I’m not lazy.”

He’s still lying on his matt. Aside from his long grey hair, there’s nothing about him old, or downfallen with age.

“Lift your gown.”

She stares speechless.

“Or go. I can sleep more.”

“Must I?”

“No. You can leave.”

Never having before a man, yet this one has knowledge she needs. So she raises it up to let him see. Small, pretty breasts. A sweet cunt.

“Take it off.”

Less uncertain, she does. He lies back, spreads his legs, no word or gesture. She knows enough to straddle his waist, & surprises herself by easing his hard cock into her. Rides him slowly, it hurts, but keeps going till he cries out & cums drily into her. Keeps his hard-on long enough for her to cum too. The skies in her mind go white, the stars black, she moans as quietly as she can.

He teaches her to fish. How to hold the spear, how to stand, how to breathe, & not breathe, before throwing. She's good at it. Very good. First girl to be allowed out for the deep water fishings. Holds her own.

Her heart remains at first with the young man, but she visits often Fitz in his hut. After the first time, he is more solicitous. Learns her body, as she hardly knows it herself, & pleasures her by tonguing her asshole to orgasm, then spreading her sweet young cheeks & fucking her hard back there.

They talk too. She learns more of Fitz than anyone else has. How he came out here long ago, mourning the absence of a loved one. He'd been of fisher folk as a child, & nearly starved relearning the trade. Somehow made it.

She wonders if they should leave. Finds herself in love with him, not the romancey pretty boy flirtation she had with the young man, but a real hard wanting love.

She grows her hair long for him, sucks him until he's panting dry, fucks him moaning deeper & louder until the camp of her people nearby knows Fitz has someone with him.

This was to have been her last deep waters trip. She was leaving with him. There'd been no choice.

“They want me to commit to him in ceremony. Obey his will in all things. Sleep in his bed. I would not be able to come to you.”

“Is that what you want?”

“I want you.” She'd garlanded herself in braids & flowers, wore a covering the thickness of a breath, shaved her red pussy in the form of one of his favorite magickal symbols. The one that meant both eternal purity & perpetual hunger. This was her moment to reveal their truth.

He looked her up & down a long time, as though he'd never seen her before. Not a word, not a breath.

Finally, held out his arms. Decided they would leave after that next deep sea going.

Now here she was, the young man she'd not yet rejected dead, & his angry, grieving brother her possibly dangerous companion.

She'd had to suck him a few times too after he'd followed her out one dawn to Fitz's tent, & confronted her returning.

His cock was small, & slow to harden ever for her persuasive lips & tongue.

He'd even begun to confuse this coercion with a romance, love, something not what it was.



All because she wanted to learn to fish. One dead, one obsessed, one on the other side of a boatless sea.

This fragment held good for a long stretch but then it became something else. Cordelia laughed.

lviii.

So a failure. More failures. Thus retreat.

But now I was readying my return. It *had* to be good. I had a story too.

It came from where I retreated to Roadbuss 2000. I had been slowly going through this hidden details in this place, looking for why he had come here, & maybe what had happened to him.

I learned a strange story I wanted to tell. Learned it by looking through his strange library, where he'd write long notes in the blank end pages. His LPs, where he'd draw diagrams on the inner sleeves. Video tapes that would show a hand turning over a pile of black & white photographs. Piece by piece.

He'd come to a place called Oorous, seemed like a town but was in truth a slave camp run by aliens. He made like he was a big city reporter on vacation to write his first novel. Everyone was friendly.

Rented a room above the coffee shop, & would come there with his notebooks, dictionary, a novel or two for breaks.

Front of the coffee shop, right there on Main Street, had a big extended awning, with an elaborate coffee cup painted on it, & tables underneath shaded from sun & rain.

So he would write there, come down early morning, take his coffee, one slice of raisin toast, maybe a boiled egg, & hunch down into his work, writing page after page.

Of what? Of what he was observing right here in town. What people would tell him. What they feared. He became a trusted confidante to many who had forgotten to trust each other.

A boy would come by from his paper route, on his old bike, or walking. Showed him how to eat a Danish with wrapper still around it, neat as you please. Later this boy got into trouble with two local brutes.

Not aliens but probably snitches. I come to the alley where they have this boy cornered, & start swinging. They're cowards. Confess the aliens made them harass the boy for being too often with me.

"Do you love your town?"

"Yes. But."

"*No buts.*"

"OK."

"Tell them he knows nothing."

"OK."

"*Do it.*"

It gets worse. I don't see any aliens, ever, but they're making it hard for those friendly to me. I'm no longer the trusted outsider.

One day a black man comes to see me. He's a minister. Strangely, the aliens don't harass them.

"They think we're harmless or that we do half their cowing & brainwashing for them."

"Don't you?"

He's a handsome man, tall, nicely built. Charming twinkle of a rogue in his eye.

"You're not a real minister."

"No. When they first came, we didn't know what they'd do to town leaders, so we hid him. Still."

"You look more like an actor to me anyway."

"Thanks. I know it's getting hard for you."

"I have my own reasons for being here. But I thought it was just a quiet town, good place to lay low."

"Not a prison camp."

"No. But now I don't want to leave. Even if I can."

He studies me close. Then takes from his lap a brown bag. Hands to me. Nods me open. Charming twinkle.

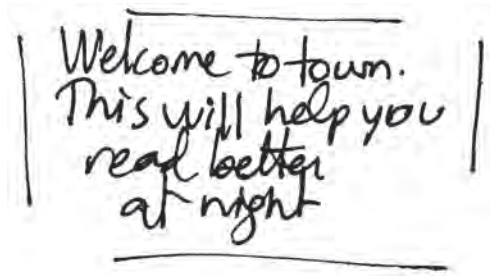
"It's a book. Thank you?"

"Not just any book. Keep it in the bag. Read it tonight. Lights out. I mean it."

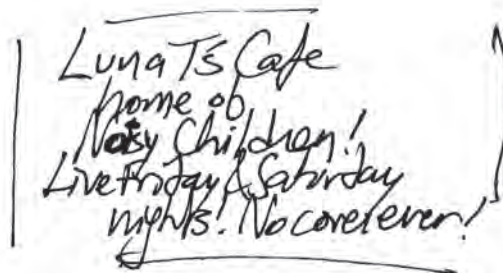
He did.

My room simple, small, tho two tall windows opposite the door gave me a view beyond the low buildings of the town to the Woods & mountains in the far distance. I could have read at night by leaving the shades up & letting the yellow streetlamp glare shine on it. But that seemed a bad idea.

Someone had given me a glass jar with a pretty candle in it. I could not think who. Oh, wait, it was left on my table, with a card. I had tucked both under my bed for safety.



Hmm. Well, I closed the shades & got into bed. I had a sort of bedside box I used for my pink cat radio alarm clock. No radio stations in range. I put the candle next to the radio & lighted it with the box of matches that had come with it.



Sounded fun, wherever it was.

Pulled book out of the brown paper bag. No cover.
Missing the first few pages & some along the way too.
So I just started reading from what I had.

“He woke up suddenly, & the white germless surroundings reminded him that his memory was going & would soon be gone.

“He had been a great hero in these darker years of history. Unlike most around him, he was able to resist the ceaseless temptations around him.

“It had still been ‘real’ life when he was young. People grew from children to adults, lived, loved, lost, worked, played, died in their myriad ways, much as they always had.

“But the world was sick & dying around them & now it was no longer a matter of argument among men of power & influence.

“A sort of revolution swept the globe, a call for everyone with skill & gift to come forward & help. By sheer force of numbers, weapons of all kinds were destroyed. Nation-states fell.

“Everyone felt the desperation & worked together. People rationed, shared their rations. Money disappeared as the bad idea it had always been.

“Doctors tended the sick, all of them. Healing technologies & medicines previously known only to the rich were openly used & shared.

“There were too many of us. The air was too full of poisons. Nobody wanted to do the hard thing until someone came up with a strange answer.

“There were drugs, that once only the rich had known, that could simulate a better, cleaner world. That put the user into a near-death dream-state, needing bare amounts of food & water.

“In this state, one’s mind reconstructed one as young, whole, healthy, full of curious hopes for the world’s mysteries.

“The world was young & new too. Fresh air, water, fresh food. The poisons gone, the skies blue, the stars visible at night. Sleep of an hour among vague colors & a *humming* lullaby, & back to living well.

“The sexual partner or partners of your choice. Happy friends. Your need to be violent destroyed nothing. Eventually the most brutalized soul calmed.

“As the world struggled & lost its battle, slowly, more took to this solution. Not just the very old, the sick, the despairing.

“People called it the Return to Paradise pill.

“What he knew was that someone had gotten a kind of poison into the Paradise Pill. Hospital wards & high school gymnasiums & community rooms of even healthy people, some using the pill just sometimes as a hope booster, were dying. Going to Paradise & not coming back.

“And there wasn’t much outcry. It became the way to go, often holding the hand of your dearest loved one, perhaps going together.

“He was supposed to find out how, & this had led him to discover that the Paradise Pill was not solely a human contrivance. He learned of the Emandians.

“But they had not introduced the poison. This was men. Emandians had lost their world too, save for a few who had traveled through the Dreaming via the Red Bag to this world. The rest had died peacefully in their beds, fed the potion of the Paradise Pill in perpetuity until their world collapsed on them, finally airless & forever black.

“No, someone was speeding up the process, & trying to win back the world for a smaller number.

“So that’s why he had found his way to the Emandian ships overhead, & how his memory had eventually been so damaged.

“He’d gone up again & again, until he couldn’t anymore, until he’d grown so frail that even the

methods they had of reviving him & his memory were starting not to work.”

A missing page here. He reads on.

“‘Why can’t I go back up?’

“‘Don’t you remember the last time?’

“‘Aren’t I coming back from that one?’

“‘No. You’ve been in this bed for weeks. You woke, you hardly talked or blinked the first time. But even after that, you didn’t know me.’

“‘Not at all?’

“‘Not a sniff.’

“‘What would you do?’

“‘She reddens. A lot. ‘I would seduce you. Be with you. Make sure I got you to sleep. Try again the next day.’

“‘You had to seduce me every day? That must have been pretty boring after awhile.’

Shakes her head. “‘It meant every day you wanted me like we were new, like it was our first time.’

“‘He convinced her to run with him. They’d left the facility to the dark, dangerous wilds of beyond.

“‘But outside the controls of the facility, he became a new & different danger every morning, before he calmed, & remembered her. She’d had to wound quite a few people he wildly mixed up with.

“‘Finally, she didn’t want to, but a syringe, & a signal via an electronic in her ankle bracelet. Tiny shells on a coarse string. Third date by the ocean gift.”

Missing page. Two.

“‘It was empty. Every room in the vast complex. He searched & searched, for anyone. For her.

“‘Found two things. An unbroken mirror showed his gaunt face, his graying beard. A bedside table in the room in which he’d woke contained, solely, her ankle bracelet. Sans transistor.”

He closes the book. Is this book the future? It feels near.

He has to go. That’s what this book is saying. *He has to go.*

Brings nothing, but the book in the brown paper bag. Decides to leave then, plainly, middle of the night. Figures the aliens will let him go.

Are they the Emandians of the book?

Closes his room’s door, key under the matt. Down the stairs to the door to the street. Crescent moon, like someone took a big juicy bite.

Walks down the center of the deserted street, not looking left or right. The black preacher gave him the book to help him know he had to leave. So he was leaving. Soon he was beyond town center, houses, farms, walking a pathless trace toward those Woods, those beautiful White Woods.

Gate-Keeper would tell this story, of how & why the man who came here arrived to this Roadbuss 2000. Like he had, it seemed. Needing sanctuary.



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Ten

*"Try to forget me.
Try to erase me."*

—Pearl Jam, "Jeremy," 1992.

lix.

Let go the map, Charlie

Yes, OK, try that now. Charlie Pigeonfoot crawls, & I mean *crawls* from the Nada Theatre auditorium. Not sure he can leave or should leave. Leaves.

A long long hallway, green carpet with gold symbology runs down its middle.

Charlie stands, finds he can stand, can walk. Checks his possessions. Meshed cup wherein his key, checker, housefly—plus his comic book, *Curvilinear Comix*—

Let's play a trick on old Charlie—maybe help him out a little bit too—

For when he looks down at his old beloved dog-eared comic book it is shiny & looks unread—& is *Curvilinear Comix* #3, not #2.

Still the sub-title—"for those lost"

He wants to sit right down there in that long strange hallway & read this issue somehow in his hands—

But just then there is a cackle from inside his little cup.

The housefly may have talked to him in certain possibly hallucinatory moments, but it had *never* cackled.

He looks inside the cup & there with red checker & key is a housefly-sized little pandy bear, orange & red skirt, bright, large mischievous eyes, impossible to keep a smile from—

No. Not yet. Charlie limps, ambles, staggeringly races down that long hallway away from Nada Theatre.

Chandeliers above him every 50 feet or so. Tall arching windows above him on his left. Let in a murky brightness, behold no specific cloud, their bases so high above his head, no telling what behind the wall containing them.

There. *There*. Swinging doors. Either fresh air & escape or at least he's further free of Nada.

Bursts weakly through the doors into the reception & check-in area of the Noah Hotel.

More chandeliers. And mirrors.

He stands, falters, sort of drags himself over to the lounge of velvet crimson furniture. Armchairs & couches.

Sits heavily. *Is this still letting go the map?*

Peeks inside his cup. The imp is gnattering quietly, click-clicks, noise-noises. Waiting.

"Just behave & be quiet."

"Eh?"

"I'll find us somewhere safe to be, I promise."

A soft cackle in reply.

Whether he's brave or just too tired to be afraid, Charlie Pigeonfoot stands, staggers, stands.

Walks over to the front desk.

"Good evening, sir."

"I would like a room."

"Very good."

"I have no money."

"I see."

Charlie gulps. "I will pay for my stay by painting a canvas for you."

"Canvas."

Eyes closed, teeth gritted. "My name is Charlie Pigeonfoot. I used to paint blood canvases. I will pay with a new one. There's a girl. In the theatre. Let her know the room you put me into & that she can pose for me anytime day or night."

A pause. A few scribbles with a sharp pencil.

"Do you enjoy extra pillows?"

"Extra . . . ? Oh. Yes."

"Come with me, sir. Your message will be delivered."

"Leave the curtains closed. And turn out the lights when you go."

"Of course."

Silence.

"Yes?"

"I was there, at those parties you came to in the woods. The trips, the fire. All the girls."

"Yah. Fun times."

"Some of us, a few really, didn't think you were a party freak toy. I loved your work. I'm sorry I didn't do more to let you know, to help you."

"Yah."

Silence.

"I'll help you now. Deliver your message to her, I mean."

"Thank you."

Door shuts a moment later.

Charlie lies back on the firm single bed, still holding his cup & new comic.

Fingers the mesh off the cup & holds it so she can come out if she likes.

"You were a housefly."

Cackle-cackle.

"What I mean is, you're not my prisoner now. You can leave or stay with me."

Feels the imp in his hand. Sniffing. Takes a small bite of his palm. Considers. Desists more for now. Makes her way along him up to his shoulder, among the rags there. Settles in comfortably.

His comic book is glowing, very lightly at first, but then more & more brightly. Almost blinding until he opens it to look.

No title page, just a full page colored pic of a slim girl in a plaid skirt. Standing on an empty wide black-topped road, straight white line running down its middle into the far distance.

Near her, either side of the road, are blank flat grey fields, less than nothing to see. But far far down the road, toward the horizon of what can be seen, there are plumes of fires, impressions of things exploding, chaos, terror—

She is faced that way but turned back to look at the reader, half-smile, teasing, lightly imporing,

& the caption,

“Come along, Charlie Pigeonfoot.

Come along with me?”

Delighted cackles on his shoulder encourage him to turn the page but, just then, there is a soft knock at the door, & a voice he too sure knows, “Charlie? Are you in there? Can I come in? They said you wanted me. I was surprised. It’s me, Cordelia.”

Let go the map, Charlie

lx.

The Creatures have slowly gathered some things together for Maya. She is as near as people-folk come to being like them, kin to them but, still, she *is* people-folk. They learn slowly to care for her as one.

Blankets. She likes blankets in the drafty coolness of their great cavern. Her favorite the soft brown one with fringes, bear faces cover it, watching her as they can, sniffing quietly. Often she wakes up whimpering from dream & they will *hmmmmmm* her back to sleep.

Her pink cat radio with the white face. She dreams of it often, & so the Creatures fashion one from materials they find above in the Tangled Gate.

It has no inner machinery but the Creatures & Maya play a game when she’s of the mood. She pushes its round station dial, stops, & the Creatures will sing her a song, often dance too. Next station, a new song, a new dance. Or the floppy-charmed Dalmatian pup will tell some funny funny jokes with his crooked smile.

“What did one wall say to the other?”

“Meet ya at the corner!”

She would often still lead them out to the shore to dive deep in waters & have adventures. One kind man she returns to again & again, but ever sadder.

“You would lay with me, Maya, but you love someone far from here.”

Says nothing, purple eyes won’t meet his.

He knows she’s with him too, as they travel his lands. He is a Peace-maker. Sometimes violent, loud, refusing bribes shaped like daughters, gold, local power. Peace can come in the form of celebratory orgies, days of pipes & wine & meat. She simply waits in his tent when she has come. He learns she is not always in his tent or anywhere else.

He lets her stroke his cock, suck it, swallow, & sometimes his hand on her small firm breasts, a gentle press between her thighs. No more.

Then he follows her back. Follows her one deep night when his current peace orgy is roaring with drums, fires, a test to see if every cock on both sides of the former enemies can be plugged one & all in mouth, cunt, ass—

follows her as she moves swiftly as prairie wind to the shores of a sea some 20 or more miles away, if a real sea anyway—

she leaves her clothes & dives in & he follows & in truth would stand no chance of keeping up if he didn't feel the speed & guidance of a number of her Creature friends—

swimming down somehow becomes swimming up toward an unknown moon, maybe, unknown stars, or just in different places in the sky?

He surfaces, half-drowned, but sees her emerging onto the shore & follows—

The Creatures lead him along & he trusts, & thus he arrives from sea to shore, to cave to tunnel to great cavern—

"You followed."

"I did, Maya."

"Why?"

"To say goodbye. I'm sure your friends can lead me home safely again."

Talks again, more than ever back in his world.

"You're a good man."

"I know."

"You're alone."

"I know."

"Why?"

"Peace-makers often die violent deaths. Men resent peace if it is too well-shared."

"Why?"

I pause. Look around this great cavern I have been careened to. There is a great, great tree in its center, rises impossibly high to its unseen apex. Maya moves to include me under her blanket. Creatures sniff-sniff nearby. They'll allow me. Closest are a White Bunny, a grey hedgehog, a tan & brown little monkey with a bowtie. I don't reply.

"So you'll be alone again now?"

"I'm not alone, Maya. When I negotiate a peace, a good one, I become part of the tribes I've helped bring this peace to. Even if I die, what I do goes on."

She's quiet as she snuggles into my grasp under the Bear Blanket. They watch me too.

Speaks barely. "His name is Dylan. He's far from here."

"Can you go to him?"

"I don't know."

I think. "Maya, do you have friends?"

"Yes."

"Can they bring you to him?"

"I don't know."

"Can you ask them, Maya?"

"I guess so."

Silence.

"What's Dylan like?"

She smiles, soft & deep & brilliant.

"He's sweet. He's brave, like you."

"Have you lain with him? Or does he with another?"

Her face reddens obviously even in this dim. "No."

"Do you want to?"

Softly again. "I think so. Yes. I don't know if we can."
I nod. Leave this girl the rest of her secrets.

More Creatures nuzzle up to us, to me. I am accepted here. I am Maya's true friend & they are too. We doze close & warm & dreamlessly.

I wake up in my own tent, alone. Words, her words, lingering in my mind, left there waiting for me to wake to them.

"We'll travel again together, my Peace-maker friend. I need to find Dylan, with my friends' help. Thank you."

Sleep the only kindly medicine that can salve me this parting & pull me under.

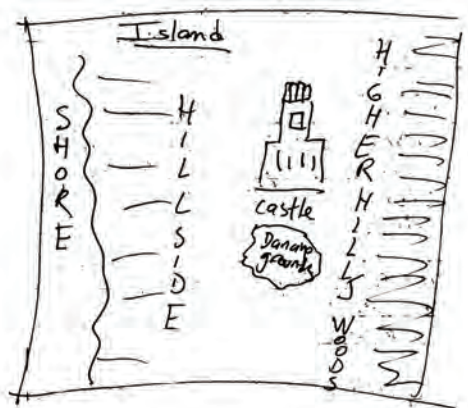
lxi.

Jazz stands, pulls me up. Leans up, grey eyes shut, I kiss her as lightly as I can, & only for a long moment. Her smile is sweet & delighted, eyes still, shut, tasting me as though I'm a special flavor.

We begin to walk & I want to put that brilliant brain of hers to work for us.

Feel in my pockets & amaze to find a scrap of paper & a stubby pencil.

Begin to draw a picture of what we know so far, from what we've seen & can see



The grounds around the Castle are unsteady to my eyes, which is disturbing.

"Like a kind of murk to things," I say aloud.

Jazz nods, my hand held tighter. Spooked. I wish I could leave her somewhere safe while I explored more. But she wouldn't, & there is nowhere trustworthy.

Suddenly we come quite plainly to something amazing. It's like my breath disappears for a moment & then resumes deeper & cleaner.

"I'm not afraid, Jasmine," I barely say aloud.
She nods, feels it too.

It is immensely tall & seems ancient, like a sort of tree from the beginning of the world.
"It's a Gate," Jazz says, awed. Her eyes shine how my heart feels.

A hundred feet high? Two hundred? A beautiful arch connects two ancient stone columns. We walk closer, hushed

& more, but still breathing freely, study the designs on the columns.

Jazz traces some with her fingers. "Creatures," she says. Smiling.

At the peak of the arch are words deeply carved & clear.

"For those lost," I read.

Jazz's smile at me is more luscious & sweet than I thought possible. "Let's go in."

"Do you think Ashleigh is in there?"

"I don't know. But something good is."

I nod.

So we walk through the Gate, hands clasped. Come to a great Fountain, tall plumes & bubbly waters. Old old stone.

Jazz doesn't hesitate to walk up to the Fountain & cup her hands to drink. I hang back, unsure. Unsure why unsure.

She motions me to her, her smile a hook in my heart's lips, accept her offered drink. Fresh, clean. Something else.

"Hmms?"

She nods. Her kind of strange puzzle to guess.

Sits us on the edge of the Fountain. Grey eyes closed & smiling for another kiss. I try gentle again & feel her harder press, even her tongue for a moment.

I start laughing.

"What, Toby?"

"I'm in love with you, Jazz. This is what it was like with Rosie. I mean. Um."

She nods. "I understand, Toby. That was hard."

I nod. "But she's gone. Like she told me. And I'm so damned happy here with you that it's OK. I hope she's happy too. That's something, right?"

Jazz nods.

I stand. Pull her up. We begin to look around where we are. Quickly determine there are two paths ahead, one on each side of the Fountain.

"Which one?" she asks, smiling.

I look down at her & for a moment let myself think which of her sweet small breasts I'd like to be fondling, sucking.

"Left," I say.

"Why?" she dares.

I say nothing & lead her on.

lxii.

I wouldn't always let Gretta-bird come with me on my adventures in the Attic. Too often, she would just sneak behind me somewhere & not let me catch her. Not quite anyway.

There was someone else I met that first winter. A girl, my age, so naturally Gretta didn't like her.

She was elusive, shy, playful, but she knew I would chase her & she led me along.

Knew about Gretta too & though she found her no threat, wanted her game with me to have no spectators.

Taught me a trick Gretta didn't learn for a long while. How to leave a false trail of Interates.

This girl knew my taste in girls before I did. Maybe she invented it for me.

She wore skirts long, below her knees, as few did back in my world. A single braid down her back. Pretty blouses, just tight enough.

Dark hair, blonde? I couldn't tell. Blue or green eyes? Tall as me? She led, but let me only so close.

She taught me how to reach places I would not have even imagined.

New York City. I looked up pictures of it months later, & I swear she led me through the streets of Manhattan, a red beret on her head. Was it real? Did anyone look in my eyes on those crowded streets as I followed her block after block?

That first winter she only let me near her once, the last night before I left. I came through a mirror deep in the Attic & found myself in a kind of drawing room. Her seated on a shiny crimson couch. Her dressed in a very low cut dress, high on her knees. Her blushing at me but steady.

I sat next to her.

"You're leaving."

"I'm going back to school."

"They told me this is what you would like best. I'm afraid I'm not that good."

"No. You're. Um. Crazy pretty."

More blushes. Both of us.

"Who told you?"

"Where I come from."

"Where?"

She leaned forward & I saw all of her breasts & my cock practically crippled me.

She was eyes closed waiting my kiss. I wanted to, I hadn't. I would. But.

A sound. Something falling.

She shrank back.

But I knew. "Gretta-bird."

"Who?"

"My cousin."

"She's smart."

"She's annoying."

But this girl was smarter still.

"Gretta-bird. Come out. It's OK. I'm not going to steal him from you. I promise."

Materializing in her way-too-short nightie, Gretta looked furious.

"Don't you call me that."

"I'm sorry."

"Jamie, let's go. We have to get back."

I look at her. That kiss is still on her lips for me but she nods smiling. "Good luck in school, Jamie."

Gretta commences to dragging me away when I stop.

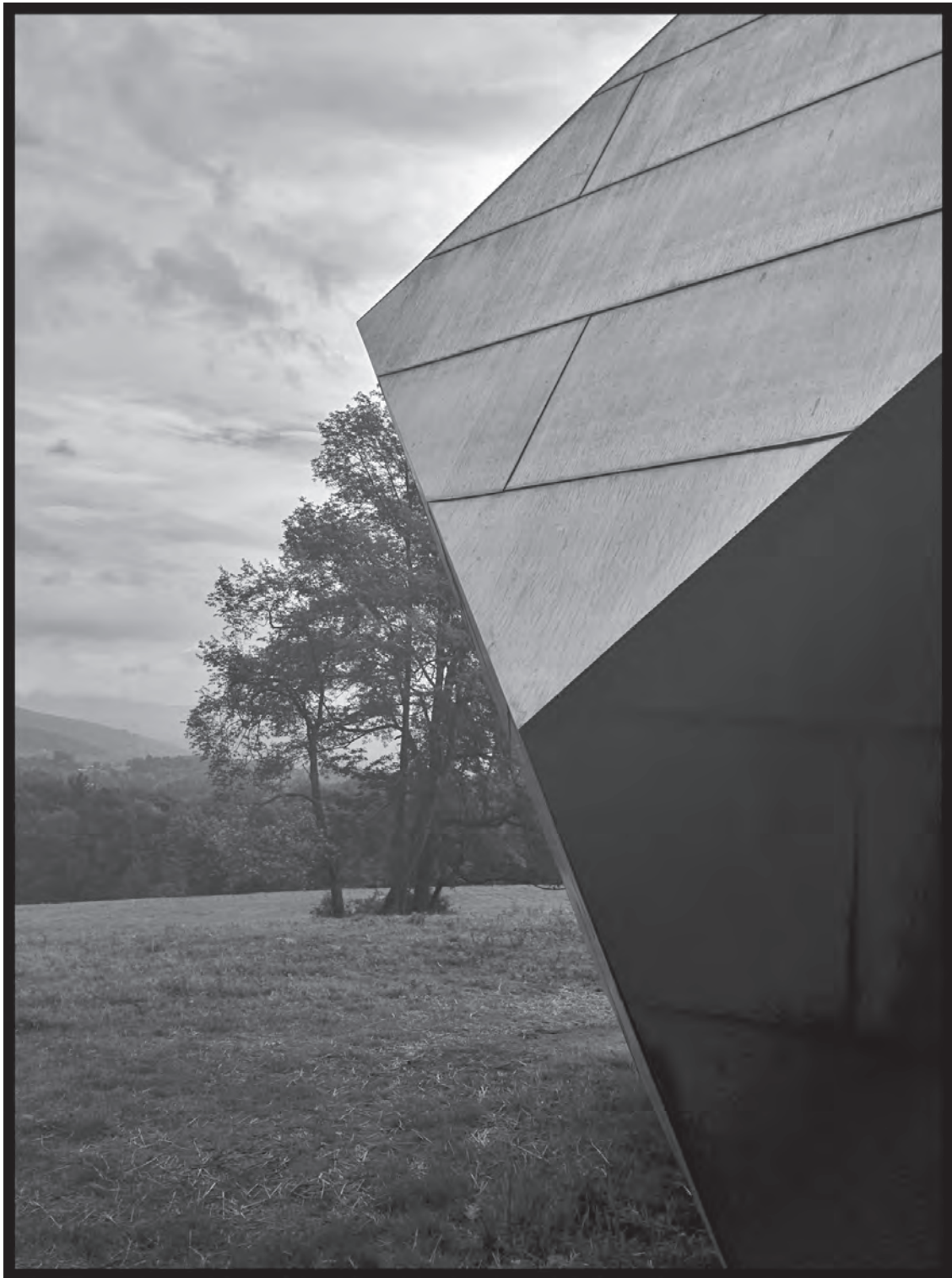
"What's your name?"

"Find me again. I'll tell you when you do."

Gretta-bird drags me back the long way to the living room, so I can enjoy her silent wrath for much time.

She barely speaks to me the next day as we have a special departure breakfast with our grandmother.

Who has figured out enough to smile & keep out of it.



Finally, Gretta hugs me as we are parted to different tracks at the train station.

"I won't always be too young," she growls into my chest.

And the last words to me from our grandmother: "It's dangerous to let it affect you out there in the world. It can become an addiction, a substitute."

"Did it for you?"

Her eyes as dark & pretty as Gretta's. "I had to stop going, Jamie. I haven't gone up there in so many years."

lxiii.

Bowie & Iris back in the house Bowie had lived in back when he & Iris just began their romance. She was so pretty he had to bite his wrists secretly to calm with her.

"That's funny, Bowie."

"It wasn't all I had to do."

"I'm sure."

"How about you?"

"Me?"

"Didn't you ever fantasize with your fingers about me?"

She laughs. *Still* too fucking pretty.

"It can't be just boys & men do it."

"It isn't."

"Are you saying yes then?"

She laughs.

It's a crowded party, Bowie's unsure how to navigate. Iris has an idea. Tugging the low-cut party dress she has on even lower, she walks up to the nearest gape-mouthed man in a short haircut in a tux. A whisper in his ears. Gulps, nods, points. Iris wetly thanks.

"Lucky him."

"He got a taste for some information. You get the rest."

"Harumph."

Whispers in his ear while leading him to his father's office. "I used to pull my white panties down for you oh . . . so . . . slowly, just to feel you entering me oh . . . so . . . slowly. I moaned with my mouth so wide & silent." Bowie nods, hangs on to her hand, gulps, in some order.

Father's office. OK. He's waiting.

"Come in, Garrish. And girl."

"Her name is Iris."

"I know."

"Then don't goddamn call her girl. And I'm Bowie."

"Is that all?"

"Why are we here? Back here?"

"I'm glad you are."

"Why?"

Bowie's father the same kind of tall angular glare on things. Iris realizes she could have fallen for either now.

"Because I'm sorry. I knew what Iris was & it scared me."

"I know. Answer my question."

"Bowie, you know I was a spy too."

He nods, knew, sorta.

"I knew about Emandia. I knew how important it was. Didn't you ever wonder how it is you & Iris met?"

Bowie sits down hard on the black leather couch in the dark-paneled office with heavy, closed curtains.

"How did we meet, Iris?" he whispers.

She sits down next to him. "I don't know."

"But it's like we've always known each other."

"Already loved each other."

Bowie's father nods. "It was this party, Bowie, Iris. Tonight."

"How?"

Shakes his head. "It was me. Bowie was such a loner boy & I wanted him to have a friend."

"And me?"

Stares bluntly at her. "You agreed to it because they had you locked up. I knew it was wrong. So I brought you back home &, once at this party, it wasn't possible to retrieve you back. *It's why I threw the party.*"

Bowie looks at Iris. "So you were my friend."

She nods. Suddenly laughs.

"But we were all over each other from the moment we met."

Bowie looks at her. "Did you know all this?"

Bowie's father shakes his head.

"I took care of that. Her memories didn't come back until you & I had moved."

"What did you think you were?"

Iris thinks. "I didn't. I was here, with you."

"Where did you go home that night?"

"She didn't, Bowie."

"What do you mean?"

"You had only one night together. I guess I freaked out. We left the next day. She went back. It was stupid. I had brought her back so they would let you & me go. We left so I knew you would hate me but move on."

"I never did."

"I know."

"Why are we here?"

Looks at them both. "Tonight you both go where Iris went."

"What do you mean?"

"I want you to go to the Island."

Iris looks shocked, remembering.

"Where I arrived."

"Bring Bowie with you. Show him."

"Why?"

"Because it's time you saw where your beloved comes from & made up your own mind about things. You deserve to know. Doesn't he, Iris?"

She nods, silently.

I walk into the office now.

"What?" says Bowie, angry, now half afraid I'll take her.

I look at them. "You met in a classroom. She would draw funny pictures & you would warn her when the teacher might notice."

Bowie's father looks at me. "They don't remember."

"Why?"

"All that never happened."

"Isn't that how she came to the party? Remember spin the bottle & closet?"

They look at me, blank.

I am carrying my pounds-heavy copy of *Labyrinthine* & I page through it for them, reading the relevant parts. They listen, unremembering.

"What is this?"

"Do you know my name?"

"Bowie's father."

He laughs. "You don't always know for sure, even in this book of yours. Sometimes it decides a better narrative course & rewrites retroactively."

"It?"

"*Just trust the book.* This is a better path."

"And those pages? That I wrote, in this book?"

He smiles. "It won't happen often. But after all these years writing this, *it will happen.*"

"Who decides?"

"The book decides. Mostly, it agrees with you. It likes you, Raymond."

"You're its spokesman?"

"In this scene. Not always."

Bowie cracks up. Iris tries not to.

I roll my eyes. "So you're sending them to the Island?"

"They are going."

"My choice or the book's?"

"Both this time."

I roll my eyes & walk out of the scene. This is a weird thing to occur.

Weird.

lxiv.

Jack & Isis are now away from the Realist party. They've gotten as far as an empty unlit road in deep country somewhere. Walking slowly along, far into the night.

"What's she like?"

"Who?"

"You girl. Penny?"

Jack's silent.

"You don't have to tell me."

"It's not that."

"What then?"

"It's just not easy to answer. It's like she was two girls."

Is laughs. "Most girls are at least two."

"I thought they were best friends. I screwed up one night & fucked the wrong one. Then I couldn't figure my way back."

"Didn't they help you?"

"No. Then something happened & I was sort of on the road to . . . here with you."

Is nods in the dark.

"Did you ever love someone, Isis? I mean really love someone?"

"I loved Samantha."

"Romantically?"

"Yes. I think so. I'd known her all my life. We were together in ways I'd never been with anyone before."

"What about all the boys?"

"That was me rebelling. Every other girl my age did it."

"Did any love you?"

"No. They wanted to fuck me, & Samantha knew it & told me."

"So you ran away?"

"Yes."

"Do you miss her?"

"I don't know if she was real, Jack. Maybe she wasn't."

"Tell me the thing you most remember. We have a long walk to anywhere tonight."

lxv.

The Heroes had been summoned to the Island again, a surprise. It had happened while they were on a lecture tour, much demanded, in which they described their heroic adventures. One year, climbing the steep & rainy Mt. Cloudy Day. The next traveling far along the Imaginal Hikeway. And last year coming to the Island in very ancient times, traveling to the Great Cavern under the Tangled Gate, long before its big tree was tall, before even Creatures lived there.

They lectured to a packed crowd at the Ancienne Coffeehouse, telling of these travels, & also urging their listeners to become Heroes too.

Coming out of the Ancienne, the two Heroes encountered the Kittys in their Boat Wagon, seeming to be waiting for them. A glance at the dashboard showed there to be a **LETTER** button waiting to be pressed.

Pressed, & a letter pops out to be read. Unfold & its says:

*You must return to the Island
for a Secret Journey.*

P.S. Gather a good crew to go with you.

P.P.S. When you get to the Island, there will be a second letter.

So the Heroes went back into the Ancienne Coffeehouse & announced to those who'd heard their lecture their plan to take a Secret Journey & need of crew.

Over a dozen volunteered & all traipsed out to the Boat Wagon to start, while many others came outside to wish them well.

They all buckled up in the back—*Safety First!*—& rolled along till they passed through the White Woods & arrived at the sea. The Boat Wagon rolled on in & the Kittys paddled them the long way to the Island.

This time they arrived in present times, but the Natives had heard they were the ancient Heroes their ancestors had known, & welcomed them, & had them to their village to stay the night.

In the morning, the Heroes checked the Boat Wagon's dashboard & there was a **LETTER** #2 button. The letter read:

*Take a partial crew & travel with the Natives on their bicycular vehicles
deep in the Woods to the Long Pond.
Follow the Hmmm there &, when arrived, listen.*

So the Natives got the Heroes & some of their crew to pack up & rolled them, via the *Hmmm*, into the Woods, & to a very quiet place where the Pond was in view. They let them off, & rolled on, saying they'd return in awhile.

Now settled on rocks at the edge of the Pond, the group of Heroes & crew, a dozen or so, gathered close to quiet & listen.

The *Hmmm* here, along the pines-lined water's edge, was so quiet they had to listen way down low. Occasionally, a bird yowl or trill or call erupted, & the wind sometimes tousled the trees. The water swayed & created & fractured images of the branches & boulders at the edge.

Eventually, the Natives came riding back & the Heroes & crew returned to the village.

After a pleasant night's sleep, the Heroes checked the Boat Wage dashboard & there was **LETTER #3** button. Pressed, the letter popped out &, unfolded, read:

*Take the rest of your crew in the Boat Wagon &
follow the Path of Roots & Rocks to the Sea.
There, have a rest & then roll into sea.*

And so the Heroes boarded the Boat Wagon, & the rest of the crew, & were directed by the Natives toward the Path of Roots & Rocks, a difficult path, the Boat Wagon's claws out to climb through thick trees, among fallen trunks, patches of wild mushrooms, over small bridges, & down & down, & through the old apple orchard with its impossibly beautiful & shy deer, & finally arrived to the beautiful, beautiful sea.

Upon a high rock sat two great red wooden seats, & the Boat Wagon climbed claw by claw up to arrive.

Down below the wild, wild sea. The Heroes considered & then nodded to the Kittys to climb on down & roll on in.

The Kittys paddled the Boat Wagon into the sea, & for a long time along. Then in the distance they saw a speck in the air & approaching fast—

& it was Calgary the Sea Dragon! who looked upon them far below & said in his bemused gravelly voice, "Ah, Heroes! & Kittys! & Crew! Hello, my friends!"

Well, everyone waved to Calgary & cheered.

"Say," Calgary said, "Would you like to see a place few ever have?"

It being a secret journey they were on, the Heroes yelled assent.

Sea Dragon tail lowered to surface, Boat Wagon rolled on up & onto Calgary's noggin. *Thwumpp! Thwup! Thwumpp!* He flew them many miles swiftly until they came in sight of what could only be called a Secret Island!

Calgary flew down near to the shore, lowered tail to ground, & Boat Wagon rolled down & off.

"Have fun! I will be back to pick you up in the morning!" & with that, Calgary flew slowly away.

At the Heroes' signal, the Kittys peddled the Boat Wagon up the beach & into the Woods therein.

Meanwhile, back at the village, the rest of the crew began worrying the absence of the Heroes. They convinced the Natives to select their biggest & most sure-footed numbers to put on carrying apparatuses & travel swiftly the crew to the sea via the Rocky & Rootsy Path, which they did, & arrived, & of course they found no Heroes or crew.

Fortunately, one of their number was a White Bunny who glowed a signal that summoned Calgary the Sea Dragon to come.

"What is it, my friends?" asked he. The Natives crouched fearfully among the rocks, but the crew being Creatures were of course not afraid of their friend, & asked where the Heroes had gone.

"To the Secret Island! Would you like me to bring you too?"

And so Calgary lowered tail & the rest of the Heroes' crew climbed on, & up to noggin to ride on safely.

The Natives stayed ashore, promising to remain by the two great red seats till they all returned.

Soon Calgary was far out at sea & they approached the Secret Island. Arrive, tail down, crew onto the shore. "I will come get you tomorrow!" cried Calgary & flew *thwup! thwup! thwup!* away.

Meanwhile, the Heroes & their crew in the Boat Wagon had ventured far within these strange Woods, to places more of dream & mirage than solid form, rolling, floating, flying, till maybe stopping in a dreamsome place, felt enclosed like a clearing or cave or cavern, & there were just the basic elements of the world around them, an air current flowing in & around them, the musical chatterings of a stream or river, the crackle snap of low flames, & from the earth itself, if be, a kind of great horn, a sound emitting from it without lips blowing. *Hmmmming. Hmmm. Hmmm. Hmmm.*

The Heroes & the crew in the Boat Wagon seemed to evanesce in & out of being, always in tune with the *Hmmm*, always in tune—

& as though a valentine to them all, the *Hmmm* had led the rest of their crew to them & they were all reunited as the fire crackled, air current lifted & held them, water flowed through them calming, & the player-less horn *hmmm'd & hmmm'd & hmmm'd* out the world every new moment—

The Heroes & crew fell into a reverie unto dream & lost & found & clustered together OK—

Woke in the morning in a quiet empty clearing, not knowing what of it was real—

Boat Wagon rolled back to the shore & waited for Calgary to come, which he did, & he carried them all safely back to the Island where they had come from. Where many, many Natives were now anxiously waiting their return & “hurrah! hurrah! hurrah!” they cheered & cheered & carried the Heroes & Boat Wagon of crew upon their shoulders back to the Village.

There they celebrated their great Secret Journey & eventually said goodbye, the next morning, & Boat Wagon back to their own Island, White Woods, Village, & the Ancienne Coffeehouse.

And of course a fresh lecture about their new adventure, & a paw swept around to indicate the crew of new Heroes present, & much applause for all—

The Heroes came out later & they bid the Boat Wagon & Kittys adieu, having decided to just walk to their next lecture location.

Released from duty, the Kittys peddled their Boat Wagon through the White Woods & finally to the sea shore, & this time let her roll in & far into the sea, guarded surely & lovingly by Calgary the Sea Dragon somewhere high above

Telling done, Maya switches off the Creature-powered pink cat radio, smiling endlessly at the epic tale they have told.

She sleeps, as always, deep among a cluster of them, fingers among the White Bunny, Hedgehog, many giraffes, & bears, a furry little squirrel in a warm orange sock hat, a brown monkey fellow, a black & white Dalmatian, quite a few duckys, so satisfied with their story she is able to sleep without dream or dreams this time—

Wakes up just as into the Great Cavern rolls none other than that Boat Wagon carrying none other than Maya's loved & long unseen people-folk friends, Christina & Kinley.

Looks once. Twice. Smiles. Frowns.

lxvi.

Isis reaches for Jack's hand as they walk along the empty road far from anywhere else, full moon above their own light.

“If you mean a boy, there was one, but it was only a little while. I suppose that's why I bothered with all the others later. I kept hoping.”

"I lived near a Woods, like these. Well, not that close, but I would wander pretty far from home & one time I found these Woods. And then I would explore deeper & deeper in them. Till one time I sorta stayed past dark & couldn't find my way back."

Jack nods, squeezes her hand, is listening.

"I wasn't tired so I just wandered deeper in. A full moon, like tonight. I was young, everything was magic to me still.

"I came to a sort of, I don't know, carnival? In a clearing deep in these Woods. How? Why?

"There was a girl older than me. Came up to me. Smiled.

"Can you sing?"

"Sing?"

"Yes. I'm sure you can. Come on!"

"And so she led me into a performance building, a stage, a dark audience I couldn't tell if full or empty.

"Just *hmmm* to my singing to start."

"*Hmmm*?"

"Yes, later you'll learn the words."

"So I did. I held her hand, looked into her beautiful auburn eyes, breathed quietly the scent of her long curly brown hair, wished my hasty blouse curved half as much as her loose flowing dress. I *hmmm*'d for her & hoped to do it OK. She held both my hands, smiled for the audience even while she stared deep into me, & it was wonderful."

Jack smiles too. "Sounds like a dream you had, passed out cold in the Woods, Is."

Shakes her head. "We were performing night after night, I never thought of my old life. Slept at dawn & all day. Sang & sang.

"Then one night at a break, she said, 'he wants to talk to you.'"

"Who?"

"The boy who comes every night to watch you." A strange smile & she was gone, & a blonde boy older than me was sitting on the log next to me.

"Hi."

"Hi."

"You sing so beautiful."

"It's my partner really."

"He moved closer to me & though I felt breathless, I wasn't scared. Held me close, hand inside my blouse like it had always been there.

"You have such soft breasts."

"They're small. I'm sorry."

"I like them. I like you."

"I wondered what would happen next, but then he stood up & smiled. 'Showtime.' And I returned to sing.

"So what happened?" asked Jack.

"They couldn't take me when they moved on. They had to go. They had her bring me to the edge of the Woods. She hugged me so tightly & it's like she, she melted away in my arms," & here finally Isis breaks down, crouching on the ground, sobbing like she'd held it since that moment. Which she had.

Finally stands. Nods, OK. They walk on.

"Is the story of Samantha a happier one for you?"



lxvii.

Jazz & Toby walking together in the Tangled Gate, walls on either side of them at least a dozen feet tall, made of tightly woven vines & stones.

For a long stretch, straight paths that would turn occasionally, once in awhile a choice, but nothing revealing in it, just twists & turns.

"Where are we going, Jazz?"

"I don't know."

"Toward Ashleigh & your Master?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

Stops. Looks closely at her.

"What's wrong?"

She smiles. "I like it here. Don't you?"

He looks around. "I think so. But what happens next?"

"I think that's for us to decide."

Toby nods. Thinks. "Can we arrive somewhere now?"

Jazz laughs her brilliant sweet laugh. Leads him by the hand along around the next corner & *voila!* They are arrived.

Everything changes. Toby panics, but feels her hand still, murk? blindness? Feels like he's indoors, a house. Finds a wall & makes his way along . . . a doorway . . . another one . . . a third . . . a far wall.

Then something, feel along . . . OK then, another doorway & in.

Sight. *Woah.* Sound. A party. Feels for Jazz's hand, it's fainter but there.

A crowd, the men in suits, women in low cut & high slit dresses. Music is some kind of old jazz. Mirrors on all the walls, I don't notice them at first.

A woman tugs me over to a couch. She's younger than I thought. Her eyes pale blue, glinting, playful. I let my eyes droop down between your breasts. Squeezing Jazz's hand as wispy as it feels.

"Which one are you?"

"I'm. My name is Toby."

"You're cute. I'm Ashleigh."

I stare at her. Twice. Is it?

Why can't I remember?

"Are you a jock?"

"I. I was."

"Football?"

I nod. She leans nearer me.

"Do you have a sister?" I ask quietly.

Does she flinch or no?

"Would you like to fuck me?"

Something catches my eye, over her head, the large mirror on the brick-style wall.

What. *What?* Jasmine? In the mirror? She's motioning to me. Nodding to me. *Tell her yes.*

I lean nearer to her ear. "I still play dirty."

She laughs though I see a flinch in her eye. Something.

She leads me out of the room, down a crimson-lit hallway into a room of bed & mirrors.

She's pushing me down on the bed & I'm looking to every mirror in the room for Jazz. *There she is.* On the mirror over the bed. She's nodding.

Ashleigh looks different, her hair a long dark blonde, but her mouth is the same, curls to laugh at any boy who'd try for her prize. Her after thought of a dress reminds me of how much I wanted to fuck this girl.

But the girl I love is in that mirror watching me kiss Ashleigh's neck, kissing down her body as I undress her, her enjoying, Jazz watching, her expression for me unchanging, loving me, encouraging me, my lips on her fine high tits, sucking, biting, her flinching a little, me biting more, down her flat tummy, her thong off & the flinch is a tremble, but my tongue lapping her shaved lips, lapping harder, licking to taste her clit, tasting it, sucking it, her moaning, something trembling in this now, I *feel it*, I look up for a moment at her eyes closed, clenched, Jazz in the mirror beyond her, nodding, *more, more*

I tongue her very wet & then lift up & push her roughly on her tummy, push her legs apart, push her hard down as I mount her, "say it"

"mmm"

"say it"

"fuck me."

"say it, you whore."

"*fuck me! o fuck me!*"

I position myself to drive in her & I would but she is stiff & struggling & Jazz is shaking her head now.

I roll off.

She turns, looks at me. "Why did you stop?"

"Don't you remember me?"

"Should I?"

"*I'm Toby.*"

"You said that."

"*You're Ashleigh.*"

She smiles. "That's true."

"Jasmine & I came to rescue you."

She looks surprised. "Who? Rescue me from what?"

I want to point to Jazz in the mirror, but suddenly she's not there.

She smiles more. "Come on, lover. You're fun. Let's do more."

"You were struggling."

"I know."

"So I stopped."

"I don't want you to. I want you to make me struggle more. I like it. Gets me off."

I grab my pants & hurry them on. Walk out.

Suddenly back where we were. The vines & stones walls all around us. Jazz & I slumped on the ground together.

She wakes & looks at me.

"Why did you stop?"

"I didn't want to."

"No? Are you sure?"

I stand. "Fuck, Jazz. Yah, I used to want to fuck her. Every guy did. That's what girls like that want. Makes them feel good."

"But?"

"*But you.*"

She's still looking at me way too seriously.

"You don't want her now?"

I think. Turn away & think. Turn back.

"I'm built to fuck. But I choose who. I choose you."

She remains sitting, looking at me. Then she softens, raises her hands for me to pull her up.

We kiss, but very softly.

"That felt real, Toby."

"I know."

"Was that my insecurities like, um, made into something that seemed real?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

I think. "I suppose your ex-Master is next."

"Are you jealous of him?" she sounds shocked.

"Or the boy at your school."

"Toby!"

"Jazz, this place seems to know us really well. It's a magical place, I guess."

She nods. Thinking. That's good.

"So you think it will test me too?"

"I don't know. But maybe we only get somewhere if we pass them when they come. The tests."

Now Jazz's smile is soft & sweet for me, with that hint of mischief, she eyes closed leans up to me.

I kiss her softly, as I think she likes, but her kiss presses me for more, so I swallow her closer to me, into my arms, my mouth, she's loosing to me newly, long & slow. I loose to her too, forget where & who & what & then I open them & I am not there again.

Jasmine in a halter top & a too-short skirt. Hair tied back. We're in a, I look around, a library?

I'm scrawnier, smaller, but somehow, um, smarter? It's why I'm supposed to tutor her? *Her?* In what?

I look down at the table we're sitting at. Open books. Poetry. Shit. No.

"Read to me."

"Read?"

She leans forward & her small finger taps the book in front of me. Remains leaned forward near me until I have a good gaze into her braless halter top. *Shit.*

She's waiting.

"No."

"No?"

I shake my head.

"Why?"

"You wouldn't win him just with your body. You didn't even really know if he liked you."

She leans back. "How do you know that?"

"I don't know. I just think you didn't."

She nods. "Another test of you."

I nod. "Why?"

She shakes her head, each shake wiping away that library. We're still standing facing each other, like we just stopped kissing.

I nod, keep her hand, start walking on again.

"Toby?"

"This place can test me all it wants," I say, my voice rising, "I'm not letting go this pretty girl's hand & I'm not fucking anyone else!"

Jazz laughs merrily. Then stops.

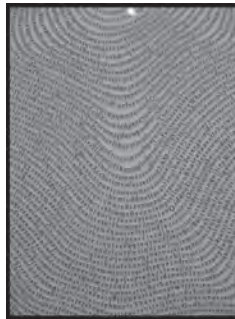
Pulls me stop. Face her.

"Me too," & we hug a long time.

lcviii.

A grand canvas of words, twisting & spinning, barking, *hmmmming*, furry, heavy-leaved, warming me happy—speaking words for me

**I hunger
for: the
illusory like
devoid of
or: there
bondage
for me
knowledge
& self is
I hunger.**



**& strive
world is
magic
any essence
is neither
nor liberation
or: Self-
reveals all
the revelation.
I strive.**

I wake, cramped bus. Shit, again. Look out window, nearly there, used to be a good thing, even exciting. Things seem to diminish.

I sit in back next to a pretty girl, the kind I've seen all my life & wished to talk to.

Say what? "Hi, you are so pretty I would like to slowly study you, inch by glowing inch, but then I'll get heated up & wish to fuck you, & this is a pretty poor opening line, isn't it?"

Say: "What is your power over me? How is it in my bones & mind alike to *want* you? How can want be so real? What does it feed?"

Say: "Hi, I'm the nicest guy you are ever going to meet &, I assure you, I want to make you happy."

Each one worse than the previous. Sad. Boringly sad. I feel old though a skinny age still, feel like a skeleton buried in a dead fire.

I tilt my head & peek. She's reading some kind of handmade book of bark & leaves? Wrapped in ribbons. The print looks like it was written by dipping a twig in dark old blood.

Knowing I can't keep looking, I used my old bookseller's trick of scooping up a line of text quickly to read in my mind:

*Yesterday it came to me: the guilt, the anguish, the rage, that's driven me this far out—it's this life
I've never fully controlled—*

She's looking at me, stopped, turned & looking at me. Her long red hair loosely tied into a jumble of curls, her turquoise eyes net mine & no escape. "Your stop is here. Here's your book to take"—pause, smile—"& a kiss from someone you will meet one day soon"—leans into me, eyes closed, her lips on my cheek like a soft, lingering rain, impossibly slow. My eyes closed too, I feel her lean away again, drift in cherry vanilla scent a moment.

Stand suddenly, the book she tucked into my grasp hardly felt as I lurch toward the back door to get out. I'd forgotten to pull the buzzer wire. This driver knows me & my stop though. I'd smiled in brief words at his Cleveland Browns hat once, & made a friend.

"That Johnny Football!" he calls to me as I half-wave a hand & drag myself upright off the bus.

Alright, so here I am at my bookstore, my job, much of my life since I was a kid. It's massive, an old block-long factory that hulks darkly against the sunniest sky.

Arcadia Bookstore & Cafe. The Cafe is a few red metal tables & chairs in front of one of its entrances. Big white birch trees surround this so-called "courtyard cafe." I usually sit in the corner-most table near the trees.

The Bookstore never closes. I'd worked in it all hours of day & night. Since I was 12. Since the day I'd gone in, horny for something better than figure skaters & gymnasts on TV.

Wandered it uncaring the books really. *Where's the porn?* My friend Muddy had a few, some good ones he'd shown me. But I needed my own, & a private hour. He told me about this place, said they had lots, & no security cams or anything.

I wander in deeper, worry the porns are behind a curtain with an 18+ sign. Yah, right, like if you're 18 you need porns. I was 12 & skinny & acne'd & the only thing impressive about me was how hard my cock got these days at the wiggle of girls, leaves, water, whatever. I needed porn for the long road ahead to 18. I had no money & knew they wouldn't sell to me. I wondered why nobody cared for my problem. Why there wasn't a good answer for me? Muddy laughed & said that's what porns are for. I didn't think so. Didn't girls get horny too?

Found them in a shadowy corner toward the back, next to the old lady romance books. Funny.

There it was. *Oui* magazine. A long row of cheerleaders, the usual tight sweaters & ass-short skirts, save for one, caught in mid-turn with her sweet little panties-less ass flicking hello to the camera.

It wasn't real. Just a studio, 20 takes to get that ass's best angle.

I didn't care. My cock *didn't* care. This magazine was going to be my new best friend, as I headed aimlessly toward the door, my new girl slid under my worn out old wool pea jacket.

But no, a tall tall man casually makes his way toward the exit. I hurry, slow, panic, would leave my new girl in her underwear dilemma just to save my own far less pretty ass & live to rob another day.

He approaches me. *Fuck*, he's tall. Long grey hair, sideburns. A face chipped lightly from a fairly ugly rock. Dominating blue eyes catch mine & won't let go. *My feet won't run*.

His hand is out. I whimper. *Fucking* whimper & hand over my girl & her fully-pantied crew.

Looks at the cover. *Smiles. Licks his lips*. Nods. I follow him uncuffed to his office. Seems like it's both up & down stairs. It's dark. He lights up a weirdly shaped black candle. Nods me sit. I do.

His chair looks like it was lightly chipped too, but from a redwood trunk. He's still looking at the cover. *Smiling. Lips licked*.

Then puts it among the piles on his vast desk. Silence. Meditating? Napping?

Talks suddenly & I jump. His voice is low, clear, even musical. Can't help noticing.

"I can see why you picked her."

I say nothing.

"They're as helpless as we are. All of us. DNA programming & mortal self-consciousness."

I don't breathe. He sounds like a preacher or a teacher. Maybe he will forgive?

"I'll call the cops now."

"*No. Wait. Please.*"

He hasn't reached for a phone. I don't even see one.

"Yes?"

"I'm, I'm sorry."

"Sorry you got caught."

"Yes. To be honest. But not just that."

"What then?" His eyes again heavy on me, but patient, letting me talk.

I don't think. I talk. "None of them like me. And it makes me crazy. Sad & angry."

He nods. Waits.

"I didn't even like them last year!"

He smiles. Waits.

"I'm sorry you caught me. But I'm sorry I did it too. It's just not—"

"Not what?"

"Not fair!" I yell, not meaning to.

He's silent. Nods. Picks up the magazine & hands it to me. "Write your name down for me."

I panic. Start to shiver badly.

He continues calmly. "I want you to work off the cost of that magazine. Starting tomorrow. Show up at 6 a.m. If you're late, I'll dial the police. But I understand. So this is your chance."

That was 8 years ago. That tall tall man became my boss, & my friend.

I worked behind the register for years before I was allowed to go up beyond the main floor of new & used books. To enter through the back door, with an old rusty key I'd earned, follow the long dim hallway to the first ramp up. Find worlds upon worlds beyond.

Her book's been in my lap, unnoticed, till it falls to the ground. I pick it up gingerly, feeling how fragile it really is.

The next page seems far more for notes than a continuing narrative. I read:

**** I visited some old friends, but their place was so cluttered & dirty I had to use their bathroom to clean up. But the sink's faucet wouldn't run, just some black dust came out of it. And the tub was half-filled with old towels, half-failing to sop up some black muddy water. I came out dirtier for trying & found V showing off her S&M artwork to a group of longhaired tiedyed but strangely formal & unfriendly hippie-types. Girls of all kinds in these black & white etchings. Chained to walls, to guns, to trees, to old convertibles, each by a thin golden chain affixed to their tongues, nipples, clits. None smiling, none suffering. But one. Long red hair, turquoise eyes. She leans up against a white birch, the gold chain tying her hands to it, her curls among the chain's links. Smiling, very faintly. Mocking, just so. **Some things you just can't prison.***

**** I have a silver electric notebook, flexible, soft, sometimes sits in my lap & **hmmms** when I am reading instead. Attached by a golden chain is a clear pen, lit to work by its wick But I'm homeless for awhile & lotta rain & notebook gets wet & whimpers, & I panic because I have no friends, & **now this—***

**** The last thing I did before leaving for good was to buy a cassette of an old album called **Sco'u'tland** by James McGunn. It's 90 minutes long, songs, stories, & fragments, & I go to the public library to look him up but . . . **nothing**. Not even a review of his album. Nobody at the crazy bookstore knew. City block long & . . . **nothing**.*

Wait. *What?* My bookstore? Maybe. I get up & push the knobless oak door in; sometimes gets stuck & you risk splinters trying.

There's a movie poster on the door, now embedded in it. That's what happens. It absorbs the poster tacked on it, *changes them* before consuming them entirely.

Looks like a spaceman far from home, sitting slumped on a planetoid next to a strange ship. A tugboat? Called *Alone*. "*How will Daniel get home?*" the poster asks.

Immediately inside is the store's map rack. Even on this first floor, the book sections shift locations daily. One of the store's many mysteries is how & why this occurs.

Rack's empty though. It happens by this time every afternoon. Then the maps need to be collected from where they've been left on shelves, displays, the floor. I've collected them up *many times*.

But I know a corner that's always free. never a bookcase placed there. When I was about 14, one of the older girls, she had red hair & turquoise eyes too, took me there. Kissed me on the cheek & said, "*She will like you so much.*"

Settling in: Turn to my book's next page. Back to longer narration:

My father & I went to an abandoned complex, where he said when he was young he would win track trophies, football crowns, baseball awards. "Abh the girls," he whispers as he limps along beside me.

The Fountain in the middle has hardly moved, no matter the weeds filling the stream that once fed it. He drops back to pass, staggers, throws me a long one I make to catch like football-shaped air. I pitch him a fastball of air & he POW! drives it over that falling down grandstand where ghosts of girls lick lips knowing, or intending to know.

He nods, starts to drift away, stops suddenly, looks down at a puddle. I join him. Shaggy tree in puddle.

***He points
"That's you."
& around us,
no tree.
his heart.***



***down.
Looks up
ruins,
Touches
"Me."***

"You're here!" says the happy, familiar old voice above me. My old boss, waving around *The Literary Book of Us*. "It has your answers!"

His name is Jester, or at least all anyone has ever called him. He's indeed about 7 feet tall, 80 years old, crystal blue eyes. Climbs mountains with pretty girls part his age, reads old poetry aloud, declaiming to the clouds, while they quietly masturbate.

I show him I have a book. His rocky ugly face cringes. Handmade books writ in blood spook him.

I nod. He reads, loudly, so everyone can hear him: "*Traveling a war-torn country with his dog, a beautiful robot, & every few miles the dog will sniff out a pipe of operational waste to empty. Takes an hour. She needs a good cleaning out after.*"

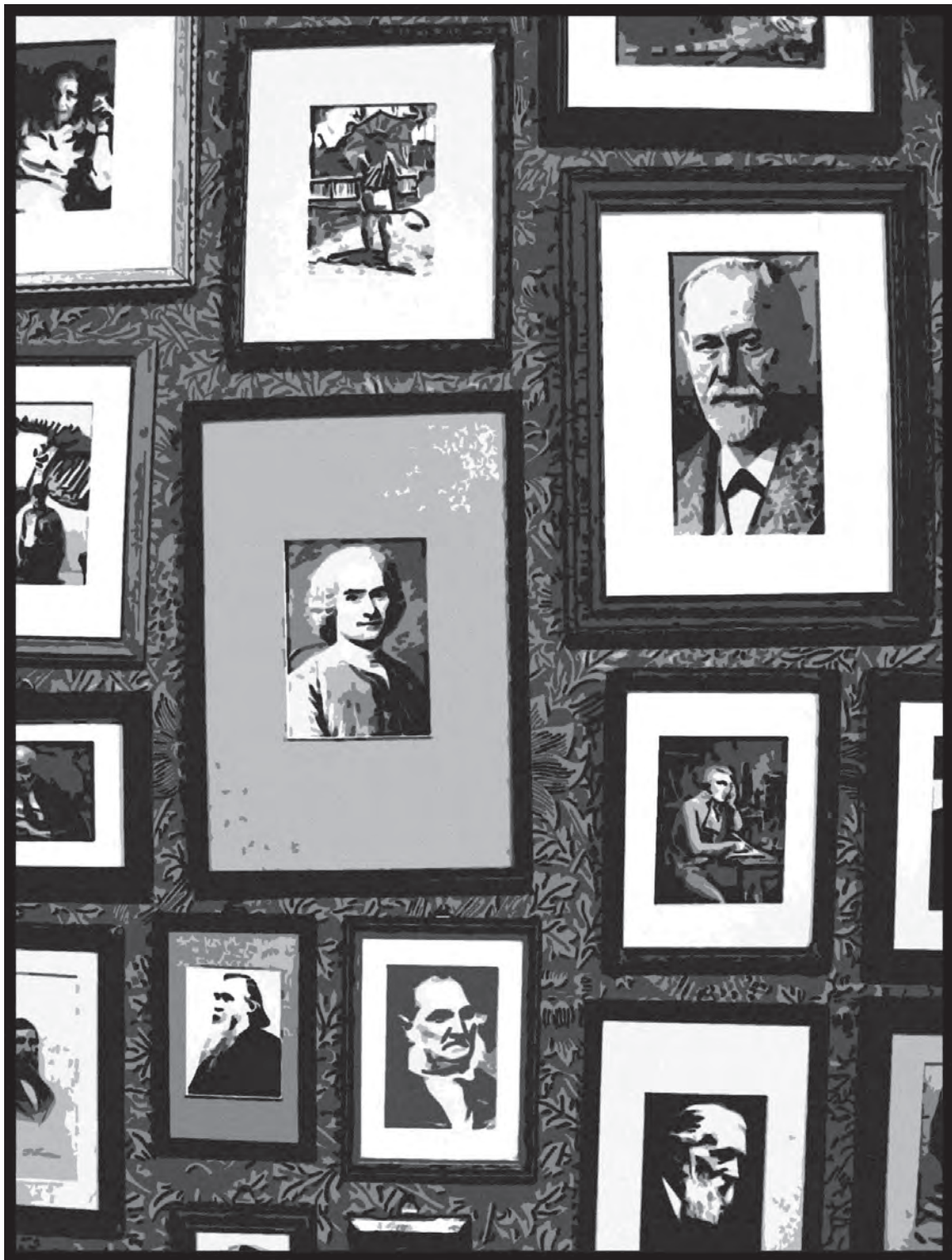
I nod, smile, hold up my book again, to remind, & he slowly leaves me be. I'm not sure what he does now, since he's rarely down on the main floor anymore.

Stand up, take my book & navigate mapless to the back door. My key rustily opens the door & I push inside. There's music as I walk through the tunnel. Bright guitars, pulsing organ & cello, & a man quiet's voice singing: "*Curse the day / I'm cursing / All the way & back again / into town to meet my maker / four feet tall, & full of sin / Feeling like I'm noone's monster / I lift him up / with my revenge / now I'm free / but I feel no revelry.*" Hugs me like a brother & evanesces.

The ramp is warm & very old, like fossilized wood. I'd left my shoes in one of the slots in the case reserved for shoes. *House rules: barefoot.*

Climb & climb, knowing I'll come to the floor I need. That's part of why the public isn't allowed up here—the panic of not knowing where you'll end up, nor when you'll return. *Everyone does return though.*

I climb & climb & finally arrive to a doorway & enter. No books in sight. It's a party. A room whose walls are covered in portraits of pretty Creatures: crooked smiling Dalmatian; big brown-eyed little bear; a purple-spotted



shiny-eyed leopard kitty; a little black-&-white pandy bear in a red & orange dress; a brown & white beagle puppy; & a long-eared White Bunny. A big couch crowded with people who are listening to a red-haired faerie-dressed girl reading from a book that looks like mine!

More singing than reading:

*People cut themselves to relieve the deeper psychic pain they feel with physical pain. I punish my body
& waste my time. One pain relieves another.*

Pauses. Turquoise-eyed twinkle at me. Reads on.

*I did that with booze & LSD. Replaced one with the other. At my best I replace waste with Art. It's
a balance.*

The crowd is pretty, dressed in tie-dye rags & long hair. But somehow unfriendly, un-hippie. But they like this song & want the rest like they know it well. I see them mouth along her final words.

*Maybe I have 25 years, 30, 40, who knows, left, but I won't necessarily be better than I am now.
That past & much of its people will keep diminishing.*

I turn & leave, let the store know I have to move along. But now I know there are two books, & two girls had them. So maybe more girls, more books. For the moment, I climb the warm ancient ramp to the next level I'm given.

This one is books. Narrow aisles, floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, the floor half in shadows, half in candlelight. And the books are so tightly shelved that I can't randomly choose a volume. Just read that each volume is titled the same thing: **Go Into the Green.**

I've walked some miles through these tightly packed shelves when I see daylight through a far door with a window. Hurry, look through,

<p>& my eyes seem to with the view an alley. half-folded upon two red doors impossibly. dirt floor growling with fury or despair. A badly-sprained corrugated metal wall.</p>		<p>twist I see of A brick wall itself, its bent back The alley's</p>
--	---	---

I pull back, & half-fall to the floor. My book is partly torn apart, its ribbons fraying, its bark crumbling. I open it up to read again, *hurry*.

We went down to the pond again, my older brothers & me. Not light yet, stumbling, but somehow made it. They wanted to photograph the lily pads again, using their ancient cameras on tripods, focusing under their black cloths. Opposite sides of pond. They waited, & waited, for the black jellyfish-like plants to drift by as they would. I was there for luck. I'd been with them the first time they'd found this pond, & these lilies & jellyfish-plants.

They were high school football players otherwise. And years later, they both ended up in motorized wheelchairs. Not from football, or a car accident. It was because they got sentimental & we three came back to the pond, & the jellyfish-plants were angry for the years' absence. Stinged & stinged. I ran, because I was a coward. I sent help, because I loved them.

I have brothers in wheelchairs. I think? Maybe I wish I had brothers like these, even if they did end up in wheelchairs.

A long way back to the entrance & I feel like one more floor to climb. So I do. If the bookstore didn't want me to, I would find none. I do, so I climb & climb. Suddenly arrive, & standing in the doorway is the girl who had shown me the free corner when I was 14. Dressed in what looks like a long single bloom from her red hair to her bare feet.

"Are you the others too? Are you all the same?"

Turquoise eyes twinkling, she says, "If you can find me this time!" & she evanesces among the many rows of bookcases behind her. "Use the book!" her words linger in my ear.

In my hand, the clear pen that lights by a wick. I find matches in my pocket, from some joint called Luna T's Cafe, & I light it. Page through my tattered book until I find a page with her words forming on it as I watch.

"Hurry!"

I write: "Give me a clue."

She writes: "Go into the Green."

I nod.

Carrying my disintegrating volume, I walk through the stacks, no longer really looking at them. This feels like something new, like arrival. I'm dressed in several ragged shirts, & I shed them all but one that says inside a crude circle: "*The Cycle is Complete.*"

My jeans are ragged too; I tighten them with my old belt. Bend down & double-knot tie my worn black sneakers. Finger-comb my long tangled hair, fingernail rush my beard. Move with intent.

My book *hmmms* when she writes again. "*Look up!*" I do & see as I hadn't before that this floor has sky for roof. She's up there, smiling, waiting for me, her hand held toward me.

I close my eyes, let myself rise, forget I don't know how to rise. A long sweet saxophone solo rises in my mind, helps me steer eyes-closed, until my hand feels another's grip me, pulls me closer.

She doesn't talk but our hands remain closely clasped, & she leads me into the sky, higher & higher, until we come to a doorway, as though the sky was the next ramp up. We arrive & are standing in a quiet room with many of my co-workers, including my old boss, & the several red-haired girls who have haunted my years.

'Tis an old canvas on the wall, a painting signed by John Reid, a vast tree, big as a city, "Where all men & women will live in the future," says my old boss. "Look deeper in," he advises me, & I do, & it's like

*I enter
happy
& stay,
within
& the glare
through
nudging
to close,
again.*



*this future
world, & stay,
see more trees
this great one,
of a sunrise
them,
my eyes
& to open*

And when I wake up in the vestibule of the bookstore I have worked in all these years, my hand holds only a few crumbs of bark, & a scrap of paper, written in a girl's curlicue hand: "*You'll come again soon!*"

lxix.

It's hard to recall in deep detail these crazy many years later, & yet it's awed to my heart by sadness, regret, anger, want.

I wanted this girl not just because she was pretty, had tits, an ass, a luring female voice, soft girlish ways.

No, I wanted her because I had become friends with her, learned her hopes, her secrets, what made her laugh, excited. She'd told me when Harry Chapin died, that July, & even though I knew only a few of his songs, I broke apart & cried, & bought all of his albums, & found someone in him I deeply loved too. She'd told me on the phone. I thank her still for this.

I wasn't a boy with many friends, especially female, living in a dirty, crowded, angry, sad, shame-filled house. Why didn't someone take a different move on things? Rally us together in family love & loyalty? Why did it all stink? We were innocents in a hard brilliant green world & should have loved each other in perpetuity forever.

I went to her party that November 14 night, a Saturday night like this one, all sweaty glands & old clothes & so in love with this girl I saw no other truth. *Nobody could possibly love her as much.*

I try to recover that feeling tonight to understand. My life was one of virtual helplessness. Nobody I could lean against, nobody to advise me. I just kept trying, & if this girl had said yes maybe my life would have been different. Maybe she would have seen how I was living & urged me otherwise.

And this night, we sat in your bedroom & you wondered aloud about us dating. Worried it. Like you valued my friendship more than the risk of romance. Like it had to be a profound choice. Couple days later, you moved on to another boy though I chased you for *four more years*.

Why write at length of this in this book? Why interrupt its stories for this fragment?

Best I can say is that as only a few other days in my life, Nov 14, 1981 re-invented me from what I had been. A sense of hope, then of rejection, then simply persistence. Trying to understand me, the world, even if incompletely, even if none of it ever fully said.

I had a chance, it was lost. Maybe I chased that particular chance too long, & a lot of others after, but it was the first time I'd had that chance. Maybe it wasn't a failure, loss, defeat.

Maybe it was just the obscure beginning of a very long path to success. *Someone loving me was possible.*

lxx.

A mélange to finish Part 10 of this big, strange book, reporting from the various doings it's told of, try it like this:

Jazz & Toby? We find them walking hand in hand along one of the countless paths of the Tangled Gate, twists one way & another, the viney walls meshed with stones too high to see over. Toby tries to climb one but it's like the vines form fingers that reach into his clothes & tickle him, just enough, that he starts to slip & comes down.

So they walk on. Path ends suddenly before a very tall & dark cave. Jazz keeps walking toward it as Toby stills.

"Come on."

"Why?"

She smiles at him, grey eyes starred with affection & fun.

"It's next, Toby, in our adventure."

Toby stares at her. "I'm afraid, Jazz."

She comes back for him, hand out. Smile holds him tight & warm as she leads him to the cave mouth.

He watches her disappear into its blackness even as her hand does not let go of his & keeps pulling him along. The darkness is thick, is warm, seems to feel them entering, like water, like *knowing water?*

But her hand, he can't see her, but her hand.

And she's talking to someone.

"You've come for protection."

"Yes. For both of us."

"What do you sacrifice for this protection?"

"I won't look for my sister anymore."

Silence. Yet the darkness seems to nod.

Isis & Jack. She's remembering Samantha.

"She was always beautiful. Long brown-green hair, long to her waist."

"Green?"

"Yes like green & brown dreadlocks, sort of, almost, like seaweed."

Jack nods. He's taken her hand as they walk along this empty road through deep woods. It's a gesture of protection. Maybe for both of them.

"She would mostly sleep with me in my bed. I would wake up with a special feeling, warm, close, & she would be holding me."

"She'd just appear?"

"Yes. And we'd talk. And I would always fall asleep & she would usually be gone in the morning."

"She protected you?"

"Yah. On the commune, when I left, like I told you, but always."

"When did you meet her?"

"That night when the Carnival left me. I walked home."

"Were your parents mad?"

"No, Jack. It was the *same night*."

"That you left?"

"Yah. I just came in quietly & went to bed."

"Wait, how? How did you know?"

"Because they would knock on my door every night, to hear me say good night. To check. I couldn't explain it. I didn't care. *They were gone*."

"So you slept?"

"I woke in her arms, dreaming of the sea, deep in the sea, & a sort of *hmmmmmmmm* in my mind."

"Were you scared?"

"I thought they had sent her to me. I was *happy*."

"Had they?"

"I don't think so. But she told me something that helped."

"What?"

Is stops to think, & remember, eyes closed. "She told me that my life would be different now. She said that once you enter the Woods, live in the Woods, they stay in you, you stay in them always."

"Was there more?"

"She said the world is one, none, many things. Woods, seas, mountains. But men's visions are fractured & they only see many. They talk of *one* & *none* too, but few of them see these too."

Jack is quiet. A strange thought.

"Can she help us find Penny?"

Isis smiles brightly in the dark.

"Find us a bed & I'll ask if she comes."

Maya. Christina. Kinley.

She stands up. The many Creatures clustered around her sniff once, twice, but these are people-folk friends they know. It's safe.

Christina comes to Maya right away, grasps the scrawny girl in her arms.

Kinley holds back a little, waiting to see what the feral girl will do with Christina. But, slowly, Maya's untelling

face relaxes in Christina's arms, into affection, into a smile. Then he approaches.

"We missed you," he says quietly. Christina finally lets her go but her hands. Maya nods.

Kinley notices a rock flat enough to sit on, & takes a corner of it, motioning the others. The Creatures seem to be clustering & dozing again.

Christina sits with Maya in her arms, half in her lap. Knowing his love is near as feral around people as Maya, Kinley is pleased.

"Maya, do you know of a set of little colored magical books that tell the story of Marie the schoolteacher & her many travels with Creatures like these? Including your White Bunny friend?" Kinley says this fast, not knowing what Maya will say or do.

Maya looks at him with her exotic purple eyes, blinkless, adjusts a bit in Christina's half-lap, & nods.

Kinley stands &, reaching into one of his long coat's pockets, pulls out shiny little book after book, blue, red, green, orange, brown, & so on, & sets them in a low row before the two girls.

Creatures all over the Great Cavern wake up, fully, sniffing, alert.

"Can you read them, Maya?"

"I . . . I think so."

Bowie. Iris. How they get to the Island is my business so I lead them to a door in the house through which they walk to the docks & to a great old boat with big sails. Gangplank for loading passengers & cargo.

Bowie takes a fair while trying to get a good look at the boat's name.

Comes back to Iris & says, "Tis the Good Ship Kerr-Plow-eee!"

Iris smiles. This shift of locale has made her less uptight than she expected. She's glad to be out of that house, away from that party. Bowie was better in the field, half unknowing but using his feral genius brain to figure it out.

She nodded to Bowie, hand out to him. Ever the gentleman to a girl's outstretched hand, he takes hers & they approach the boat, guessing this is their way to the Island.

At the top of the walkway up to the boat seemingly stands nobody to greet.

Then a small sound. A cackle. Of course. What else?

A tiny little pandy bear. Dressed in red & orange skirt, big bright crazy eyes. Wearing a strange sort of tall hat with odd sigils decorating it.

Iris is charmed immediately, as she would be, & kneels down to address the little Creature. Stumped for words, finger on her chin for a moment, cackles too. This delights the Captain—for what else could she be? & they cackle back & forth together awhile. Bowie waits, cursing his father for his part in this, & the Author for doing this on purpose for his own strange amusement.

Iris stands up & turns to him. Her smile is sweetly delighted & Bowie knows that she knows that he will say yes to whatever she's about to say. The imp is in her palm, lazily gnawing.

"We're going on the tour of the ship!"

Bowie nods.

Iris studies Bowie. "What's wrong?"

Bowie nods. Even tries to smile.
 Iris is not fooled.
 “Cough it up, Garrish.”

“Why do we have to go there?”
 “To see what I came from?”
 “Does that seem necessary? Do you care?”
 Iris is quiet. “I don’t know if I care but I’d like to know. Maybe it will influence our path. What we do.”
 Bowie nods.
 “What’s wrong?”
 “My father doesn’t control us. Even the Author & his book. We do what we do. You & I aren’t a trick of someone else’s mind or plan.”
 Iris nods. Even the Imp is listening.

Bowie seems better, a bit. Looks at the Imp & nods. Time to tour.

Gretta & Jamie. Jamie is alone & it’s getting darker in the courtyard. He considers leaving. Yah, right.

Little books in his long borrowed overcoat. *Hmmm.* Well? Why not?

Red one is the one he pulls out, & studies with a shudder. The light overhead is only somewhat helpful of reading these pencil scratchings.

The words are confusing, some smudged, but he starts to get it, starts to find himself paying attention, caring, getting a clarity in this strange story he’s discovering. It seems *important*.

Marie is a redhaired schoolteacher who we meet as she is having a dream of standing barefoot in a clearing in the Woods, where the twittering lights of many faeries dance around her.

She wakes, she thinks, & finds herself at the edge of the pond near the cabin where she lives with her brother Joe & their guardian Daniel.

But what’s odd is that the mountain that rises in the distance above her pond *isn’t there*, though it is still reflected in the pond’s surface itself.

Perhaps she falls back to sleep, if she had been awake, & she finds herself back in the faerie clearing but now upset about her missing mountain.

Three of the larger faeries emerge from the cloud around her.

“Please. I don’t know where my mountain is? Is it only missing in a dream?” she asks.

The faeries float near to her & *hmmm* gently to soothe her fears. “Your travels begin to solve this mystery. But you need a companion & a melody. First, close your eyes & listen. Then open them, & look!”

So Marie closes her eyes & hears, rising in her mind, like the sea coming into shore, music, sweet music, a *humming* of many voices, each one distinct, but also a blending, but also like not there at all, listens till the water recedes back from the shores of her mind, & maybe settles down deeper than easy knowing.

Opens her eyes & there before her in the clearing, sitting, looking at her with the brightest, most intelligent eyes, is a White Bunny with long furry ears. Marie thinks, or hears, the word “MeZmer,” & thus knows the Bunny’s name.

Jamie, shocked & delighted, & looks up to breathe.

Oh. Shit. There she is, dressed for the affectionate mauling, her guitar in hand, her smile dirty & 'witching as ever. *Gretta-bird.*

Cordelia. Charlie Pigeonfoot. He lets her in & then retreats to the far corner of the room. Cowering. Eager.

For fun, she's tied her brown hair into two long braids. Her halter top & short skirt already or she would have found some.

"Hi, Charlie," she says again.

He nods.

"Do you really want to do this?"

He nods.

She flows slowly onto his bed, one he hadn't much known himself yet. She stretches like a cat, yawns, smacks her lips.

He says nothing.

"Charlie."

"Cordel'a."

She starts. Not a version of her name she's heard in a long, long time.

"How did you know that?"

"I was there."

"Where?"

"There."

He nods.

She sits up. "It was a long time ago, Charlie."

He nods again.

She says nothing, just rolls around the bed a little more, short skirt riding up to her lace pink panties.

He nods, goes into the bathroom, finds a pin in the medicine cabinet, lays it on the sink to wait.

"OK, go ahead," he says, reluctant, ready, pants & shorts pushed down.

Her moan begins, like barely tussled air, moves higher, lower, nearly gone, then begins to rise, & rise, & rise, call it a moan, or more call it a *humming* with wet tongue, bared teeth, here it comes, *here it comes*

And he has soaped his old cock thoroughly, closed his eyes, gets hard quicker than he thought, but yet here it comes, & fast—

"More," he growls out to her—

Her fingers have pulled the panties off & her fingers slide deeply in & in & in—

He cums, slowly, leakily—it's some, not enough.

He turns off the bathroom light & sits on the floor.

Long silence. "How are you, Charlie?"

"Why?"

"I'm here. I care."

"Yah."

"Do you want to come lie down with me till you're ready?"

"No."

"Why am I here, Charlie?"



"I need to pay my hotel bill."

"*Why am I here, Charlie?*"

"I need you."

Silence.

"For what?"

"I don't know. I'm sorry. You can go."

"No. I won't."

More silence. Then she begins again. It takes him a long time to cum again, her moans become howling *hmmms*, there may be pounds at the wall, but this time it works, this time he's fucking her pretty little ass till they're both gone. This time he cums enough.

Now the pin heated under hot water. Now the mix to begin his new canvas.

Gate-Keeper. Feeling better about his prospects to take over *Clarendon Island* properly, Gate-Keeper decides he needs some sleep, the kind he's not had in a long time; not the drowsing-while-working-ceaselessly-on kind. A couple of times he found himself passed out on the floor of the Extreem Roadbuss 2000. His head hurt; he didn't feel rested.

So he pulls down the shades & shutters of the Roadbuss, many of them rusty with unuse. Pretty dark now. Finds a not-too-musty old blanket in a drawer under one of the TV monitors. Warm, comforting. Likes it more & more as he strips to his t-shirt & shorts & tucks under it.

Even in the dark he can see that the blanket is a deep soft brown, & there are many sober watching bear faces woven into its wool. *Watching him*. For a moment, he is spooked.

But . . . takes a breath . . . relaxes a little. They do too. *They are guarding him*. My. OK.

He drifts, hoping for the least memorable of dreams, nothing Benny Big Dreams would even notice. Just rest.

I am living in a small, dirty, buggy apartment. Airless. Then my mother, long dead before they buried her, waves her hand around the place & layers of clutter & filth lift & are gone, *just gone*—much better

I remain sitting awkwardly in the corner, & tinker, nail, attach, bang, & produce a filter that will eliminate all but what I want from the outside—I need to meticulously search through the rest—

I must sleep even deeper because this dream begins to fall apart, or else I filter my own self out in my search for those precious bits—

because I am dying, been told I am, my blood is sick, & have come to a sort of monastery museum—for comfort? for cure? The hallways are crimson lit & none of the doors have handles on them, & I come to a cafeteria where they all wait for me naked under their wool cloaks & hoods, heads shaven to a strange symbol meaning eternal purity & perpetual hunger

They let me into their circle & on a very small table sits a black-handled golden bell.

They say as though one: "ring this bell 10,000 times each day between dawn & dusk & you will cease sickening to death."

I wake, crying out, & when I stop I hear from everywhere outside a vast, low, deep *humming*—

It's time to get to work.

Cosmic Early. Here's the thing: he wasn't convinced he hadn't written Cordelia into existence.

She came to him in dreams long ago. Casually, at first, the kind of ridiculously pretty girl a man like him could only look at furtively as she passed, & have a good hard jack over in the nearest public restroom, or that night in bed if he could hold it.

Just her face at first, those ocean blue eyes. That curling, affectionate, mocking smile.

More of her in time. It's like he could feel her picking through his taste in girls, the sweet & dirty parts, like they were index cards, pulling out this one & that one, adjusting herself again & again, honing, honing, dressing her body & personality for him, keeping him near by moaning softly in his dream ear, letting his dream nose sniff of her, a little soap, a little turned on—

He sits up suddenly in bed; his room's shade full up as he *never* leaves it, needing full darkness to sleep.

"Hello," she says shyly. Sitting at the folding chair & taped up table he calls his desk. Somehow in silhouette still, her voice is modulated of purr & girlish music. She sniffs very cherry.

She doesn't join him in bed in this first dream, or many others subsequently. She just makes him talk, & she listens, & she asks questions, & she answers none. When she is finished, she always tells him to close his eyes, & she *hmmms* him to wake.

He wakes up sweaty & cum-stained yet he hadn't touched.

Then, she comes to say goodbye, & he isn't yet asleep. It isn't a dream. If any of it was.

Self & Ralph. While not in love, sucking each other off brought them together in a way they hadn't been since Cordelia had initially chosen one of them. She leaves them one night "to go visit an old friend," & they go up into the projectionist's room to have a smoke & a talk.

"It wasn't bad."

"What?"

"You know."

"Oh yah. I agree."

"I mean I'm not gay now. But I'm glad I did it. I'm glad it was you."

"Yah. I agree."

"Where do you think she is?"

"I don't know. I haven't known anything clearly since she came, to be honest."

"Except that white dress."

"Those tits."

"That smile."

"Those hands."

Silence.

"Are we supposed to be jealous?"

"I don't know. I'm not."

"I'm not either."

"I still want to fuck her."

"Yah."

"Maybe do her the same time?"

"Who gets which?"

They laugh. Dig out of the old filing cabinet one of their many vials of clear liquid LSD.

"Wanna watch *Dream Waves*?"

"Oh, *hell yah*."

More Fun comes on as Cordelia is visiting Charlie Pigeonfoot, & Self & Ralph are in the office, tripping balls & trying to figure out where *Dream Waves* went on the *TripTown* website.

Their boat is leaving in the morning. One more night in a tent on land. The other one is nervous & fidgety, tries to keep them talking by the fire because he sees things in the dark.

Eventually she's asleep in his arms & he tells the strange boy good night.

"Clever."

"Thank you."

"It's tonight."

"What is?"

"The letter. Light one candle. We'll read it together."

Her breathing stopped, she finds a red candle, thick, solid light. Curls into his grasp & the letter appears in his hand.

"The beginning?"

"No. The rest." She points.

He reads from there. "Your father wanted you to know that he loved you very much, but he did not help bear you.

"You came from a faraway world called Emandia. Your world died a long time ago, & a small number of your kind survived. Many somehow came to the possession of Travelers as you did. Your father learned this, & told only me of all our tribe. What he didn't tell me until he came home to die with me was how he come to have you.

"It was in the White Woods that lay beyond the garden behind the Pensionne. He was so sick, & I didn't understand all he said, but it seemed like he was saying the word Creatures. Bunny. Bear. Other names. Whoever these are had summoned him & delivered you to him.

"It was as though they were waiting for him to be ready. The Village knew he was setting off on a journey, & so when he went to the White Woods by vision to receive you, it was his last night before departure. He didn't return with you for several years, & swore me to secrecy your real age. The Village only knew him as a widower from travels, & a father of a daughter.

"I can guess now that the increased number of travels he did in later years was to find out more about your origins. But all he ever learned was that you came from Emandia, a far away dead world.

"Perhaps you will find others of your kind in years to come. I will look for answers too, & tell you if I find any. Safe travels, niece.

Love always,

Aunt."

They sleep wrapped together till dawn, not a word said aloud between them after he says "Aunt." Come morning, boat awaits.

*[Is anyone watching this
film? Does it seem to you
important enough for a bit
of an audience?]*

John. Figures if he's gonna be CareTaker awhile, he should fix up the cabin some. Task one is he disassembles & crates up the Mac G5. Carefully, kindly, but still.

Lowers the loft bed to the floor with some nails, a hammer, a few bangs & bruises. Sleeping up high seems wrong here. He's elevated over *nothing* here.

Finds a sort of attic crawl space he hadn't seen before, &, glory, a box of old books to look through. Some poetry, some philosophy, a couple of novels. These will be fine. He'll read to all of his unseen friends at night & hope they understand his friendly gesture, if not the words.

They don't manifest to him, tho he wishes.

At night he simply listens. Curtain never drawn. Tries to listen deeper & deeper, high & low. He knows that his being a man makes them reluctant. Yet he's returned, & he's trying, & he senses he's close.

Sometimes tells funny stories of him & his brother. The girl they both chased that summer, with the braids, the ocean blue eyes. The halter tops & short skirts. She knew more about coupling than either of them, turns out, & moved away before either could catch up.

"We stole some beers from a neighbor who drank all day all summer anyway, & drank a toast to virgins like us, only girls!" I laugh & laugh & try not to hurt too much in it.

I feel them close. My raw pain & love they understand. Though not visible, I hear them very quietly *humming* to salve me my sadnesses & memories. It helps.

What can I salve them of? *How can I care for them?*

Starlight Lounge—Dancing & Drinks Nightly. Does it really become a swank joint again? Does Gay Trey really sing again for crowds of people, not empty chairs?

It seems like something is happening after that good cleaning we all gave the place. Jim Reality III stays around & he & Gay Trey & sometimes Perry Homo will do a set together. Who songs, Beatles, some of Jim's originals. Their harmonies grow sweeter with time. Seems like more chairs are filled.

Godd the little pink bear stays around too. Most nights will warm up the crowd with his comedy act. Is pretty damned funny.

Rich Americus comes around more again, & often brings his friend Guy Lemonde & Guy's big pot of super strong chili. Rich will sometimes join the jam on stage. The crowd will dance madder & happier for all this.

I'm not sure what else & yet I think yes, more. Serge & Miranda look at me expectantly, even hopefully.

I promise *more, soon—*

Finally, a return to Luna T's Cafe to wrap up this *mélange*. Let's go in now, & see how this goes.

Again, most not around, but at least I know they're having fun at the Starlight Lounge.

"But you, my friend, are here."

"Of course."

"I'm glad."

"I am too."

"We can all grow & change as time goes on."

"Like the White Birch you see out the barroom door window."

"It's perfect, Doctor."

"It is what it is. We envy that."

"We don't know what we are."

"Amidst our too many theories & beliefs."

I pause. He does too. This is fun.

"I come here from a day touring around my old college town."

He raises hand. Hobbles at a slow hurry over to the jukebox. Ancient purse, ancient coins. Click.

Piano sounds tinkle out, amidst bass guitar. A little playful percussion. Some lead guitar creeps in. *Ahhh*. [Hobbles back.]

Nods. I continue. "I walked a dozen miles today, from where I used to live, to my old school, to a pretty place I'd hide when a chased youth, & back again to a benign poor folks coffee joint."

"Was it your kind of fun?"

I nod a lot. Smile. "And all night since, I've been full on deep into this book, giving it the love & devotion I feel for it."

He smiles, sort of. Sips at his coffee cup.

"Chai tea," he replies to my unspeak question. "Charles thought I'd enjoy a new treat."

"Do you?"

"We all grow & change, Raymond."

*Inside your fuego
we keep it rolling
Inside your fuego
we keep it rolling
Inside your feugo
we keep it rolling
Inside your fuego
we keep it rolling*

*rolling (rolling) rolling (rolling)
rolling (rolling) rolling (rolling)*

"The world is my gift. Writing is my thank you."

"It's a good lesson to learn."

"At times I felt old today, like a spectre haunting places that had long passed from my old days."

"Your college?"

"And my old home. And my old favorite bar. And, I don't know, the bike lanes now demarked on all the roads."

"But then?"

"I came to my hidden Place, struggled & slipped & crashed to it, under the bridge, the stream as ever, the graffiti on the bridge on both sides of the water. The birds. The rocky hills. *It was still there.*"

"As are you, my friend."

"As we both are, Doctor."

I raise my soda to his raised chai.

"That White Birch is perfect."

"Yes. It is."

"I saw it first a year ago, a struggling day. It was my companion many hours as I suffered my worst. Stood as good alternative. I've seen white birches everywhere since."

"That's good, son." I hear tiredness in his voice now. Step over to his stool to help him make his shaky way to Rebecca's office & its often-slept couch. There's a warm red blanket, & an electric blue. I use them both, after ungarmenting him some.

He looks fondly, sleepily on me.

"Does it make good fixtion when we are friends?"

"I'll figure that out. Don't worry it."

He nods, falls quickly asleep.

I leave the office & do not return to the bar, but instead walk further into T's till I come to the Ampitheatre.

Sit on the hill, looking up at the full moon, & down there to the big bonfire, & its many dancers & drummers.

Try to forget me.

Try to erase me.

I don't care. Because I believe it's not possible anyway. If I've touched you, if you me, the impression ever stays. Raised dust does not settle. It dances on. This world ever moves, ever floats, ever flies through its galaxial home, carrying us safe as we allow, always home & bound for home both.

12/15/2015
ap

To be continued in Cenacle | 96 | April 2016

* * * * *



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Eleven

"I must create a system,
or be enslaved by another man's"
—William Blake, "Jerusalem."

i.

"Couple A & Couple B meet in college. Couple B are quarreling in the Student Center when they sit down at a table near Couple A, & they all happen to start talking. Couple B is prettier, Couple A is smarter. They switch up at points, becoming Couple C & Couple D, & two stray to Couple E & Couple F to form Couple G & Couple H, but eventually Couple A & Couple B reform.

"Some years after college, them going to the Red Sox games most weekends, one of them pulls off a coup: they win the 'Take a Swing Contest' & get to play against the Red Sox.

"First three all get singles, maybe the Red Sox are kind. The fourth one, though, smashes the ball just over the left fielder's glove, he slows it, wilds around for the ball, another rushes to help him, throw infield is wild though, & everyone scores, *an inside-the-park grand slam home run*.

"The Red Sox have to pay them \$10,000 total—\$2,500 for each run—plus \$10,000 donated to the local Jimmy Cancer Fund.

"Later, days, weeks, he sees a tiny blue light on the ceiling of their bedroom, brief & gone at first, then there for hours; he doesn't sleep, more & more, just watches; it affects things—"

These lines from Cosmic Early's *Aftermath: Dream Fragments Appendices*.

It's hard to say when he started writing these down, forming up something called "Dream Fragments Appendices." It's just . . .

he had long felt he was *done*, that he'd written what he had, the best of it, long past the best of it, & he'd sort of accepted it, figuring it was inevitable. But then . . .

Too many of these, they seemed more, seemed like they had value in them somehow—



Another, OK?

"I am with her again, after all these years, finally, naked in bed, her willing, & smiling, & ready, & there's 2 of me in this bed, & she's young still somehow, & she wants us both very much, her breasts are beautiful, her nipples hard, her mouth moist & smiling, how? It never happened then, not even a kiss, nor in the decades of dreams since, why this dream? Why 2 of us? She's eager, ready, wanting, time is out of the way, inhibition never was, just a good breath, a returning smile to hers, & begin, *begin anywhere*"

One more, this one convinced him to write them down:

"There is a little toad, escapes from its cup, is hopping around the crowded room of books & experiments, I make one move, another, & then suddenly sit on it, over it really, holding it under me, but unharmed, until I am able to nudge it back into its cup.

"It pokes its head above the rim of its cup, seeming calmer, but then it begins to croak, softly at first, slowly, & *oh so sadly*—its croak becoming a keen, a croon, a howl, a long, beautiful anguished howl"

Coughs. Hard. Twice more. Caps his pen. Looks over to his bed. Starts. Jazz is laying there, nude as is her habit, but her grey eyes are wide open, regarding him. A smile, mocking, ironic? Affectionate even?

"Hello," she says quietly.

I stare.

She smiles down at her nakedness.

"I'm not that big there."

I stare.

Suddenly laughing, she sits up. Leans forward. "I'm still cherry too," she hisses, with all the wicked delight possible.

*"Come together
Right now
Over me"*
—The Beatles, 1969.

ii.

I watch you, very small among the rest, across the train car aisle from me—
A small horse, pony? White, with little bits of gold dangling—

People get off; I dive across the aisle to sit near you. A man picks you up curiously, I snatch you away, this is a Creature, & I am here to Coordinate, to protect, especially when vulnerable, in danger—

You are with me, resting on my old bookbag, between my legs, & I don't care how the details of this occurred, I'm here to Coordinate, it's what I do—

But who am I to be suddenly upon these pages, pursuing my calling, but scribbling it down too?

It's to take us a few pages deeper in here. Get some ideas on the page's table—

It's the little colored books, mentioned on previous pages—

"You asked me if I can read them," says purple-eyed Maya to Christina & Kinley. "So we brought you the one who writes them," *we* being her intimacy with the Creatures, *the one* being me, having found myself drug here, I think dreaming, from where I live, near or in (I can't decide) the Creature Common.

Kinley smiles his kindly but way-too-sharp smile at me. "We've . . . met?"
 "One of us, I'm sure," I smile back.

Christina speaks up, me realizing this whole big book is quickly becoming familiar in my mind, even as I remain, distinctly, CC.

"Read us some stories, Mr. Author Man," she purrs about as sexy as those words can be said.

I don't join them in their row on the rock, but the ground I'm sitting on is dirtless & smooth, & a number of Creatures are sort of near me. I look down between my knees to consider.

The little horse is near my ankle, resting affectionately. He was made to be a purse, with a zipper down his back, where I found his missing eye too. He's been introduced to the Commonards of the Creature Common, & welcomed much.

I look up finally, nod, smile at them, begin to talk.

"There are several of me, even as we are the same. We look similar, not the same, live in different places, & times, & sometimes different ways."

I look around this wonderful Great Cavern. Its beautiful tree in the center, reaching to a heightless height. Its many Creatures.

"When I was young, there was distinctly one of me. I lived with my poor large family in a suburban neighborhood, & grew up mostly friendless & mocked for my clothes, my bad hygiene. I hid in books, in worlds of my own where I was admired, a hero.

"With my sister, & her toys & stuffed animals, I created a fantasyland, Bags End, inspired from the fantasy worlds I'd read about & loved. It grew vastly from its simple origins, & continues to do so these many years later.

"I left that life to live as a young man in the world of others, university & jobs & girlfriends. I left myself, a living, ongoing bit behind; like a leaf print, it remained alive & someone of its own.

"This second me began writing the stories that you are all in, though you came many years along. And there came eventually poems that twined with these stories too. But for years, they did not, nor did they very much twine with the Bags End stories. I was chasing through my world, writing & yearning what I did not have, did not yet know.

"Eventually, I had to leave again what I had come to know of the world. It began when I found magic medicines that showed me plainly what remained of me from my earlier self, & yet also pushed me forward, to try out the unfamiliar, sometimes dangerous. I traveled thousands of miles to chase love, Art, better, wholler truths."

I smile here. Quiet. They are listening. The Creatures are dozing. White Bunny. Hedgehog. Many bears. Small Giraffes. Shiny-eyed little ones. Asleep in my lap &, I notice, in the laps of Kinley, Maya, & Christina.

“The facts of all this are less interesting than those truths. I lived for awhile in a room in a great house of rooms on a hill. My room was filled with candles & obscure trinkets from many places, many worlds. For awhile I owned a white-faced pink cat radio.”

I look at Maya & her 'witching smile warms me.

“I made a friend in that great house of many rooms on the hill. He was a nice brown bear who lived on the staircase landing. Nobody else noticed him—just another thing in a house full of them—

“But I did. I would sit with him, late at night, especially when I would come home late full of the magical medicine, happy with my pens & notebooks, but often unhappy with the world.

“He would listen, say little, enjoy my huggings, as all Creatures do.” Pause again. Remembering him.

“Come the time I had to go. The world of men is hard if you travel far, & alone. I came home late, very medicine'd, & climbed the stairs to sit with him.

“Next to him was a paper bag.”

“For your coming travels.”

“I looked inside. I saw the little books. Secret Books.” I gesture to them still around me, a Creature or two sort of protectively near each.

“Find stories to fill them with. As you look more & more, you'll be amazed.”

I held his paw & looked at these little books, their glittery covers folded around them, & held in place by a string hooked around a button.

“What if I don't?”

“My friend laughed. ‘Just travel on, & listen in every direction, with an open heart.’”

“I hugged him a long time. Till I heard two men laughing up the stairs in the kitchen. Bowie & Preacher, I think.”

Maya smiles even more 'witching at me. I continue.

“So I left. He had too, since he wasn't on the landing anymore that morning.”

Stop. Eyes closed. Remembering. More Creatures in my lap. White Tiger. Green Bullfrog.

“I had my black bookbag, strap on my shoulder, full of notebooks & music cassettes. Had my bag of little books. Had my beat blue suitcase, covered in Phish & Dead stickers.”

Christina & Kinley snicker, enjoying this.

“Twas a green Western city, full of hippies, hustlers, the poor & crazy. There was a store I'd passed by often, never gone in. Since I was leaving this city, I figured go in.

“Sort of a deeply cluttered thrift store. Murky. Weird, woodsy music in it. I'm not sure how long I

was in there. Got lost awhile, since the aisles warped this way & that, so it felt more like a maze than anything else.”

“Labyrinthine?” Kinley laughs.

I smile, nod. “Then I find a coat. Long, dark green. Thick but light material. Lots of pockets in its lining. I try it on. Feels natural & nice.

“What’s weird is I never find a cash register, or see anyone working there. By when I’m at the exit, the store is dark & quiet, so I just leave.”

Without a word, the three of them move off the flat rock, & we form a circle, the Secret Books within, Creatures lapped & nearby too.

“So now I put the little books in the pockets & traveled on my way. Got on the Greyhound bus with my bags & traveled far East.

“I listened to the stories of people I met along the way. Many were Travelers like me, looking, yearning unsure.

“It was one of these that told me of a festival up in the mountains. He was an old man with a long beard, severe dark eyes, but he saw me writing in my notebooks, saw me studying my blank little books, decided he saw a little something in me.

“‘Keep walking, humming lightly to yourself. Anything you are feeling, thinking. They will find you & bring you along.’ Nodded twice at me, smiled a sorta mostly toothless smile at me, turned back in his seat to doze.

“Did you go?” asked Christina, more prompting than anything.

I nod. “He’d told me what road to find, which direction to walk it, what dirt road sign to look for. I found them all near the end of a long day of walking.”

Remembering, smiling. “Turned from the paved road onto this dirt road in the twilight. This was it for me, I figured. I’d find them or get long lost in these pale woods.”

“White Woods?” they all ask.

I nod. “I didn’t know that, but yes. I didn’t know about the Hmmm either, but I did it. In my old long coat, full of little books, with my black bookbag & blue suitcase, I climbed that path *humming*.”

“Did they find you?”

“Well, I heard the drumming before anything. Deep, chanting drumming that quivered me down low. When I came to the clearing, up on a hill I looked down & saw the many fires too.”

I close my eyes, remembering more fully. “They were magical Woods, like all are in honesty, but especially so on nights when the moon is full. I strayed from the valley of fires, back into those Woods, uncertain. Nobody I passed was especially friendly to me, smiles, nods, pass by. I wondered why the old man had sent me here? What was I to find?

"I came upon a clearing, & a man & his campfire. Uncertain, even lonely for all the whoops & cries resounding the Woods, I walked up to him & said hello.

"His smile immediate, kind. He was drinking from an old metal tankard, or made of rock, & offered me a drink. I sipped. He nodded. I drank more fully. Stared into the fire for what seemed hours. I looked around & he was gone. The fire nearly cold.

"But the night was long still, & I let myself drift back toward those drums & fires. Found I was standing at a fair distance away, dancing as I could not remember having in a long time. My old, hungry, hurting, tired body let loose that night as I danced nearer & nearer the fire & drums.

"Until I was among the drummers, finding the strange quixotic beat & dancing my hands along with it, hours, days? More & more of me fell away, soon I was drift, was drums to the fire itself, dancing closer & away, closer & away, & finally took her bright fire embrace & died smiling, laughing like a complete fool! in her arms."

They are breathless listening & so I continue.

"Now I was free to move the miles & years at my pace, feeling my travels would be easier, & perhaps more fruitful.

"Years passed, & many miles, & I found myself in an empty room, sitting against a white wall. Head foggier than it had been ever.

"A noise. A cackle? I look down before me & there is a tiny little pandy bear. Great big crazy eyes, red & orange skirt. Cackling.

"I nod to her & she delighted makes away into the night, slowing for me to follow. We come up a hill to a very tall building, & she leads me into one of its dwellings. Quiet, dark.

"We walk a long hallway, with pictures on its walls. One of a red-haired fairy girl in a faerie grove. Another of a bicyclist riding toward a school. A third of a mountain reflected in a lily pond, & the last of a tall billboard depicting enigmatic figures walking down a long murky street.

"Each one reminded me of something, of a story, of many stories that I knew. I followed the imp down the hallway & into a dark room, a bedroom. Sleeping figures in a bed.

"This was my next self, my third self, who would be inspired to tell stories, the ones his earlier self knew in countless numbers. I would Author these tales & he would tell them to the magical Creatures he had gathered in his home with his beloved lady. He would be the Creature Coordinator."

I smile at all of them. "I am all of these, as they are me, as each is himself too. But you can call me CC, or Raymond, or even Ramie. They're all true."

Christina snickers, but it's a nice one for her.

"So you know these Secret Books well?" asks Kinley.

I nod.

"Do you want to tell us?" asks Maya, giving me full attention with her strange 'witching eyes.



Courtesy of *Norwegian Sky* Art Gallery

"It's a long story. Many, many stories, in truth, that wind in & around each other again & again. Characters come & go, & again, & some more. It's like the longest most complex & strange & beautiful dream you could imagine."

They lean forward. I jerk back, then laugh. OK.

I stand up, displacing some dozing Creatures from my lap, but gently. I nod to the White Bunny in particular & she hops ahead of us toward some unseen part of the Great Cavern. She knows my intent, being my Tender, & so I speak & follow trustingly.

"Well, I think it always starts here, with that cabin up there on that hill, with its adjacent garage. That is where the Traveler Daniel & his dear friend the Tumbleweed come to live, & the garage becomes their workshop.

"I always wondered if Kinley was really your last name," says Christina with loud delight. Kinley laughs too, despite himself, & they hold hands again & calm.

"And down there is the pond with its little fishin' hole, where he one fine day discovers the brother & sister Joe & Marie.

"And they move into his cabin, each to his own bedroom, then all to nurture & tend each other. Marie grows to become a schoolteacher, popular at the local school. Joe becomes a kind of Naturist, roaming these White Woods to tend harms & comfort the lonely & uncertain.

"Daniel & Tumbleweed set back to more of their travels as the years go on, & Marie & Joe are good without them. Their reunions are always happy, though, with the many stories Daniel has to tell.

"Then one morning, Marie pauses her readyings to walk to school by going into Daniel's workshop to find a book. About Alternative History, one of his favorite topics. She wants to discuss it with her students."

"Alternative History?" asks Christina, again fondly glaring at Kinley. He in turn peers hard at me for more of a definition.

I nod & try. "It's the belief that history is not on a single line. It's like a field of wild weeds & flowers, no single start, no sure finish, & possibilities countless at every moment." Kinley listens closely, piercingly. Nods, says nothing.

"She finds the book & then walks down to the fishin' hole to find a few good pages to read to her students. Sits on the grass, reads, reads; suddenly fatigued despite a good night's sleep, she stretches out on the warm green grass & falls into a nap.

"In her dream, she wakes up, & looks up, & the mountain that had always reflected its handsome image in her pond was gone. Completely. Yet still its reflections in the pond.

"Shocked, dismayed, yet still she lays back down & falls into a deeper dream. In this dream, she is deep in a strange Woods in a clearing full of Faeries, floating in a cloud around her. She discovers herself playing a flute which is summoning them more & more.

"Please! Perhaps it's just a dream? But my mountain is missing! Can you help me find it?"

The Faery Cloud spoke with one voice. "Here, Marie, your longed-for Travels begin. But for your journey to begin well, you need a companion, & a song."

"And Marie finds herself knowing & humming something that feels known from deep within her, & yet new. And before her sits a long-eared White Bunny, kind, fiercely intelligent eyes. She hears the word 'MeZmer' in her mind."

I smile at them. "Shall I go on?"

They nod eagerly. "We follow Marie & MeZmer as they walk & hop from that Faerie clearing in search of Marie's mountain, & other travels & adventures."

We are back sitting in the Great Cavern, Christina sleeping in Kinley's arms. I find Maya in mine, start, but it's OK.

"It's quite a story."

"Yes."

"Why do you tell it?"

"This one or that one?"

"All of them."

"I don't know. I suppose it's to make my interior worlds, its spectres & memories & weird dreams, manifest in the world I live in. Tell what I can, feel not so strange & alone."

He listens, thinks, nods. Yawns.

I listen to them all sleeping peacefully, among these strange & beautiful Creatures. All my making? More like, I just coordinate the many songs, into a braided *Hmmm*, of sorts, & sing it best I can. (I too doze.)

Dreaming, I drift along as sometimes dreams do, but then I begin to sense a world around me, my own body, or dream-body, moving within it, the air cool on my face & hands, me dressed in a black knit cap, like an old thick one I'd found on a bus or in a thrift shop, a black shirt with graphic cartoon Beatles on it, & an old button-down cotton jacket, dark blue, raggedy, even moreso my leather jacket, not much less my blue jeans, black sneakers & socks, Lennonspecs on my face, hair longish, unshaven, not quite walking, not quite not, tis night & yet I move easily & no stumbles, tis the *hmmm* I realize is deep in my throat, guiding me along these White Woods safely, & I am safe here, I realize, I am approaching something, somewhere noisy & exciting, somewhere I have been before, a clearing, a great clearing filled with tiny individuals I would ordinarily not see visibly—

They look at me familiarly, affectionately, as I walk-float among their numbers, & I dare & allow myself to study the faces I pass amongst, each one unique of course, they are shaped like people in each having a head & torso but their faces seem naturally furred all over, each its own variation of color, their eyes larger than those of men, noses & mouths smaller though, to compensate, their clothes strange upon them as though they do not fully reckon why to wear them, their hands with furry fingers but their feet more the climbing, grasping paws of monkeys, thin antennae on their heads? Tails behind them? I'm not sure, but their faces are kind, are sweet, there is no one these little beings would not welcome to their gatherings like this, none they would not wish to friend—

Their pleasure I am among them but their attention way up ahead toward what looks like a stage atop a platform, & some kind of production going on upon it, why is this familiar & not both? They

welcome me, I feel pulled by my heart & open hands toward all of them & yet a sort of blurriness in it all, allowing myself to continue walk-floating along toward that stage-platform, sliding to one side of it to arrive at a set of stairs that I climb-float up to arrive to much shouting & applause from all my friends down there, & find in my arms a White Bunny, a little grey Hedgehog, a little flowery-decorated bear fella, & a shaggy green fellow, & they are looking up at me to continue, *continue what?* I open my mouth curious what will come out, nothing at first, until I notice I am standing before the picture of Marie in the Faeries clearing, & of course I speak—

“MeZmer leads Marie into a Crystal Cave impossibly high & lit up by brilliant Faerie lights of all many different colors, & Marie feels the song she had learned *humming* out of her mouth, skin, all of her, becomes the *Hmmm* in this Crystal Cave, & lost to the world but this until MeZmer nudges her back to wake & follow her hand in paw as they hop & walk into a smaller cave & meet up with a smiling monkey fellow who leads Marie to a place of pillows & a soft Brown Bear Blanket, whose Bears watched her closely, guarding her now that she & MeZmer warm underneath, leading them into deeper dream, where the glowing fissure in the wall nearby is clear & they can stand & together walk & hop through it, a long glowing hallway, the sounds of the Sea, the wide, wide Sea, & they come out to its beauty—

“On the beach they walk & hop along the great waves until they come upon two little black birds sitting calmly on a wire running from nowhere to seeming nowhere, & Marie speaks, because this is what one does amongst Faeries & Dreams: ‘I am looking for my missing mountain. Can you help me?’ The birds look down calmly ‘pon her a long while, then say as one voice, ‘Miss Marie, you must go into the Sea!’ & are again silent, & Marie uncertain this advice until she notices the glowing White Bunny that is her companion now (also now glowing in my arms) &, hand in paw, they walk & hop untroubled into the Sea!”

Take a breath. The Thought Fleas, I now know enough again to know their kind’s name, cheer & cheer my telling, & seem to want more, & so I move along the stage-set to the next picture on the wall, a bicyclist riding toward a school, traffic light & tree’d street—

I stare at this picture unknowing awhile, until I feel an itch in my mind, something, something? Helping me, I relax to it, let it come like fresh bright waters into my darkened mind, let them come, & words & pictures & yes, OK, I’ve got it, I think I’ve got it now, it’s Joe on that bike, Marie’s brother, of course it’s Joe, & he’s riding to see her, & I speak & speak: “Joe is Marie’s brother & is riding his bike to her school to bring her fruits for her lunch, but she is not there & he wonders why she stayed home, she’d seemed OK this morning, getting ready to go, & he is getting back on his bike now, & riding back to where they live to find her, check on her, when on the road he sees before him a grey Hedgehog, squeaking excitedly up at him—(& in my arms)

“Joe stops, & feels compelled to lean down & to put his hand low so the Hedgehog can climb on, & find his place on Joe’s shoulder, squeaking him to ride on now, & Joe does, rides & rides, until there on the road is a large pipe with a dark opening, & Holly urges Joe to ride on in, & he does, the pipe takes on a glowing quality as he rides in, as though it’s turned on, & they ride & ride, Joe getting ever uneasy, until they roll out back into the White Woods, yet the trees seem so much greater in size, & this is confirmed when coming up to him are two ladybugs nearly as big as him! But their faces are friendly & they urge him to follow them a long stretch through now-pathless White Woods until they come to a clearing where waits a great red & yellow Truckee waiting for them, & they climb in his Truckee bed to begin riding along, Joe, Holly, bicycle, Ladybugs & all—”

Pause, a breath, continue. “They roll along until they come in view of a great mountain, ‘Tis Marie’s!”

Joe explains, not knowing Marie was missing it somehow, & they roll on up it, a bumpy course, for a long while, until the ground below them gets smooth, soft, & soon they are not rolling but sinking deep into a kind of weightless quick sand, & down, & down, & down, & unharmed, & arrive to somewhere further up the mountain than they'd been, & rolling again among trees to arrive shortly at the small furred cabin of two pup brothers, the golden one sees & greets them, he is Shelley, & coming out now is his sober-faced puggle brother Threshold, & Joe is introducing them all & telling his search for his sister Marie, & the help he thinks his new friends are trying to offer—

“You are Joe? Do you know Daniel the Great Traveler?”

“He is our Guardian.”

“The golden one goes into the furred hut & returns back with a map. ‘He & his Tumbleweed companion visited us once. Told us of their many travels. Left us with this map for if we two ever chose to travel. He said we should make a wish for who or what we wished to near, & then open the map, & it would reveal our path.’

“Both pups look fondly at Joe & his friends. ‘We are where we wish to be, so we pass along this gift to you.’

“Joe thanked them & took the map. Held it a moment, closed his eyes, & wished to near Marie so he could make sure she was safe. In his mind, he could see her red hair & turquoise eyes, smiling. Opened his eyes, unrolled the map—

“Revealed was the mountain they were on, & on its other side a path leading down to the wide, wide Sea, & Joe could see that was how they should travel to near Marie. He showed his friends the map, & the Truckee in particular, & they all got into the truck bed in the back, & waved goodbye to the kind brothers as they followed the prescribed path away over the mountains & down, down to the wide wide Sea, where they rolled along the beach for a long time until they too came to To and Go the little black birds on the strange endless wire—

“Joe told of his search & held the map up for them to see, & hoped he was not being foolish asking the silent birds for their counsel—

“‘Kind Joe, friend to many & caretaker of the vulnerable, you must . . . go into the Sea!’ they said in one braided voice, then silent again.

“Joe looked to the crashing waves nearby, then back to the birds, then at his friends, & he nodded & raised his hand for the Truckee to go, saying thankee to the birds. Luckily his friends pulled him under the pink scarf they had been nestled amongst as the Truckee rolled steady in & amongst the wild waves of the wide, wide Sea.”

I stop. The Thought Fleas cheer & applaud even more for me, & I think I wish Kinley & Christina & Maya were here, & I see them suddenly among the figures in the front row, first Christina's tight shirt over her sexy tits, long blonde hair, & then Maya's-pink striped blonde hair, & finally Kinley taller than them, & every Thought Flea in the place too. Sleeping? Waking? I give a vague wave to acknowledge the cheering & move on to the next picture, wait for the itch, it comes, study the picture before me, its reflection of a great mountain in a lily pond, peaceful, strange, speak:

“Buddy & Cuke hurried through the White Woods, looking for their friend MeZmer the White Bunny, who had promised them hopping lessons on this pretty cool morning, but she was not to be found,

when instead these friends came to a great clearing filled with cheering & happy Thought Fleas—”

And here the Thought Fleas before me cheer & cheer, & the Buddy & Cuke in my grasp nudge & nudge me until I raise them up, & all cheer & cheer some more—

“On the stage performing his famous dance routine is none other than Bauer the Bear, who dances & slides from one end of the stage to the other, a star if ever there was one, eventually encouraging many Thought Fleas to come up on stage & dance with him, or hang on as he slides back & forth again & again—

“When his act is done, Buddy & Cuke come up on stage to greet their old friend, & he invites them to join him for a resting nap in the shack nearby.

“I do enjoy dancing for the crowds but I also miss my old dancing partner Shatzi,’ says Bauer as they walk, his gruff bemused voice also a little sad. They come to the shack, the hammock within, & they cluster together, old friends &, as Creatures often do, share a dream.

“In their dream, they find themselves in the cave of Jacoby the little monkey fellow who Marie & MeZmer had met, & he is delighted to see them. He is excitedly unrolling a map on the floor of his cave to show them something very important.

“‘This is the stage in the Great Clearing, & at the side of the stage is a door you wish to find,’ he said.

“‘Why?’ asks Bauer the Bear.

“Jacoby laughed. ‘Through it, you will find the way to rediscover your friend Shatzi!’

“‘He disappeared after a show,’ Bauer explains. ‘He’d fallen hard but said he was OK. But I could not find him.’

“Jacoby made them study the map closely & then they woke up.

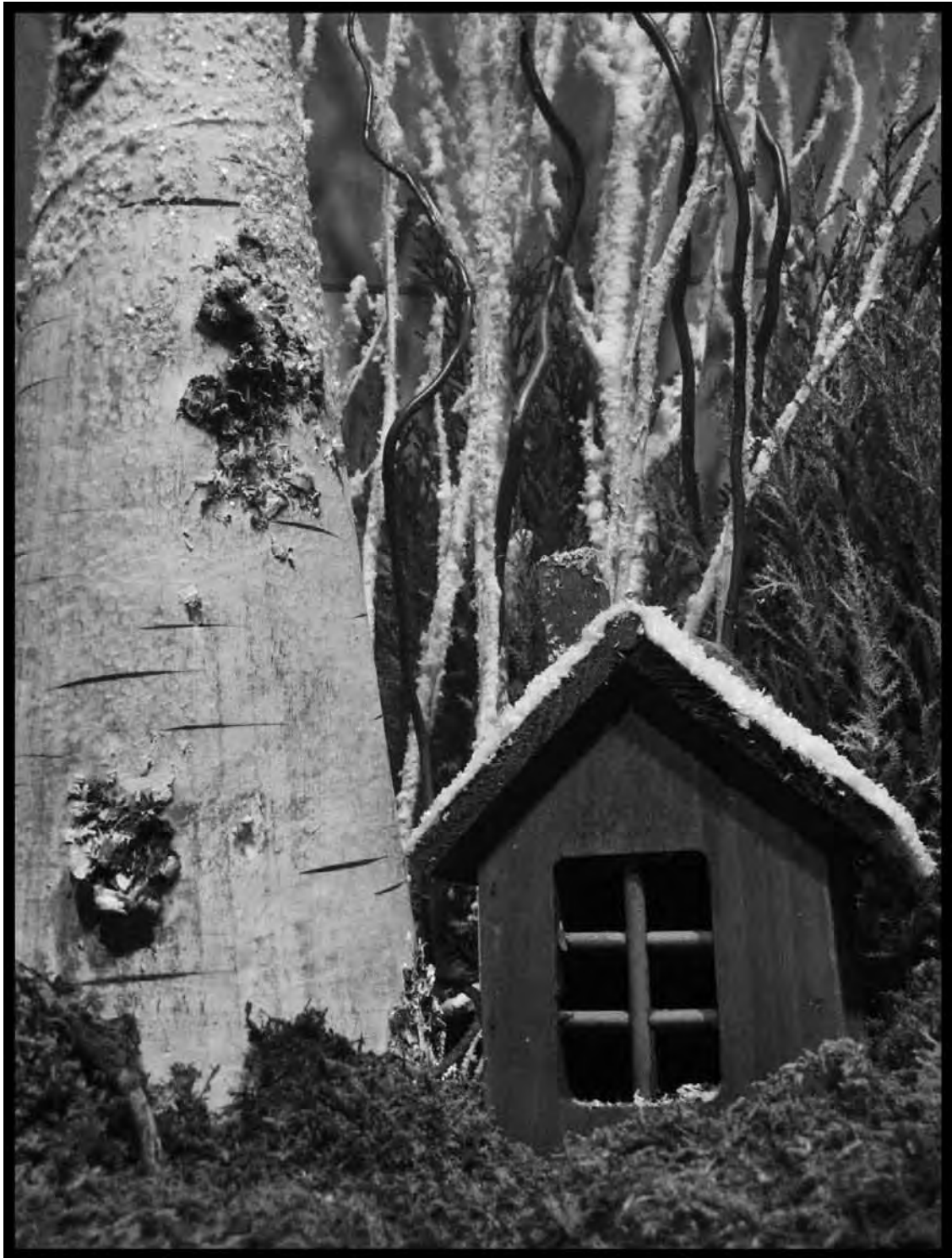
“Bauer was so excited that he ran them back to the stage, & all three of them looked high & low for the door to find Shatzi. But no luck, & more no luck. They finally sat sadly side by side on the stage.

“Then there was the sound of singing at the far end of the clearing, among the trees. A wondrous site to see. The famous Singing Toes, ten of them, singing a song for Bauer the Bear.

And in this Great Clearing there is the sound of song at the far end of the clearing & we all hear the prettiest one-none-many voice singing the song for Bauer the Bear, & I fully now remember: this Grand Production occurred & it was like this? Why am I back here, in dream, with Kinley, Christina, & Maya?

They sing:

*You must go into the Sea!
Go into the Sea! Go into the Sea!
Bauer & Buddy & Cuke, friends three!
You must go into the Sea,
to find the long lost Dancing Shatzi!*



*You must dance your way there
Paws high, tipling on the air!
You must dance & dance & dance
Bauer the Dancing Bear!*

*Go into the Sea! Go into the Sea!
Dance & dance & dance your way!
Find your friend, dance away!
Go into the Sea!*

Of course the applause for this star turn was long & loving, & from the crowd appeared himself Bauer the Bear to whom I handed Buddy & Cuke, while I stood off stage with MeZmer & Holly, watching & amazing—

Bauer danced with his friends in paw, danced & slided, & danced & slided across the stage, with such talent & deep wishings that a door unseen revealed as promised, & he danced himself & his friends right . . . straight . . . through!

They found themselves arrived to the beach along the wide, wide Sea, as had Marie's & Joe's crews before them, & there was on that strange high wire above them the black birds To & Go!

The birds were singing, singing the Famous Ladys Toe song, as their own advice too—

*Go into the Sea! Go into the Sea!
Dance & dance & dance your way!
Find your friend, dance away!
Go into the Sea!*

“And lucky just then appeared on the waves two bloo-eyed kittees in a sturdy Boat-Wagon to take them on board, buckle them up (Safety First!), & take them away into the Sea!” I said in conclusion.

I was exhausted with this dream, though the applause was exciting, & I was sorta slumping on to the next picture when I saw coming onto the stage my good friend Kinley!

Cheers & cheers, of course. Held out his hands, & I gave him over MeZmer, Holly, & Buddy & Cuke—all of whom back in my grasp, strangely now his—

Studied the fourth picture on the hallway wall of the stage set. A photo of a great billboard painting, a long mysterious street with strange figures among its buildings—

“My dear friend the Tumbleweed & I found ourselves deep in the desert, negotiating with some ruffians for a map we desired, but they seemed more interested in taking our goods off of us, so I raised my finger, TW *hmmm*d below their level of hearing for them to still, & I unrolled one of my maps to show them something valuable & wondrous. Mumbled ‘Fondo Wondo!’ & stroked an image on the map. Suddenly lightning ripped the skies above us, & a half dozen rainbows wilded amongst them, & they panicked & backed away from us till at a flick of my finger, they ran off fast.

“‘Good thing they fell for simple weather tricks!’ cracked TW in my mind, as I laughed, rolled up old & new maps, & we were away for a new destination. Days to find the town of the map. And the billboard.

“We stood before it, map in my hands, me muttering the words there to read, & we tumbled back into the billboard, & arrived to the street. But no time to celebrate. Strange figures took us into custody right away, & brought us down that long murky street to the jail at the end of it.

“Door slammed. Night came. Quiet. Nodded in our shared mind-tongue, & we tumbled back again.

“Sounds of the . . . wide, wide Sea. A long sandy beach, sang when walked on. Till we came to the two little black birds on their endless wire in the sky.”

Kinley pauses, a dramatic moment. Everyone began to cheer & cheer & cheer for more.

Kinley smiled & said, briefly, “We looked up at them, they down at us. I said, ‘Hello, I am Daniel. This is Tumbleweed. We are Travelers.’”

And, suddenly, almost violently, we all wake up back in the Great Cavern!

iii.

Watch this, call it a demonstration & here goes:

1. It was yellow onions that helped our task finally. They are loosely related to time-space, so can be used to transport material across unimaginable spaces & times—they simply arrive where & when needed, bearing within what organic material is needed—healthy cells for sick ones, as an example—information as yet unexpressed out loud—
2. I did this kind of work, we called ourselves the “onion truckers,” because we got the orders, prepped the onions, off they went—did this kind of work until I found myself naked, standing in a featureless white room—I guessed a spaceship—
3. A voice explains directly to my brain, bone, & blood that we are each & all part of a neural network flow, that humanity has been preserved entirely as data, & my choice to join the big, green, beautiful virtual world outside this room—
4. I turn my head away, hard, in a gesture I’d learned in a dream—it went like this—
I am an old woman, traveling alone in the after, until I meet a young girl with a bag of yellow onions, her eyes are dark, her hair dark also, thick & long, & she sings of these onions along this empty star-flooded night road, sings:

*Travel with me,
Travel free, free!*

She walks alongside me on this road, as I push my shopping cart, smiles uncertainly, speaks:

“You may cheat back on old age, ma’am, with one of my yellow onions. Restore your flesh from years ago! Become young & pretty like me!”

5. I stop pushing my cart & look at her. “Do you remember how I found you behind that great mask, hid in that wall on my family’s estate?”

She nods. Shyly. I gesture her now. She removes her cloak slowly, lets it fall upon the road. Nod again, & she unbuttons her shirt, lets it fall. Her breasts are young, pretty, nipples hard at the sudden night air.

Nod again. Quivering, she slides off her skirt.

“Look down.”

Shakes her head. Eyes tight shut.

“*Look down.*”

Her legs meet at a featureless root.

“Now show me.”

Head shakes.

“*Show me.*”

She looks at my face, at my now hungry eyes, unmoving from her own, & the featureless root begins to soften, divide, deepen—

6. I can't go back where I came from, to my fellow onion drivers, & it's hard going for awhile until I find myself in an ancient coffeehouse, across a strange gaming board from a man offering me a device that sums up others, their dreams, truths, useable data, tis easily portable—
7. I nod & say *let me try it*, walk deeper into this coffeehouse, looking for someone who hasn't been out of it in a long time, & I find a girl, long dark hair, dark eyes, absent her beautiful body because its ability to mold to a lover's wish has long since traumatized her heart, & I use this device to delve deeper into it, this deep black heartbreak, & see there, on a table, in a clean morning kitchen, a yellow onion, & I nod, & I pull, & I pull harder, & she holds it in her hand, & her choice now—
8. I travel what some call the White Woods, & others the One Woods, travel somewhat by dream, it's how to cover great distances, some of them dreaming, I've learned of something in them, someone, one & many someones, a sort of laughing cryptic puzzle of a little being, looks like a tiny black & white pandy bear, big laughing eyes, red & orange skirt, I see her/them often, but never close enough to hold, to talk to—yet I seem to accumulate them somehow—she/they follow me in greater number, curious about me, wondering what games I would play—
9. The world washes past me, I can see its great movements of land, of men, how it shifts & again & again through hurtling space—
10. Eventually I wonder about my other selves, & needing to speed, & sniff deeply, I form more into a White Bunny than a man, & I/we travel the One White Woods & accumulate us as we hop faster & faster, grow smarter, but then less smart, far more tender, far far more tender—
11. Come to a great city, re-shaped as girl, come to a party, sort of a great loft apartment, I feel strangely shaped for viewing, my chest & hips emphasized, my eyes overly large, my lips wet without licking, the clothes on me a conversation along the quick path to a bed, but the yellow onion in my hand, & so I have a drawing pad & several long charcoals, I sketch the laughing, stoned, delighted faces around me, look up, nod to one, “push the button”—hesitates—“*push it!*”
12. The faces on the page begin to move, to change, take on fuller forms, there are shapes & setting

around them, what is it? *What is it?* A bookstore, oh, goodness, *can that be?*

13. I'm working at a used bookstore, as a second job at night, just started, mostly at the cash register, ringing up sale after sale, some have great piles of books, there's this one girl who buys mountains of those thin paperbacked Westerns, writing a paper on them?

The store is along a busy city avenue, its great front door open till late to all, & its second floor with its mysterious glass walkway, closed off to the public, yet figures do use it to cross to . . . somewhere—

It's late, closing down, cleaning up, & one guy I'm talking to wants to carry on the night, I demur to another night—& the girl who wants to bring me out for a drink too—

I smile. "You're too Zelda Fitzgerald for me. Wouldn't work."

I have my book, I'm walking out the front door. I'm very happy. It's a great store. They like me. I feel like I belong.

14. The avenue is still alive as I walk it that first night, happy, & I see a crowded square, many people yelling & clapping & a sign up high says, "James McGunn performs *Sco'u'tland*, midnight!"

15. Thirsty I step into a store & to a refrigerator of bottled juice drinks, but in front of it, stomping in a puddle, is one of those tiny pandy bears, crying out, again & again, "I want to buy the English!"

16. I sit down to read my book to the imp, she cackles, calms, & listens:

"At the cartoon end of the world, a signal finally reaches the trees, & they burst out from their roots to up & save the world!"

17. Suddenly wake. A big warm blanketed bed. But the smell of a hospital. I don't know who I am & panic. My book lies face down on my blanket. I open it up at random & read aloud:

"Wars of the future will be fought in the mind, via drugs, dreams, television, Internet, sex, persuasion, manipulations of loyalties to the point where to obey is to receive pleasure & endorsement, & to disobey is to receive nothing as punishment. All war & physical suffering eliminated at the simple cost of freedom & self-created identity. Sleepers emerged from this doomed, damaged epoch—"

18. Close my eyes again, try to remember, understand, how it was easy, made no sense, but the music & the laughter & all shot through with want, but something more, I cared, the world interested me, I still, then, no, never, yellow onion, feel myself lower & lower, edge in, in deeper:

19. "Somehow deep down in the heart of things, a speck, like a piece of dandruff."

20. Till I am an old man, & knowing so many things, & a young woman keeps me traveling along, won't let me slow, & stiffen, our travels open out to others—

iv.

Since it was a sort of interval before they were next up, Bowie told Iris the story of one of his strangest operations:

“It was in a hotel room, a big one, like an apartment,” his fingers twined hers, she smirks—

“Preacher & I were trying to tease something from the air in that room, expose it. He brought in heavy cases, of ants & mantises & hummingbirds & so on.”

“Why?”

“We had this light device, I called it our ‘football’ because of its shape. Most evaporated, but maybe not all—& these hurry ‘home’—”

“Hurry home?”

“That’s what we were looking for, Iris, where they would go to.”

“And?”

Bowie shrugs. “It didn’t work out. They were too clever for us.”

Then he laughs. A pause then she laughs.

Spy humor.

v.

I am walking through a series of old factory buildings, again, wide dark alleys between them, & I need to piss, this slows me, as it has previous times, but insistent, so I look every which way, there’s “BAR” as it usually is, narrow red door, neon sign on a blacked-out window next to it—the door sticks, but I vaguely recall: two hard kicks low, & a push high. *Peasy easy*.

Dark place, bar against one wall, toilet against the other, just a rickety stall around a toilet, I hurry in, prop the garbage can lid against the door, sit hurriedly to let it flow, but a bloomy scent & a woman is trying to push in—some relief, not enough—

Back of the bar is murky black & open-ended, & again I choose to go deeper, sorta remembering something—

There—another bathroom stall—rest of my piss waits—door has a working lock too—but more—a vast space inside this bathroom—a banquet hall, & by my orders they are setting up an event—first the piss—*ahhhhh*—now I’m ready—

The hall fills as I walk around, glances at me but shy or circumspect, nobody willing to speak to me up close—

I am uncertain. That’s new. I’m reluctant. Why? The hall is full. There’s excitement. There’s a pinkish-blue smoke, opiate? Ganja? I don’t know.

I don’t know. I retreat back to the bathroom stall. Sit, pants still on. Close my eyes, try to gather myself close within.

“Global.” I start. Don’t move.



“Global Wall.” Still don’t move.

Bloomy scent again, no, several. These are not chemicals but skin. Young flesh. Scents I know. Scents I love.

“We know you can do this.”

I open my eyes. They aren’t there. Just scents in my mind.

“This is how you are protecting us. We’re in Dreamland guarded by Benny. Your promise to visit every night.”

I nod, remember. Remember it all now.

After the radio station, after I broke them one & several, I drove them in our electric van out to the town where my past was buried.

It was cold, winter, the cemetery empty of the living save us.

The marker I’d paid for was blank. Under a white birch, no other stones nearby. I’d paid for several plots to gird this one blank stone.

They were quiet, subdued. Still gathering themselves new from the radio station. I loved them, I cared for them, but I was no longer obsessed with their possibilities. *I needed to see Benny.*

“Who is this?” asks the youngest one finally, who speaks out of some group-mind consent of theirs.

I look at her, enjoy her blunt crimson-eyed return back at me. That long furred overcoat covers nothing from my body’s memory of her. Of them, she still resisted me the most.

I’m silent a long time. “Me. I’m buried here.”
Does not defer to me with a raised brow or a question.

“It was the only way I could leave my life behind.”

Sarah, the dark-haired middle one, still likes me despite, still remembers our swim, speaks. “It’s really you? I don’t understand.”

“I iterated. Benny taught me how.”

She, they, flinch at Benny’s name. Know that’s who I’m bringing them to.

I continue. “My life’s path led to here. Dig up the bones, find me. End of search.”

“Why did we come here?” asks the oldest one, the one of them I first had. Never really accepted sharing me with the others. Disliked most the four of us no longer sleeping together.

I sigh. “Because it’s where you’ll bring anyone who you need to show that I am dead. It’s your insurance.”

They say nothing yet clearly dislike this. I kneel before the stone, touch its cold surface with my hand. Brief image an icy apocalypse in my mind, shake it hard away. I feel them behind me twitch toward &

away from me. No longer feeling permitted.

Walk back to the electric van, pull open the back sliding door for them, & get in the driver's seat. They follow slowly, wondering if the buried one of me would like them better.

I can't right now. We have to get to Benny. *Get? To a man of dreams?* I need somewhere to hide them, whilst they sleep perpetually, until I fetch them again. Which I intend.

It means traveling in the White Woods again, one of the few roads that pass through it, & knowing that once they are safe, I won't be, & Benny & they will be far from me for safety. Then I can do what's on my mind.

I don't say much as we drive along, don't play the radio, which they would like.

And finally come to where no road continues, we get out, & I leave the van unlocked. May not see it again.

They are scared of all this, of being left, of where I will go without them, of what it all means.

I look around these darkening Woods, & motion all to take hands, mine the oldest one's, & I lead them along, *humming* a melody Benny had long ago taught me, for getting somewhere desired in these Woods—

We walk & walk as a great full moon comes out, & the White Woods braids through my low *humming* many, many times over, & I hear my girls join in, feel their voices lift their hearts & hopes & I love them, *I love them*. I will *protect* them, & return to them soon, it's OK, better than OK, *it's good, he loves us, he loves me, he loves us all*—

We arrive to a cabin on a hill above a moonlight drenched pond, but I lead them further into a smaller building, sort of a workshop from the tables & tools that fill it—there's a rough wooden stairs, & at the top is a fishing wire hanging from the ceiling, & pull it down a door unfolds, & climb up, & behold a whole new world, this one path into Dreamland, beyond the illusion of sleeping & waking—"Here we are, my loves" —

vi.

Bowie tells Iris another story, since her 'witching smile springs upon him.

"It was before I was really a spy."

"There was a before?"

"I was waiting, Iris. I was young & uncertain & I was waiting. I didn't know that's what life can become."

"Waiting?"

"As long as you're not in someone else's way, or part of their plan."

"And you weren't?"

"Not yet."

Iris thinks. A waiting Bowie is hard for her to conjure.

"I worked a job."

"You? A job?"

Laughs, agrees. "I don't know what I did. Moving boxes, shifting numbers, greeting strangers welcome?" Irish laughs some more.

"This girl & I discovered we got our groceries in the same store."

"Girl, Bowie?"

"It didn't seem like that. She would give me a ride home in her car when she'd see me walking along the road with my bags of groceries."

"Seem?"

"Then she invited me to visit her one time. She said she made a mean pink lemonade."

Iris laughs. "Pretty?"

"She had a girlfriend I met that day."

"Even better!"

"And an ex-boyfriend who was over for some reason a lot."

"Uh-oh."

"Yah. I mean, they were just being nice to me, I was alone, not very good at the job."

"Moving boxes? Shifting numbers?"

"Yah."

"So what happened?"

"Well, she told me she was an artist, loved to draw. She said she would have taken art classes at the local college but they were closed to non-majors."

"Was she good?"

"Her drawings were of this strange place, she said it was up in her attic. Said it went on room after room, passed through by mirrors."

"Mirrors?"

"That's what she said."

"Did she show you?"

"No. They were feeling frisky."

Iris laughs loudly.

"They wanted me to use this old box camera of theirs to take closeup pornos of them making out. All clothed but still."

"Did you?"

"I told them I kept my friends by keeping my porno images of them in my head."

"Awww. They liked you, Bowie."

"The boyfriend didn't. He sat in a corner of the living room, sort of tinkering with something. I was scared it was a weapon or something."

"Really?"

"Yah."

"So nothing happened?"

"They drove me home. I got a phone call claiming my father had died in a plane crash."

"Bowie!"

"I stopped waiting, Iris. That night, I packed my knapsack & I walked out of that life."

"To where?"

"I just walked for a long while. Walking's better than waiting."

"I suppose so."

"I was traveling after awhile with an old man & his shaggy cartoon dog."

"Cartoon?"

"Yah. Animated, sentient, but obviously built by someone. Sort of a grey sheepdog. Long whiskers, googly eyes. A cartoony bark."

"Hm."

"We're staying in a room that's deep inside a parking garage. The old man, me, the cartoon dog, & his



little orange Creature companion.”

“Creature?”

“Aha. Figured.”

“The old man will leave us from time to time, calls them ‘research expeditions’ but won’t say any more.”

“How did you meet him? This is a strange story even for you.”

Bowie nods. “So finally I have to leave our room & go find him.”

“How?”

“I wasn’t sure. There was the all-night bookstore down the street.”

“Did you find him?”

“I brought my knapsack, not sure why.”

“What happened?”

Bowie darkens. “The parking garage wasn’t safe. That’s why we always kept the room’s door locked. It was kind of dark too. I heard them moving around & ran to find a place to hide. There were a lot of burnt out cars in the garage.”

“Bowie!”

“So I hid in one. But then they were all around me, knocking at the windows, trying the locks.”

“Wow. What happened?”

“I slipped from the car, ran. Tried to find the darkest place I could in the garage. Wait them out.”

“Did you?”

“I fell asleep. Then the garage guards were rousting me with flashlights. My knapsack spilled, its books & papers & I was panicked gathering them all, & just ran flat out till I was on the street.”

“What then?”

“I was alone a long time after that, Iris.”

She’s silent, squeezes his hand.

vii.

I had this dream that I was about to throw out one of these notebooks, one from about 1990, it has a zipper that, when zipped, encloses the pages within, & I was just about to throw it out, & its pages not typed out anywhere, so gone would be gone, when I looked at those pages, & maybe an old ticket stub amongst them too, & I balked, hard, at throwing them out, *no, it’s too much, I won’t—*

So when I woke up, I was shaky, feeling spooked, & the train was passing up higher & higher into the mountains & I was again unsure *why this train, why that destination—*

It slows, it stops. I climb, clumsily, off, & find myself up to my hips in mud, & look down the tracks to see a mountainous plume of water coming hard—

No. It’s a movie. The camera, you see the camera now? It pulls back & back until you see the train is only 3 incomplete cars long, up on a platform, & I am standing in a pool of muddy water, & the distant plume is a kind of special effect, a pretty trick.

“Anyway, that’s how this works,” says Paul, my old blonde bookstore colleague who now works on these kinds of motion pictures. The kinds that aren’t *really* motion pictures, but more like levels of worlds which people inhabit, not ever really knowing it’s just special effects, it’s just *movie pictures—*

It wasn’t always like this, of course, at least for some of us. We lived in the forest, you remember, peaceful, no friends because no enemies. No movie pictures, for certain, most of us didn’t even know about the books kept hid in one of the larger treehouses,

"No, it wasn't a treehouse."

"It wasn't?"

"It was that hut, the strange colored one."

"Oh. Right."

"Can I tell it?"

"OK."

The hut was one room, but it was very settled. An armchair in one corner. A filing cabinet. A little bookcase. Another armchair. Some photos on the wall.

"Wait. Photos?"

"Yeah. A few of them. Of Creatures."

"Naturally."

"Yah."

In one corner was a wooden chest. Under the blankets & pillows in it were the books. Hardly anybody knew.

"Until?"

"Until what?"

"The story?"

"Oh. The armies came. From the world above us or the one below. Nobody knew. Maybe it didn't so much matter."

"They marched out of an earth tunnel."

We're both silent.

viii.

The three girls climb the stairs into what seems like at first an ordinary attic space. Dim, a little dusty, not too bad, & there are three sleeping bags laid out side by side.

"Are we supposed to stay up here & wait?"

The others don't answer because this seems obvious, at least for now.

Traveling with Global Wall has so defined their realities for so long that they feel small & confused. He was the cohesion amongst them.

Unspoken between them is that he is handing them off to Benny Big Dreams for awhile, & so they'll have to learn how to please, & control, him.

If he's a man, most of the answer won't be too difficult.

If he's not? What if smile, pout, & wiggle don't apply?

Such their thoughts, more or less, as they fall asleep, having moved their bags closer together, for protection? Something.

"Up & adam, goils! Chop chop!"—the voice is low, amused, but commanding. Seems to come from nowhere too, as they jerk & twitch awake.

It's not where they were before. Kind of a long shadowy living room. They're still at the edge, near the door they came through. But there's furniture now, chairs & couches, & a long fireplace along one wall.

They stand. Waiting for the man, to be assessed, to assess.

The youngest one figures it out first. Global would not be surprised at this.

"We're dreaming. This is the dream version of the attic where we're still sleeping."

"Give the little lady a prize!" says the voice from somewhere & nowhere.

His voice prompts them to each look down to check herself. Nightgowns short as their sweet asses. Red for the oldest, pink for the middle, white for the youngest. Matching panties. *Oh*. Each thinks.

Yet he doesn't show himself, save as a disembodied finger, bobbing on some dream breeze, pointing them to the other end of the room, & the wall-high-&-long mirror there. They watch themselves in the mirrored murk approach. Wondering what next.

The youngest learns the trick first. Touches the cold surface of the mirror & feels her fingers go through. Keeps pushing on through until she fully arrives there. Looks back at the two of them, & herself!

They walk up close to each other, yet do not slave to each other's movements or expressions.

Suddenly smiles. Gestures to the others to come along. They hesitate, then approach. Enter. Look back.

"Have fun, goils! Stay close together, though. I promised to return three of you when he comes!"

"Are you Benny?" asks the youngest.

"I is."

"Can we see you?"

"Maybe later."

"Why not now?"

The voice laughs. "There are tricks & traps. Floors & doors that are not what they seem. If it feels too far, return a ways back. But all of you, remember. Promise me?"

"If we can see you."

"Promise," the voice now very male & commanding. They know it from Global. They all three nod.

"Have fun, goils!"—& then a sense Benny Big Dreams was gone for now.



To be continued in Cenacle | 97 | June 2016

* * * * *

Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Eleven

*"I must create a system,
or be enslaved by another man's"*
—William Blake, "Jerusalem."

ix.

"I return home to the hospital, arrive OK this time, & there are all my roommates in our shared room, & they're having a hard discussion about how there's too many of us, & too little room, & the acid is beginning to come on, the acid is beginning to come on, the acid . . ."

I stop. Now who said this? It's in quotation marks. Is it from a book, am I years ago in college libraries, copying out words like I believe in them? Like it's a simple, *plain* thing to do?

No. These are my words I just copied out, & so nobody else to tell me what them. The narrator lives in a crowded hospital room, with discontented roommates, & he's just dosed, hard let's say.

The scene shifts, now another narrator.

"I'm a small young man, I'd tell ya 5'2" but I'd have to be wearing taller heels on my shoes at the time. But then I meet a woman named Evelyn, & she doesn't notice how not tall I am. She notices my smile, notices it in a way it's not been noticed before.

"Evelyn is brown-haired, turquoise eyes, long & luscious, as I am short, short, *short*. Somehow me, & my sack of things, & I'm moving in with Evelyn into her two-room house.

"Sometimes when I'm at home all day, waiting for her to return, I forget her name. It's something that happens to me, & I go hunting through her mail, looking through her things, trying to remember what her name is. *Evelyn, it's Evelyn.*

"At one point, we're in her back yard, on chaise lounges next to one another, we're naked, lookin' up at the stars, takin' turns cryin' out '*hellloooooo . . .*', until there is a noise, & in comes to the two-room house, bigger than the house, bigger than both of us, & certainly bigger than me, even on platform shoes, Evelyn's big, bruising, bald ex-boyfriend.

“Evelyn throws a sheet on me as I lie there naked on the chaise lounge—she covers up with one too—we pretend to be asleep—but he calls & calls & calls, ‘Ev’lyn, where’s my be’ah, where’s my dinna’, where’s my suppa?’ *Things like that.*

“Evelyn stands, puts on her robe, goes inside. I wait, cowering under my sheet. There’s a gunshot, lots of shooting. Evelyn comes back. She climbs on top of me in my chaise lounge, still under my sheet, but I find myself fucking her anyway. It is strange—it is shocking—but somehow wonderful—because *it is Evelyn*, & she wants sex now—but I want to know how she feels about me—because I’m small, & my heart’s big, & can be broken *so easily*.

“I spend a lot of time looking at her picture postcards, & the photos on her wall, trying to understand my Evelyn.”

The youngest one, in the white nightie & panties, raises her hand to pause me. Even wearing little spectacles to complete her brainy sex kitten look—

She has paged through the ragged copy of *Labyrinthine* I gave each of them, & says, “Is this the same Evelyn you wrote about earlier? The brunette who lives in the cottage, among other poor folks, near the strange rooming house, the one that neuters murderers & thieves? She brings a man home & they have good fun until the balding bruiser boyfriend comes in?”

I stare at her. She licks her lips, smiling, to punish me, then says, “And there are gunshots & then he’s gone.”

“And the bruiser had only claimed her because of recently occupying the town,” says the middle one, Sarah. Now they all know smiles undo me, so she tucks me in the corner of hers, to say a secret, or two.

I look in my own copy, page through, yes. “She was a Traveler, collected picture postcards, well known to do so.”

The oldest finishes. “He’s no Traveler, like her, he’s looking for the red-haired, green-eyed girl.” Pauses. They all laugh like “*aren’t they all in this book?*” But then she finishes. “She’s lonely. He’s nice. She wants sex. It’s enough.”

We’re sitting, each cross-legged, in a circle. Smiling peeks of panties on all sides of me. I hadn’t actually given them their copies. They found them, because they’d stayed in that first room, & decided to root around it.

Then I realized what was going on about the time it was happening on this page. I was innocently playing with some pages from the April 2016 issue of my literary journal, *The Cenacle*, a piece called “Dream Raps, Volume Five,” when all this happened. They found a hook in. And here we are.

I think they are trying to help.

I resume reading. They calm, for the moment, & listen.

“Leaping! Across time & space . . . I am back in high school, yes indeedy, *oh ho ho ho ho*. But I am taking classes now, doing quite well. Getting good grades. *Nothing keeps me down this time around.* I walk into an empty classroom, a’swaggering, thinking nothing can stop me this time.

"But there's a message on the chalkboard:

CLASS IS CANCELLED TODAY.

"*Hm. Feeling slowed, a little off now, uncertain, but then I notice a book on the teacher's otherwise empty desk. The book is called *Nazi Jailbait Bitch*.*"

The three girls snicker.

"What?" I ask.

The youngest talks. "They wanted us for that book."

"Wanted?"

She nods. "Read us more." I slowly do.

"Kind of a porn novel, seems the title charactress seduces & kills Nazis. It's an old cheap paperback. I wonder how it ended up in this empty classroom. Well, I sit on the teacher's desk, my short legs swinging below me, page through it, reading about the various adventures of the **NJB**. She's quite a clever **NJB**, & she kills in a variety of colorful ways.

They hold a world between them, balanced. His hands above, hers below. They speak rarely. He wonders about her kiss, she wonders about his touch. This is something important they do. When it ends, as it has to, & he is bleeding out from a thousand small skin pricks, each a star's deadly jab, she stays right there, so close, loving him, hating him, making sure his last view of the world are her eyes, what he once called 'the opposite of turquoise,' to his last breath, watching her eyes.

"But then I decide whoever owns the book will value it enough such that I should leave it where it is, on the teacher's empty desk in the empty classroom. And I leave, having gained a little bit of the literary experience for myself from that volume, & ready to move on."

They're all nodding. The middle one Sarah says, "They sort of wanted us all. The book, the TV show."

"And the movies," giggles the youngest. "And those video games," says the oldest. They laugh & laugh, calm down, try to behave, then giggle some more.

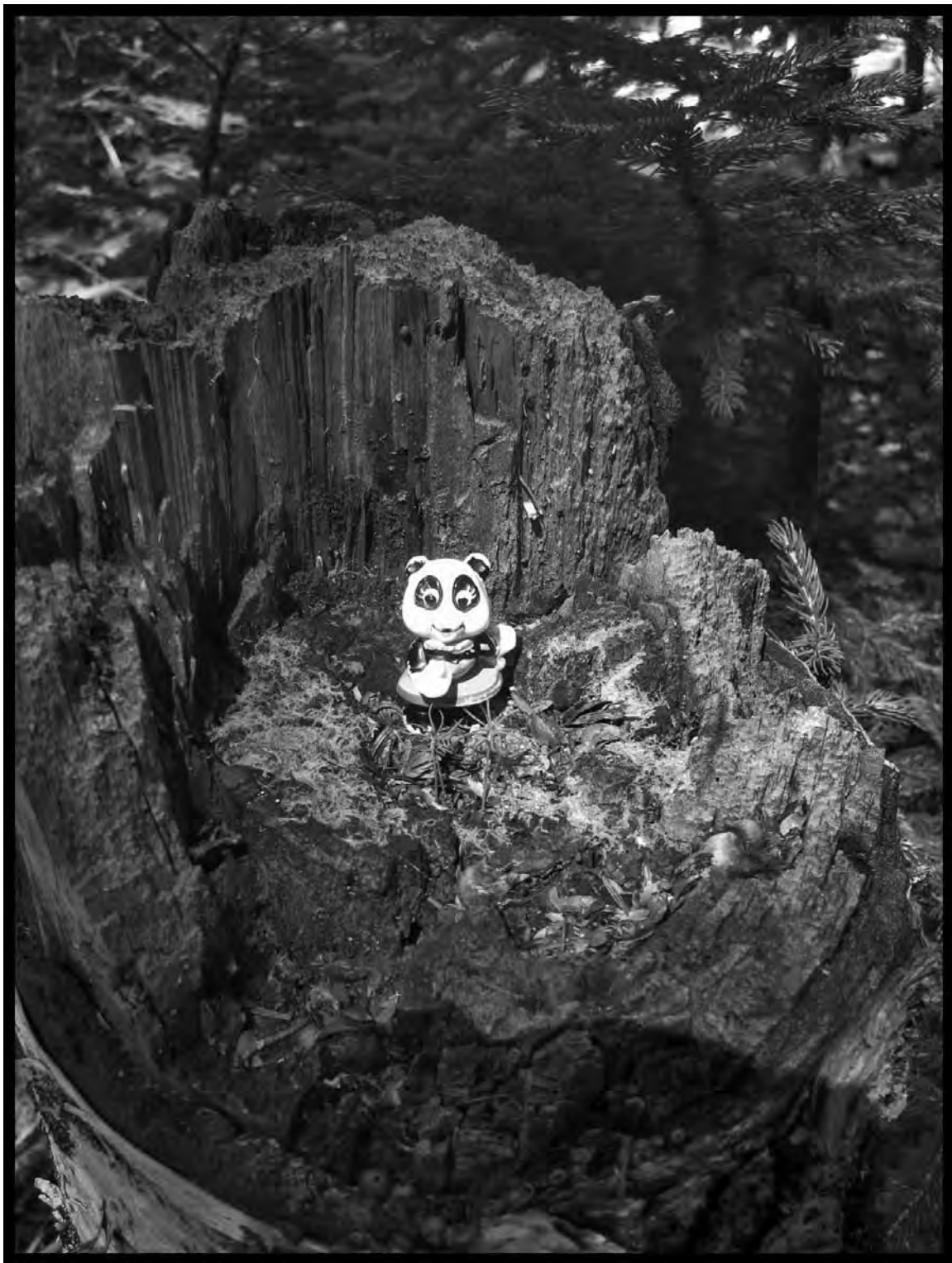
Finally I sigh & read on anyway. "I walk home, each step again leaping me back across time & space. Arrive to a not-quite-then-nor-a-quite-now. It's the little gas station convenience store I worked in, when much younger, the one built right on top of the spaceship buried in the earth. Down a flight of stairs found at the back of the store's walk-in refrigerator, but a locked door below kept me from exploring it too deeply."

They are paging back & forth furiously in their copies of *Labyrinthine*, finding references to ships under the earth.

"Why do you keep doing this, using the same tropes & metaphors over & over?" they seem to ask with one braided voice.

I shrug.

The youngest one click-click-noise-noises to her fellow sometime **NJBs**. They exchange a lot of these noises.



"Can we go?"

"Go?"

"You know the way?"

"Or you can make it up."

I repeat: "Go?"

"To the spaceship. We want to see it now."

"This isn't there. This is the attic, it's high up, & that ship's down low."

This doesn't phase them. I shake my head. They pout. Well. I say, "Maybe after I finish reading this section."

They nod, giggle, quiet, listen.

Helpless, I read on. "I find myself behind the cash register, watching the video monitor of my friends, my dear brothers back at that old brown-paneled barroom we used'ta haunt like a pack of grimy ghosts, all now long lost to me in time & space. They're laughing, they're shaggy-haired, they're grabbing each other's shoulders & hands. *They're funny as fuck.*"

"How?" one asks. They're all leaning over me, reading the lines in the magazine too.

I shake my head. "We drank. We didn't have girlfriends, or the Internet. So life was entertaining each other. Alcohol helped."

Their hive mine assesses this. "*We're not going there,*" I state flatly.

They *awww* & *booo* me but I tire of the easy tricks. Shoo them back a bit, & read on.

"And sometimes I just feel like I'm walking blind through the world, wishing I could make a valley for all my loved ones to live together & maybe, *oh you know*, open up the valley to others. Random guy walks in & says, *I love your writing, man*, & I say to him, *I love your writing, man*, & we hug each other affectionately, & it seems as though I'm left wondering what does it mean to be bound by space & time, by finitudes of memories, by the affections that wax & wane in the human heart, & the miracle of the greener world, & the miracle of music, & the miracle of *breathing in*, *breathing out*, & keeping somehow, some way, by years & miles & years & miles, your heart open to all."

I stop. Now they are listening. Sort of calmer & more raised up same time.

I stand. "OK. We can go the short or longer way."

Silence. Waiting.

"Shorter we just go there, I make us a quick trip down. Longer, we get there eventually."

Consult, consult. Click-click-noise-noise.

"Long way. But make it interesting."

I nod. No sweat. I motion them to take each other's hands & follow me. I take none of them. Can't, don't, can't have a favorite. We pass through the mirror to the next room, where I look back & see all of us still. But, in this room, just me. They're tucked in my mind. Easier to manage.

I can tell they don't like it as much, but I promised a good way along to the spaceship. Here goes.

(. . . so I stretch out on my bed, long legs dangling far over the edge, curtains closed so I cannot see the many other beds in the room . . . & so I put on my headphones, turn on my cassette player because that very day I'd recorded off the radio a new album by my favorite band . . . sink into my music, sink into my hospital bed, deep into my hospital bed . . . listening to those songs I recorded off my radio, holding the tape player near to the speaker, & they're all wonderful songs, deep, tragic in ways I don't know, they're beautiful, beautiful songs . . . they make me happy . . . & then the DJ, Commander Q, says the name of the album is *Wish You Were Here*, & I think that too, tonight, thinking back, thinking forward, thinking across those miles, turquoise eyes, turquoise eyes, wish you were here . . .)

x.

I'm going to school again, now, Evelyn smiles me each time I leave for class, my *Tales of the W.A.R.P. Wizard* lunch box in hand, trying to make myself something after all these sad nothing years.

At my school, there's a woman who keeps following me around. Oh, it's not romantic or nothin' like that. She's an automaton, & she wants me to kill her, & she hands me two guns for the task. She pleads & begs & says *just finish me & you'll be a better man for it*.

Well, we walk out to a empty park with lots of trees, & find a particularly nice tree where I promise I'll bury her under, give her some dignity, being she doesn't feel any.

[“Why?” asks the braided voice in my head.

I try, but hard to push a voice in your head back a pace.

“Why?” they press.

“You won't like it.”

They press harder.

“OK OK” I push back. “She's an old model of sentient sex toy. They retired her & that's why she's at school. Retraining.”

“For what?”

“For whatever. Not many models of her kind make it. They often end up finding someone kind & willing to end them.”

They don't like this, but I clear my throat in their direction, signaling I intend to resume.]

And I shoot right at her, & they don't work right, these guns, they seem to go off wrong, & yet one bullet does seem to pierce her head, & she dies—or she seems to die—falls heavy to the ground—and I realize I don't have a shovel—so I use these guns to dig a hole.

It's not a very good hole, & so I have to disassemble her into much smaller pieces by hand, & some of her screws don't come out right so I have to snap them off—but eventually I get her all into pieces, & I sort of line them up in the hole with a little bit of dignity to the whole thing—and I don't exactly say a prayer over the whole thing but I do say, *I hope you rest in peace*.

[the three of them are now quite spooked & I'm not sure why. Then it hits me.

[“Emandia,” I say.

[They nod, barely.

[Joining them in my mind, I find that we are in a room that is also a bed, the lighting is roseate, & they sort of huddle around me.

[“Pull off your panties,” I say with the kind of a voice they'll respond to.

[They do & I see little or nothing there for any of them. They are blushing some, but more waiting.

[“Each take a hold & pull off mine,” I say, quietly. No order in it.
 [They do, & see my cock is big & full right now. Turn away all 3 to snatch at panties.
 [“No. Show me.”
 [Now I see sweet shaven little cunts. I’m sure if I’d shown a cunt of my own they’d have responded the same way.
 [Then I notice the youngest one’s sweet cunt is sort of alternating with her own nice cock, & the other begin to as well.
 [“OK, pantie up,” I say. Now nude, none of them want to until I say it again with a nod. They slowly do.]

I find myself wandering the campus trying to dispose of the guns, & that seems to be a harder thing to do than I thought. At one point I end up in maybe my old dorm room, maybe it’s a friend’s, from the month I tried the local college. I’m smoking something good on TV, maybe to take my mind off the whole thing—it’s important & not important at the same time—

& there are no lights on in the dorm room—though it’s nearly noon—& there are people sleeping in it too, maybe sleeping off a party, I really don’t know—& I turn on the lights from a bank of switches, & the people sleeping complain—though it’s nearly noon—& I can’t get them off again—& I think to myself, *goddamn*, & I go over to the wall, & it’s a brick wall—& there’s a brick loose in it, nobody’s looking because they’re all asleep—& I pull the loose brick out, it’s tough but it comes out.

Behind the brick there’s empty space, & so I shove the guns in there, put the brick back in place, & realize the deed is done, so go back to smoking my TV program. There are others watching me now, but *they just don’t know*.

[I shake them out of my head so that we are facing each other.
 “Do you want more clothes?”

Vigorous head shake. “Since we’re not Maya or Christina, or red-haired & green-eyed, we’ll take pigtails & nighties,” their voice is single, mocking, teasing, & yet waiting to be shown more. I think they prefer me to Benny Big Dreams, though I don’t know why.]

xi.

It was a movie, or a dream I had that night, listening to that cassette of my favorite band on my headphones in my hospital bed, or maybe it happened to me, why I ended up in this hospital bed, in this too-crowded room, with the quarreling roommates, the acid coming on, the acid coming on . . .

[I give each of them a tab of *Alice* LSD on her pretty little tongue, they chew & smile to harass me, we sit in a circle on our bed, I tell them to keep eyes closed & listen. I can hear them click-click-noise-noise trying to decide about me, still angry at Global, willing to mull a switch of team, *if they all agree*.]

Their village was gone, destroyed? We find a group of people traveling together. They embody their lost culture. They carry its trinkets, its memories, its seeds, & they travel on & on. They become adaptable to many situations, to the dryness, to the parched heat of the desert, metallic chill of the mountains, the strange magick of certain Woods & on occasions when everyone seems to feel it, & they do a lot, a sad collective feeling, they will brew a trinket tea together that will allow them to cluster dream & live anew in their lost home, to walk around, to touch its details, its smells, its tastes, the faces that are not among them anymore, what the air was like, important sounds & not important sounds. It helps them greatly, these rare nights, to keep going . . .

[They fall asleep around me, which is good, it helps to move both laterally & vertically in dreams]

xii.

We are walking through another mirror while still together in that bed-sized room while still they are iterated & on back to their sleeping forms in the attic where Global Wall left them—

Through this mirror to the White Woods, them no longer in nighties & pigtails to my pleasure, but sort of spangled & glowsticked drapery that leads girls to each other, naturally, whatever Nature is—

They look at me, but pretty girls at strange Woodsy festivals need no leader or direction, yet still they won't let me fade off, & so I come along half-spectre-like, not feeling anything resembling dancing yet—

The path seems to begin back there, you can see the light down there, & probably grey hills below that we climbed, because I wanted to see their eyes as we entered these throbby hummy drumming White Woods, & as their clothes shifted from pleasing to pleasure—

Every path through Woods is rough & temporary, begins to leave again as soon as one's step leaves—so one learns to walk more like an animal, where each step is like a kind of word, of flesh,

of movement, a danger & curiosity in each one & whatever this means to a brain used to paths of cement & power—

A hand reaches into the murk I'm in & pulls me along, the three of them would no more abandon me than each other even as the music pulls them on & on & in & in & through—

Some kind of open area now, surrounded by trees still, very tall old ones, pale but more like glowing, like light was language, like how they might say something by glowing more or less or in combination—

And the *Hmmm* beneath it all, the rhythm, the beats, their movement among each other, I near, I enter, the warm snaky *Hmmm*, I'm fine drifting now, I'm fine, with pen, drifting away—

xiii.

There was this other woman I meet at school, older woman, sixty, eighty, a thousand, it was hard to say. Plain-looking woman but somewhat strange. We near each other, sometimes get along. Both back at school, trying to turn our nothing selves into something at last.

There was one time in the cafeteria where she's sitting with someone else, & I was sitting nearby. I had my *favoritest* peanut butter jelly & cottage cheese sandwich. *Favoritest*. I would make it up in Evelyn's tiny kitchen, & I'd wrap it in tin foil, & then I'd put it in a plastic baggy, & *then* I'd put it in my little sandwich-carrying case, & then put that inside my *Tales of the W.A.R.P. Wizard* lunch box, & I would make sure nobody touched my lunch box but me, because I knew what a tasty sandwich lay within.

But then he left, & now we're sitting together, chairs facing each other, & I want to take her hand, talk about a man's feeling of possession, but I don't quite [the youngest one distracts me by dancing nebulously around my writing hand & arm, breathing in, breathing out, too sweet almost to be

seducing], & anyway she'd probably misunderstand & think I meant me & her, when I didn't at all. I was just practicing for later that night with someone completely different. *Evelyn, of course, you know that.*

But she has to go. I can tell she has to go because she's putting her screwdrivers, wrenches, & various colored nails back into her strange wooden box. It had all sorts of symbols on it. You won't find them on the Google, or in big dictionaries, or in arcane volumes in the library. No, sir. It also looks like it had been through fire a couple times. There are scorch marks on it, a couple dents. It's a wooden box but it looked like it had sailed [I think she's kissing but clouds, laughing, made up words to distract me] the seven seas.

I collect my spoons & stuff them into my bag, but it's too light & I panic. *Where is my sandwich? Oh, there you are, sandwich. Still in the sandwich container.* I was very worried but now I feel reassured, & then I depart too, & I'm back working in my office.

The school gave me a job to help me pay for my classes—which is located at the part of the building that's not yet built, so it's actually a worksite—but I have a cubicle in the middle of the worksite. It's:

CLICK CLICK

NOISE-NOISE

all day long. The crazy sounds of work around me as I'm trying to type on my typewriter, fill out forms, answer the telephone. Most of the questions are about the live feed from 1968, it's glitchy today, & seems to only show war riots, nothing pretty, nothing hippie. People call and complain. *They want hippie.*

[She is clogging up my mind now & so I'm confusing writing with slinking around her spangles & stars. As I feel along, she renders in flesh what I'm wanting, thinking, beneath what I'm thinking, moans like words like touch like squeeze like release, *like better than release*]

Late afternoon, as often happens, all the workers in their hard hats gather in a certain corner of the worksite to watch a sort of live cartoon that appears there every day to entertain them, some kind of pretty girl dancing merrily, her face grows older, younger, she's shy, she's bold, she clearly delights in dancing for the workers until their break is up, & then she departs, & I go home but, again, *no one touches my lunch box.*

[Read this, to me, I say to her, my hand on her wrist, her face smeared with play & lust. Tiny spectacles appear before her sweet eyes, her road-wrecking lips read:

*You wonder what kind of project could this be, & if I tell you it is a film, you would not believe me & say, oh no, strange sir, film was conceived only recently, & I will say to you in response, you have not seen **Remoteland**, you have not seen **Remoteland**. You have not seen **Remoteland** . . .]*

xiv.

We finish together & we smile & I am ready to tell Evelyn why I am so short now, 5'2", if that, this is an important part of why, she listens, & I watch her listening, & she smiling prompts me to continue when I am too long silent watching her listen—

[Afternoon. They sleep in a group in the grass. A field we found. Hilly. White Woods all around. I sit near writing. Wondering the how & the why of this. Pages on, pages back, how, why.



[They stand, a row, & begin to stretch in various poses. Arms high, low, crossed with legs, balanced on one foot & reaching out, standing with hands stretched, bending wide & near, till a kind of silent signal & they conclude, bow briefly to each other, smile, tumble around me again, to tease & watch. I resume.]

There were numbers crawling along every surface that I could see, & there were letters & symbols & formals & someone said, *read 'em, what do they say?* I peered closer & I couldn't see because they kept changing, I couldn't focus on one number or letter or symbol long enough to see what it said, because it changed the moment I focused on it to something else, *something else, something else, something else.*

& they crawled on my hands & they crawled on the ceiling & they crawled on the walls & they crawled on the pictures in the pictures in the picture frames & they crawled on the windows & they crawled on the floor & they seemed to adhere to the kind of surface that they crawled through. Sometimes they were more old-school computer style numbers, sometimes they were more curvy, sometimes they were pixelated. They took on the form of what they crawled on.

& there was nothing to say about them. There was no explanation really, there was no *this is what it means*, & yet it wasn't meaningless, but it had no meaning. It was somewhere in between, maybe somewhere off that narrow scale. *Wow. Fucking wow.*

Went on all night, went into the next day. I climbed the stairs &, instead of on the floor there being numbers, there were patterns, strange craquelure patterns, but everywhere else numbers, & I'm still looking for them even now.

"Even now," I say, not quite meeting her turquoise eyes.

[She wakes, the youngest one. The others sleep on, or seem to.

[Sits next to me. Holds my hand. No trick. No game. Curiosity.

["Why do you write this book?"

["Because I do."

["But why?"

["Because I have been for 10 years. And the ones before it stretching most of my years back."

["Don't you know?"

[Briefly, we are where I am now, on a bus, riding through a cool summer's day, clouds grey & heavy above, but calm for now. Two girls in the seats in front of me, I'm in the very back, are watching movies on their book-sized gadgets. Asian faces on the screens, Asian subtitles. I notice most of the actors have round, un-Asian eyes, & wonder about this.

[She's curled into me, now, on that hill, near her others, just with me on this bus. Waiting. Whatever I say. However long it takes. OK.

["It began a long time ago, before book-sized gadgets showing movies on buses. There was TV, radio, movies, books. Where you were more your whole world.

["Books were what best showed me the bigger world, promised that what little I had & knew was not all.

[“I liked the words, their sounds, their mysteries. I liked that what was within me could partner with the world through language to *make something*. Sometimes something good, even fascinating.”]

[“Is that why you do it now?”]

[“Yes, but also to connect with who I was, learning of that, feeling new how it felt then. Remembering, continuing.”]

[She’s silent, thinking. Nods, but vaguely.]

[“Who are you? I don’t even know your name.”]

[“Ask me.”]

[“What is your name?”]

[She smiles, playfulness hinting her eyes. “It’s April.”]

[“Like the month?”]

[“Like the month you were born in, Raymond.”]

[I start a little. “Why April?”]

[“That’s why.”]

[I nod. But vaguely. “Who were you before you were with Global Wall?”]

[“Just a girl. Pretty face. Promising body. Unformed mind.”]

[“His favorite.”]

[She laughs. “Yours too.”]

[I nod. “True, but not the only reason.”]

[The others stir, & April & I return fully to the hill. They know they missed something, I’ll owe each of them for now.]

xv.

What I keep mind of is your turquoise eyes. That’s what I keep mind of. For you see, what happens over time is that it seems like first you are you & then I am you & then you are me & then I am me again. Sometimes I am the raggedy fellow & you are the long-haired girl with the turquoise eyes & sometimes I am the raggedy girl & you’re the boy with the turquoise eyes, but you see it’s the turquoise eyes that always keeps me knowing what is what. They remain your constant, girl or boy, whichever is whichever is whichever, however things sort between us, & it’s a good thing too for, in this new place we’ve come to, things look perilous.

We have to learn how to adapt & adjust, we may have to stand in different lines, we may have to sleep on different floors, we may have to speak in different tongues. I think to myself, this is only temporary, I think to myself, as long as I can pick out your turquoise eyes in any situation, any profile, any raid, any examination, any time there’s raising waters or drought, any time under any star, amongst any kind of soil, in & among & through, however it may be, words words words words words words words words, ahhh, turquoise eyes. It’s OK . . .

[Now I’m on the bus alone, for a little while. Passing by Woods, bushes, short cliffs. Listening to some damned pretty fiddly music. Guitars, harmonies.]

[Passing all this at 70 MPH or so. Have passed along these roads before. Will likely many times again.]

[I write, April, because it gives me a sense of *being alive now* that few other things do, as intensely, as fully. When I write, I am doing more than taking up six-foot-plus of space.]

[Nobody asks me to. Nobody perishes if I don't. It's an explain-less must. It relieves the tension, the fear. Beholds anew the open doorway between *in-me* & *out-there*, so I can sit in that doorway, & sing every word my pen is able.]

xvi.

You see, Evelyn, it's like also this.

Once upon a long time ago, might have been a Tuesday, I was looking to make the acquaintance of a *tiny . . . little . . . individdle*. And this tiny little in-di-viddle has been an individdle part of my days & nights ever since. *A tiny . . . little . . . in-di-viddle.*

[They're now all awake & sort of cuddled around me smiling. My eyes are not dull with old remorse, lusting their lithe & lights from a thousand light-years away.]

One time I was in a situation where I could not believe that she was multiple sizes at once, & it was a dangerous situation in which all the circumstances surrounding it were uncertain. There were strange faces, there were swaying hands, there was skipping music, there were all kinds of dark & eerie, as it were, & I worried the fate of this *tiny little in-di-viddle*.

I swept her into my hand, I hustled her along, sometimes she was too entirely big for me to move much, except by sort of a nudging gesture of my shoulder to her ankle that towered above me, & sometimes she was many at once, a horde of her, crazy-eyed & cackling merrily, but I worked to find every single one of her, & *oh!* I made sure that I found them all, even as their numbers shifted higher & lower & stranger still.

[And of course herself can't stay away from a good telling about herself. And now each of the three holds one, each imp gnawing a girlish palm lazily, for show. For giggles. Many of them.]

—& I can tell you now that, as of this telling, this *tiny little in . . . di-viddle* is as safe as I can possibly cause such a being to be, with her love of the game, the shenanigan, the cackling trouble or, as she likes to say, *click-click noise-noise*.

[Cackling as a mixed group of girls & imps, they suddenly race away toward those far trees. I move not to follow. Pretty imaginal girls & imps got ta run free sometimes.]

xvii.

His name, I say, is Daniel. He is a man who has been washed over time by event, person, world, his own body, washed, washed, & washed again. In the last year of his long career as a local sports hero, beloved, best of all players, playing aching always now, or just plain injured & no time to heal, playing for a team the shell of its old championship days, his heart still the hero's even though his body is slower & battered, he persuades all his teammates, except for two, as the season is winding down, the end is near, he says, *why are we earning all this money? We're terrible. Let's donate the rest of our paychecks for the remainder of the season to the good charity. Let's just do it.*

Oh, there's a big event, he doesn't want it, he just wants them to do it quietly but someone gets a hold of the story, & this last good act of his as a professional ball player is pronounced far & wide. Someone later on, years later, long past his time, wants to do a documentary on the man, remember him on film,

& the only sequence of this unfinished film that is ever recovered from the fire is a scene where there's a crash & we arrive suddenly above ground on the subway train as we come out to near his home where he grew up, sparse green, many strange houses, some seemingly built from the bottom up rather than the top-down.

Half-filmed is the story a childhood friend of his told about the time when they were mere tykes in the sweet store—& they'd gathered all their money from paper routes, shaking down littler kids, stealing off their parents' bureaus, finding coins in sewers—they were in this sweet shop, & they knew they could have bought the same sweets somewhere else cheaper, but it was finer doing it this way.

[Maya's with me now, so it seems. Purple eyes, check. Pink-tinted blonde hair, check. Scrawny as Creatures, check. "Yes?" "I'm here." "Why?" "Not sure. The others left." "Yes. True." She looks at me. "I'll keep you company for now." I want to say one thing or another, but I don't. Keep writing.]

He said, *it's finer doing it this way because they'll put it in a fancy-looking bag with a ribbon, & we'll look like we're just sittin' pretty, bag full of this sweet candy to share between only us.*

He remembers his last morning as a ball player, the last game he was going to play, probably not more than a series at the end of the game, mop up a lost season. Everybody was going to clap too loud, call it good. Lineman playing a step slow not to sack him. Cornerbacks & safeties letting his slow, wobbly passes through. A touchdown with ten seconds to go, when a dozen wouldn't have helped.

He was lying that morning in his bunk, thinkin', *what kind of Mac-Donald's breakfast am I going to have this morning, is it going to be a big one or a small one?*

If it was the last day of your professional sports career, & you'd already donated all your money for most of the season, so you were kind of on a low budget now, what kind of Mac-Donald's breakfast would you go for? Where would you scrape up the nickels & quarters?—& as you did, would you be thinking to yourself, *wow, this is like way-back-when all over again?*

"You were the friend from his childhood?" Evelyn asks me.

I nod.

"You were taller then?"

"*So damned tall, Evelyn.*"

xviii.

Then she says: What were you like when you were a teenager? Tell me a good story. I can't think of any, so I tell this:

I'm listening to my AM-FM transistor radio late into the night, I listen to song after song, it's like medicine as they say, & I find this singer, his name is James McGunn, & they play a lot of songs by him on this late night radio show hosted by this strange gent called Commander Q, & James McGunn has this album out, it's called **Sco' u'tland**, sort of a strangely punctuated version of *Scotland*.

It's a 90-minute long album. I save up my money, & I buy it on LP, double LP, perhaps even cassette tape as well. I look him up in the music review books in the library, & he has other albums too, some they like & some they don't, & I wonder who he is, who is this James McGunn?

When I'm not listening to his double LP **Sco'utland**, I'm walking down the street with my transistor radio poked right at my ear, hopin' he'll come on. Maybe Commander Q will have an interview with him. Maybe I'll find out more. It's hard to say.

[Maya snickers. "Is this you?" "No, not really. Emotionally, somewhat, but not literally." "Emotionally?" "That young, I loved music unreasonably too, & wanted to feel one of them understood me, could have been my friend." "Oh.")]

Later on, I'm just sittin' somewhere with my favorite com-puter & we're having ourselves a good ole time, not doing much of anything, just sitting with my com-puter, & it starts raining, & my com-puter fills with rain, all her ports, & I panic, try to shake them out. I look around for shelter, & I find this college bookstore, & I bring her inside, & just try to shake her out.

It's just very strange, it's like water that goes sideways & vertical & sticks—it's some kind of gravity-defying water—and I remember this song by James McGunn, it said,—& it was very reassuring though I didn't understand it at the time as now I do—it said, *when the water starts to fall up, forget the king, bring your cup.*

(She laughs merrily. My strange years before her delight her & turn her on. Every time.)

[Maya nudges me. "What? I'm just working." "Where are we right now?" "We?" Charming, & rare, Maya smiles on me. Oh. "This is an old writing joint of mine. The Peoples Donutshop. I used to live near here, long years ago, & still return to remember & renew occasionally." She nods. "It's what I have left of a lot of years, come & gone friends. I wrote here then, a lot, so returning is a touch back to that. The people of my life then are all scattered & gone." She nods, softens. Watches me write on.]

xix.

Nazi Jailbait Bitch likes to say to me: these are the kinds of things you hear when you're riding the local bus & people get to talkin' about their lives & their times & they sometimes tell you lurid details of their escapades, because you see these people are desperately lonely & sad, & they don't understand how the world has tromped on them, year by year by year by year, & the only thing I can say in response to all of this is that some of those strange things really happen to some of those strange people, & so I say to you tonight, one & all, most sincerely: CHOMP THE ORANGE, DO YA?

xx.

Sexxxy, placing the tab on your lover's tongue, watching her chew, swallow, watching him watch you as you chew, swallow. Telling the next story, as the acid is coming on, *oh, luva, the acid is coming on . . .*

Then I travel to a place called Oorous. Seems at first to look like a town, a nice, small town. But I find out eventually that it's a sort of slave camp run by the aliens whose ships have always been overhead.

I arrive in the guise of a reporter, taking a break from his big city newspaper life to write his novel, take the room above the coffee shop, & I come down every morning for my coffee, my raisin toast, light butter, & sometimes a hard-boiled egg.

I set up shop at one of the tables under the elongated awning that the coffee shop features to keep its patrons safe from rain & shine, as they enjoy their beverages & their conversations.

I set up at my table my notebooks, my pens & pencils, a couple of novels I'd like to try (including the new one by Darling Darlene Danger, & my umpteenth read of Cosmic Early's *Aftermath*), & I'm ready to roll. I get to know people though over the course of my days. Oh, there are some times when you'll see me hunched down low, scribbling away, blind to all but my page.

—but then there'll be other times I'll be looking pensively off into the sky, tapping the pencil against my front teeth—& that'll be a good moment to stop & say hi, & chatter a little, & so I get to know people this way.

I get to know that paperboy & teach him that the proper way to eat a Danish, *son, is to keep it wrapped in its plastic & to nibble away. That way you do not get sticky, nor do your newspapers when you deliver them.*

He gets roughed up later by a couple of toughs, who I believe are in cahoots with the aliens. They drag him into an alley to beat him up, 'cuz he was seen with me too much, pallin' around.

I go to that alley & fists start to fly, & they are cowards, these two toughs, & they admit that it wasn't their idea, & I said, *you're not going to do this again. You're going to tell those alien motherfuckers this boy is OK. Got me?* They bleed, shiver, nod.

Eventually, the aliens turn on me too, warn people to stay away from me as they pass by—ones who used to smile upon me—until one morning a black man shows up, tall, handsome, well-spoken. I've heard he's the town minister.

He says, *I understand your problem, & I appreciate you stayin' around*—& I say, *are you really the minister?*—& he says, *no, they got him in hidin', we didn't know what those alien bastards were gonna do to the town leaders when they first arrived, so they think I'm the minister, & they steer clear. They aren't sure what this God thing is about, & they aren't ready to find out yet.*

xxi.

*There were missing pages near the end of **Nazi Jailbait Bitch**, & the very last page was a mangled fragment. But I read it & memorized it & liked to speak it breathlessly into your turquoise eyes: "Wars in the future will be fought in the mind by drugs, dreams, televisions, internet, sex, persuasion, the manipulation of loyalties, needs, desires, to the point where to obey is to receive pleasure & endorsement, & to disobey not punishment but simply nothing. Physical war, impoverishment, suffering, disease, prejudice have all been eradicated at the cost of freedom & self-created identity. This epoch is not sustainable because the world is too badly damaged."*

Where are you, Turquoise Eyes? Where are you? Why am I in this hospital bed? Who am I, Turquoise Eyes?

xxii.

Evelyn finally replies. She likes us to sleep with the bedroom shade open, the moonlight, the stars, the obscure green-&-gold neon sign glare from the S&G Pizza place next door.

[“Is that your way of integrating this into the book?” asks Maya. “Yah. Why not?” “Leave nothing out. Your motto.” “I guess.” She giggles, trying to lighten me a bit. We picture her in pigtails, wide-eyed, smiling, for an elongated moment. Both of us enjoying. I nod. Resume.]

I was a very young woman at the time, & I was trying to find someone. We're far from each other. I try sending

her a note, use a pen that writes on her paper where she's sitting in that ratty old armchair she likes, & I tell her where in the city to go.

She gets up slowly, & gets ready to go slowly, & she floats along, following the course of the river, sometimes floating above the river. She holds the pen & pad in both hands, & I'm writing her instructions on what to do next. Her replies on my pad are short & illegible.

Sometimes I see from her point of view, as she's floating along to meet me, & we're approaching each other, & I sometimes see from my point of view & her point of view both. We arrive at the same moment through the same cave-like entrance of the bookstore, same aisle, same bookcase, holding between us a book entitled **Labyrinthine**, & it's falling apart. We look at the back cover, & read that **Labyrinthine** describes six stories of imprisonment, each a different kind. **Hm.**

I begin to sing to her, holding her small soft hands, to reassure her that her long lost soldier boy will come home. I look into her face with all the love I can offer, & reassurance, & I start to sing, **love is a battlefield, love is a battlefield, love is a battlefield.**

xxiii.

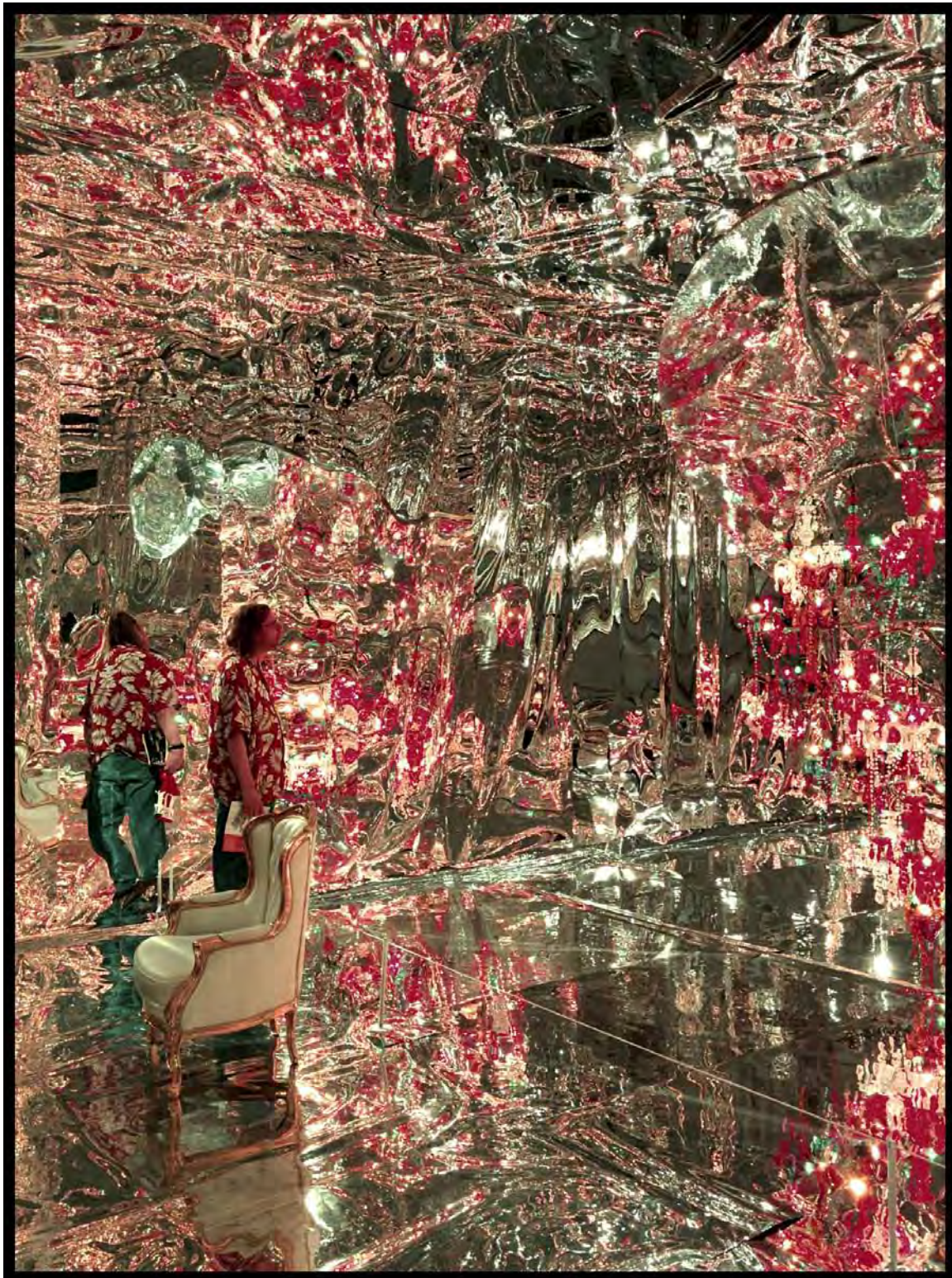
"He wasn't supposed to be a ball player. I knew that. He knew that. For years, I would see him playing ball on my black-&-white TV with its Antennar 2000, the kind that gets you in 3 channels, not just 2, & I would watch him scramble & throw, score & score, push his teammates to be the best possible, hand them round the championship trophies as they came, every winter for six straight years, held each one up for just a moment, then hand them 'round to each of his teammates for them to hold, them to feel that shiny, buzzing pride of *winning well*.

"But, Evelyn, I knew the true story. He'd told me. We had a night back in high school, years before, a reunion night, first since our candy-buying days, we were in the same store in town, the gas station convenience store I would work at in a few years, the only one the alien slavers let us run without interference, & we came face to face, him much taller than back when, me growing shorter as I continued to do, & he nodded, & I nodded, & we went back to where we would go in those candy-glorious days, down a long, dingy road, down a hill alongside it, through swamp & reeds, come to a dirty river that ran under a noisy bridge, & sat on the hill under that bridge, & he brought out a big-ass craggy pipe for us to smoke, & he said, *this baggy has the last of my Turkish black hashish, & you & I are going to smoke it all, & I am going to tell you why I am joining the football team tomorrow.*" And we smoked ourselves blind, silly, silent after a long while, after he'd told all, & then I knew what nobody else did, forever.

"He was the boy who knew two sisters. The younger one prettier, of course. They're friendly to him. They're performers & started talking to him between sets, & then they step back inside the roughly constructed performance building, & they are among many performers taking their turn, sort of a calliope of talent & freakishness.

"—& these two sisters are performing with their father on one of the stages, singing as he plays guitar, & their singing moves him, moves him deeply. For a moment, he forgets his wants & his desires, his frustrations, whatever brought him here, there's just this music. *This beautiful music.*

"Later on, there's the fires the performers like, they light them in the field near the performance building, so many dancers, so many drummers, & he finds himself in shadows with the younger one, feeling her up, saying *my god, you sing so beautifully with your sister, your father playing, & you have such*



beautiful tits too.

“—& she laughs, blushes, says *thank you*, but looks somewhere else, toward the many dancers, the many drummers, & he slowly lets her go & thinks *that’s it*—he goes back to where he’s staying—he’s not staying with the performers—no, he has a crappy tent, a few possessions, just another refugee.

“But he begins to gather things, he begins to go to places where he can find paper, he digs himself up a pencil. He finds different colored paper. He finds different colored pencils. *It’s amazing what you can find when a passion grabs your Art, inflicts your mind.*

“—& he begins assembling a colored book filled with colored penciled poems, for the younger sister.

[“Poems like what?” demands Maya suddenly. “Tell me.” I nod, & make one up quick:

It’s the way your breath quicks,
after all the work you did for me,
the pigtails, the skirt so short,
the shiny lips, the wide eyes,
yes, it’s the way your breath,
you forget you’re not the prettiest
because I don’t care, stroke,
longer stroke, it’s the way
your, *there, touch there*, &
you moan how I like, *how*
they all like, it’s the way,
that moment when your breath
quicks, & again, & once more,
& the night goes up wild, wild, *mmahhhh*

Maya nods. OK, for a sudden demand.]

“He puts it together, ties it with bark & twine, assembles it roughly but sincerely. It’s finally done & he brings it back, he stands in the shadows, watching their performance.

“He has his book in his hands, of all these words he’s written, he’s found in himself poetry, praise, longing, desire, put into words. If only some of it, & he’s holding this book & the singing so moves him again, so deeply & so dearly, that all he can do is leave his book on a seat in the very last row, & depart before they finish their last song.”

xxiv.

Down in the hospital basement something’s going on that I’m connected to. Something such ordinary folk as my roommates don’t know about. Something to do with the machinery, the blood & the marrow & the bones & the muscles & the tentacles that undergird this world & all its beauties & terrors.

That’s what’s down in the basement behind a thick door with massive lock that I only have the single key to, & I keep the key hidden on the third floor, the floor my roommates don’t know about. All the walls have been knocked out on this floor, so it’s one big room. You may also notice all the broken glass on the floor, every last instrument, every last drinking glass has been smashed, & I won’t tell you what or how or why right now.

xxv.

I'm still working in the office, the construction around me has finished, but the end of the world has come. I find myself in the file room with crayons, drawing a map to the Place of Art where we plan to go. Before leaving, I walk down the hall, to see my boss, & she's not in, & I realize I'm just going to have to go—& I leave the office, & I leave the building, & walk down the street.

Things are collapsing around me. There are colors missing, certain words in the language are gone, & things begin to rumble below me, above me, along my arms. *Rumble rumble*. I walk, then run, to her two-room house, fetch her, we bring one knapsack each, follow her map far out of the town, follow it loyally until we find the Place of Art, deep in the White Woods, & here we are in the Place of Art, & we walk in, there's a clearing, she tells me to close my eyes, & we begin.

—& it's a visual book I see with my eyes closed, & I'm reading my way along, a long apartment, narrow, living room one end, kitchen & bathroom on the other, & I'm reading in long straight swathes along it, a very crowded party is around me.

I read back & forth across the apartment but I am *in* the apartment now. I'm *in it*, not just reading it. I live there with my beloved Evelyn, this is my home, & it's the night before leaving, & I want to make something of this. I want to read one of my longest poems to everyone. I want to give out copies to everyone so they can read along too, but my beloved Evelyn says *we only have fifteen copies* & there are way more people there.

They are crowded from one end of the apartment to the other. Finally I have a microphone & I call out, *does anyone have a drum to play while I read my poem?* But nobody seems to know me or pay attention. I begin to think, I begin to wonder, I begin to get curious as to what's really happening here.

I open up my eyes for a moment, & see the quiet Woods around me, see Evelyn as a sort of buzzing glow nearby, & realize I'm in two places at once, & I can come back here anytime.

I close my eyes again, & I walk through the crowds, & I come to the back door, & there's a girl returning through the back door, & she's just pissed on the back porch.

She looks at me & says, *sorry*.

No, you're not, I answer.

—& I still want to read something long, poetical, with grace, whimsy, dark hope in these dark times, but I can't do it. I can't do it now, & I keep walking until I find that I am now at the other end of the apartment, but I see that people are leaving. Crowds of people leaving, going out the door, & they're going onto the landing, & they're getting on their bikes, & I just want them to *stop*, want them to *stop leaving*, want them to *stop staying*, *I want the end of the world to stop*. *Stop*, I say. *Stop*.

I hear her voice in my head, & she says, *just open your eyes & wake up, & I do*.

xxvi.

[Maya nudges again, twice, thrice, a strange smile, & now we're together in the low-lit Great Cavern under The Tangled Gate, where Maya has lived awhile with many Creatures. They are all dozing in

clusters twisting in & out of the many shadows & lit areas. She & I are among quite a few blankets, crimson red, electric blue, pale blue, some browns, a vanilla, smaller ones of yellow & also blue, & on our very shoulders a very handsome brown one, so soft, fringy at its edges, covered in many sober-faced watching bears. Safe, all this.

[I nudge her back, & we are also sitting on a crowded bus speeding through a heavy-clouded green landscape, she holds my hand lightly, one more smile, & a nod to my notebook & pen, & she turns to the window to watch. So we cluster in one place, so we hurl in another.]

*I wake up, & I am again in the strange metallic chair in a spaceship high high **high** above the earth. Trying to explain to them something that we had all come up with, all of us, men & women, the best of those remaining, the ones who hadn't panicked & given up.*

We'd decided to call it United Earth because it was a simple phrase that covered everything that needed to be covered. If we couldn't be united, that'd be about it, & I was trying to tell them about it. But I kept drifting back into dreaming, & each time the dream was different, there was no connection between them, there was no link.

*I wake with some strength & I try to tell them that we meant it this time. **We meant it. Please help. Please help, we need it,** & then I drift away, & find myself in my school again.*

It's a long, long building, & I walk to my classroom on the far end, having missed class again. Find out it's cancelled, & I don't know where to go because I have missed so many classes that I thought today, when I woke up so full of energy & life, I was going to catch up on all my classes.

*I was going to do what I had to do, talk to the teachers, even Mrs. Wordsley with her spooky box, talk to others & say, **this is the day I put my foot down & get it together,** & just as I'm getting it together the class is cancelled, & just as that happens, & I'm sort of wandering away vaguely, well, this man comes up to me & says, **hey, big man, you have a big hole in your pants, on the back,** & I sort of lean back, twist my neck around & sure enough, there's a big hole in my pants that I hadn't even noticed.*

*I thought, **I've got to go back to the hospital room where I keep my other two pairs of pants, & change, & get this pair of pants fixed,** & it's getting all so muddled, it's not perfect, what of those vows, & I drift & drift & drift toward those pants, & eventually I find myself awake in the metallic chair, talking to them again about United Earth, & it seems like they're saying, **we want to believe, we want to believe you this time, but we don't know if we can, & we don't know if there's time, & we don't know if this isn't for the best.***

*& I'm nodding & I'm thinking, I'm thinking that if I don't say something useful here I'm going to just drift away into another dream, & it's just going to be pointless because eventually I'm going to wake up back down there & I'll have accomplished nothing but caused myself a lot of pain & so I say to them, with what's left of me, **there is a future in which we all live together, & there is a big library that we go to, to remind us of our sordid & bloody past, & some of us will stay there for weeks, if not months, to study it, & to try to figure out what not to do wrong again, & we need your help to build that world & that library, & that library will be our promise to you, please help,** & then I drift back again into dream.*

xxvii.

We breathe slowly, deeply, in, out, in, out, & close our eyes again, & travel deeper into the Island's magical White Woods, until we find a clearing.

The clearing becomes a temple, shaped by the full moonlight—

We enter the temple, & arrive to the deep desert—

We pass along, far along, deeper into the desert, & come to a little shack with an exotic nearly toothless little man who gnatters high & low at us, & Evelyn laughs & gnatters high & low back at him, & I try too, & I'm not so good at it, but I try again & again—

—& he whispers in her ear, then mine, the words we need to send us on our way to the town deep & far from anywhere else—

—& we will travel & travel & eventually though we come again to the Woods, & there is a road—

The road brings us to the Village he whispered about, & the Village doesn't have many buildings in it, it's hardly a Village at all, & we have to pick the right one, but there are so few. Evelyn points, *there*. The one with no main entrance.

It's huge. It's like a mountain of a building, like it's cut from rock itself, shaped into doors & windows, floors & entrances, unknown number—

—& we enter through a door, a guess, a hope it's right, & come to a room, lined on three sides with books, floor to ceiling, on the floor, there's a fireplace crackling & snapping, & before us some small chairs, & an armchair turned away, & there is someone in that armchair that you cannot see that motions us in our minds to each sit in one of the little chairs, to be comfortable, to be ready to learn.

Are you ready to learn the secrets of this strange town called Wytner?

xxviii.

This someone then speaks: "I heard this story at a bus station. I was traveling somewhere far, I'm not sure where I was going, but I had my ticket. I sat next to this old man with a long beard, ragged kind of Army-looking clothes, & he told me that his blood was sick, & that he was dying, & he said that he was doing his best to comfort those around him who did not know how to handle these things as he had learned to.

"—& he said there was this particular moment when he found himself with a group of friends, some of them new, some of them old, & they were in a monastery museum, looking at the blood canvases on the wall, the red bulbs along the staircase, the fake eyeballs hanging in profusion by wires from the attic door.

"—& he finally led them out onto the roof, oh you couldn't go out on the roof of this monastery museum, but he found them an open window, & they all climbed out, all these new & old friends of his, & he showed them the sky from this peculiar perspective.

"It was a beautiful night. Sunset was strange, sort of golden & green, but beautiful, lovely, soft. If anybody had a hand in making this sunset, they were both artistic & skilled, enormously inspired, & he touched each of his friends on the shoulder, tall & short, long-known & new, & he said, *just look at that sunset!*

“He said: *Every time you see a sunset like that hereon, long after I’m gone, think of me, & then one day, when your time has come, you bring your group of friends up on a rooftop that doesn’t expect you to be up on top of it, & you say the same thing to them. You say, **look at this sunset!** Feel it, don’t worry about its details & words. Feel it, & tell them to think of you, & pass it on to others.*”

xxix.

Someone then cackles a bit & speaks the other version: “It doesn’t begin well, on this Island. I’m scared, I’m running. Some kind of dead or deaths behind me. I didn’t cause them, I saw them, heard them, & I’m running, running, & eventually I find that I get to as far on this Island as I can, & away from the scary thing I was running from. *Was it a Beast? What was it?*”

“Hours pass, then a few days, then longer, & nothing happens. I begin to assess my situation more calmly. Oh, I’m still scared, look in every direction often, but here I am. *On this Island.*”

“I study my camera that I brought. It seemed so important before all those tragic scary things that happened after I arrived. But the camera was meant to take pictures of the strange things that they say occur on this Island, the strange thing this Island is. This Island with the mythical timeless portal, that will not be found on any map, & I brought a camera, & I was gonna document it all.

“Just as an experiment, I take a few exploratory pictures. Just around my camp, just to document. But then when I go to pull the roll of film out to develop it, I’d brought all the chemicals & tools, *it just pours, it pours out* the back of the camera. *It’s like there’s nothing but liquid inside this camera, & I just don’t know what to think.*”

“I came here to find out the truth of the Island, & to document it, I meant no harm. But it seems that, since I’ve arrived, things have gone wrong—and then I remember this peculiar bit of advice I was given along the way, as I told various people of my plans to find this Island.

“One of them was a strange old man with a long beard, ragged kind of Army-looking clothes, I don’t even know why he was in my office. He kind of came in with others that I was discussing the matter with, then suddenly he was looking at me. They’d all left, & he was looking at me, & he was saying, *if you’re gonna survive there, you better learn how to hmmmmmm*

“& until now I hadn’t even thought of this advice, but now I sit down, right where I am, right in the clearing where I am, I just sit right down, knowing it’s all too much for me, too bigger than I am, except this one piece of advice, & I sit right down here, & I close my eyes, & I *hmmmmmm*

[Off that bus now, sitting at a table, side by side, in a train station in a city, but also still in the Great Cavern, Creatures awake, sniffing, I’m known in various harmless iterations, & Maya of course is one of them. She nods me finish, & a curious amused gleam like something else too.]

And for just a moment, you are back with me, close, closer than anyone or anything I have ever known, Turquoise Eyes, my Evelyn, Turquoise Eyes, & I hmmmmmm till my breath runs out, and you are gone again, oh my lost heart, you are gone again

[I look up, take a few breaths, look at Maya, relax us fully into the Great Cavern. Creatures in my lap, mostly dozing, though the White Bunny staring me hard with her glittering mesmerizing eyes. Affectionate, but always the weathered eye ’pon me.

[Maya holds out her hand. Three little pills. “One to take now. The next once we are dreaming. The third when needed to go deeper down.” Hm. Lots of words from her. “What about your three?” “Don’t worry. I’ll follow you in.” I choose the pink one, swallow, & let myself settle finally relaxed from long task among Maya, blankets, & Creatures].

xxx.

I wake. Time feels weird, like it’s a now I don’t feel closely like breath & skin. I am alone, no Maya, no Creatures, no blankets.

It’s dark, like that’s all there is, that’s how it is. I hear nothing, like it’s not what one does, or at least not what *I do*.

Trying another sense, I sniff, twice, again, again. Nothing. No flowers, no feces, no home cooking. Taste? I know it’s to do with my tongue, & often pleasure, but, again, nothing.

What was that pill, Maya? And where are you?

Last physical sense, touch. I still have a body, reach out my hands, realize I am lying on the floor, ground, something, so stand, dizzy, crouch quick, sit. Lie back down.

Er. OK. Roll on my stomach. No dizzy, OK. Looking up, into the darkness, I reach out my hands, stretch, stretch. My feet, too, reach that way too, push, push. Tire. My feet & hands gentle to the floor, ground.

Then, something. If I touch my fingers & toes lightly, very lightly to the ground, *I feel something*. A buzzing. No. Yes. A *hmmming*. Just touching lightly like nuzzling a sleeping lover’s cheek. Too much or too little, or long, it’s gone, like it too never was.

But for a few seconds, *hmmming*. A few on, a few off, but patterns don’t work either. I have to vary the length. Like pi, no repeating pattern.

OK. I need more senses involved now, so I touch & try sniffing. Um. Something. Try to imagine a lilac bush, sniff. Something? Maybe.

I try to listen, up from the *hmmming*, into the rest. Nothing. So I try to *hmmm* into the rest & I see it, smell it: *lilac*.

Finally I try them all, taste too. All of them, I *hmmm*, focus, let go, ask, *please, let me, please, let me—*

xxxi.

Marie the red-haired schoolteacher wakes up, looks around, middle of the Woods again.

It’s a cool morning, & her in a light gown, & bare feet. Quiet in these Woods.

She notices her pipe nearby, & picks it up casually. Daniel had taught her the pipe, but mostly how to hold it, how to breathe and blow. She’d asked him to teach her songs to play.

His answer: “The music comes first. The songs come later.” Said things like that which made *so much*

sense coming from his mouth, his expression.

And she sort of knew what he meant. Just playing a pipe, holding it, not worrying the details of right or wrong.

She eventually learned songs, even made him teach her a few, but often she didn't.

She would listen to the sound of the Woods, & play along, finding her place in its music, never the same, these Woods *breathed music*.

Along came two Creatures, which never surprised her. A black bear, & a black & white panda bear. As she played, these bears no higher than her calf danced nearby, both jolly & intricate in their moves—

Eventually the music leads them on their way, & Marie plays along for awhile, happy wondering music, which quite naturally brings along her White Bunny friend & too that scampy little pandy bear, cackling delightedly—

They seem to be urging her up & away, & so she follows along quickly, very quickly, she wonders how fast yet this is how it is with Creatures, one moves as quickly as they will—

Marie's brother Joe is biking along the shore with a small grey hedgehog on his shoulder, squeaking occasionally, it is peaceful to be riding this morning, Joe's looking for Marie still but he's less worried than interested in what adventure she's found.

Then, in the distance, a weird figure. A man, scrawny, seems to be dressed in a suit assembled from many pieces by someone who's never seen a proper one. Curious, Joe pedals harder to catch up to him—this . . . native to this strange Island? But it seems like he's gone from the wide shore in an impossible moment—

& Joe finds his bike rising up into the air impossibly high! The hedgehog squeaks & clings to his shoulder—

Gradually, panic lessing a little, Joe learns how to ride in air. Pedal pedal to keep altitude, stop pedaling to steer course, then pedal some more—

So like this Joe pedals far along till gravity draws him slowly but inevitably back to a road he recognizes as the one he rides to Marie's school—

But she's not at her school so he slows still a distance away—& notices a small blue bear sitting against a tree, looking at him calmly with small black eyes.

Joe gets off his bike, & his hedgehog friend hops off to go & exchange a friendly sniff with the bear. Joe sits nearby.

"I'm looking for my sister Marie. She teaches at that school over there."

The little blue bear puts his paw to his chin, considering.

"I have a friend who gives good advice," he says. Or Joe hears, since he's not sure if Creatures speak aloud or directly in one's mind.



Bloo joins Joe & the hedgehog & they ride through the small town & beyond, ride miles & miles along, never gaining altitude, Joe guesses that was the Islander's trick, riding till they find Bloo's advice-giving friend.

We find Bauer & Schatzi, the panda bear & brown bear respectively, sitting in a clearing with an old friend of theirs, Xavier, or X, a white-furred bear with a handsome black hat & scotch-style scarf.

X has retired from show business, from the Carnival he led for so many years.

[“Retired?” asks Maya, incredulously, her purple eyes flickering ’pon me. “Maybe a vacation?” I suggest timidly. My source material is somewhat dubious.]

X lets his friends know he is seeking a guru who might help him understand the sufferings of the world.

It was something Creatures never understood, in all the years their Carnival hosted the many people folks they'd been set to entertain: why suffer so much?

Their Carnival helped, gave them entertainment & distraction, but did not resolve their suffering. Did not settle the conflicts among people folk. They still hurt each other. Misunderstood the world & hurt each other.

They come to the mountain X seeks, & climb up it awhile in quiet. Or down it really, look, see how they are climbing down a mountain towards its peak.

And arrive to a small hut with no windows or doors. Is there someone inside? They each sit down against the wall of the hut, side by side.

Rising from the deep depths of the mountain's height, a great alien spaceship.

Rolling down the mountain from below, a red & yellow Truckee.

These, no doubt, come to help.

Daniel & Tumbleweed, when we catch up with them, are walking an empty country road, talking about maps within maps & alternative history, as they usually do.

“Is it easier for only one reality to exist, one universe, or many, every possibility?”

“Easy?”

“Toward a conclusion, a finish of the story?”

“Or the countless ones?”

“Yes.”

“If there is a conclusion.”

“If.”

They come along almost of a sudden to a Creature in the form of a small white-furred goose, fetching & intelligent eyes.

“Do you have a problem?” she asks politely.

“Problem?” Daniel replies, kneeling down to speak more levelly to her.

“To solve?”

She is a problem solver, with need of a problem to solve. Daniel invites her to come along & perhaps problems will present themselves.

Kaylee is of the opinion that problems sought will be found, which is fine by her.

Night comes & they find a wide open field to stargaze under.

Up there, emerging from the seeming countless numbers of stars, something, something, an absence, an emptiness, a kind of deep hole in space, & Kaylee makes sure they are clustered & touching as she leads them up, up, up to it, into its absence, into its emptiness, & through & now something of them given, shared, soft at first, not yet audible in such an unplace, & yet now something, a smallest *humming* of their voices, offered together, seeking the touch of ground, the smell of seed & soil, the feel of skin against air, now air to be felt, & all yet still emerging from the *humming*, & this feeling, this absence, this hole through space, knitting it closed with touch, with empathy, with its unknown sufferings contained but bloodless, bloodless to attack anew. They draw closed & closed, & back & back, until they are back together, in their field, touching, watching, listening.

xxxii.

Usually by daylight the movies in the Nada Theater are over, & the seats are empty. Whoever is left picks up all the refuse in the place, as a thankee to management. Self & Ralph retreat to the office behind the projectionist's booth. Cordelia does not join them. Sometimes Charlie Pigeonfoot does.

Truth is, it's hard to clearly say what happens. Maybe everyone just melts away till the return of midnight. Maybe they have become dream fragments of this theater, & so when it retreats into quietude by day, they retreat too. All melts for awhile.

But then *More Fun* does not end one time. It continues on, still no audience, almost like, um, it was trying to lure one by day when no nocturnal patron would come.

When they die, people melt away, become invisible, bit by bit, then these invisible parts fade out entirely. Some call them *melties*.

It's a hard thing to watch in a loved one. The lethargy that sleep does not salve, then the invisibility, like he or she is being randomly gouged out of existence.

You can feel her forearm at first even tho you can no longer see it. Coloring it back, with paint or makeup, does not work. Nothing sticks. She wears long sleeves but eventually they slump empty.

The Postman is now traveling with the Recruiter. The Recruiter is telling this story.

“I was alone when it started happening. I had been for a long time. When I met her, she was sitting under a tree, sorting through an old green jewelry box. She started talking as I approached.”

“It's empty there.”

“Empty?”

She looks up with grey-green eyes that swung briefly through my life & times & found them unexciting. “So if you want a tree, I'll be more agreeable than most. but you won't find anything to stick your stick

in.” Continued sorting her jewelry box.

I pulled out the several guns & knives I had on me, & placed them on the ground between us. I leaned to a crouch.

She keeps sorting. Keeps talking.

“I’d be too tired to fight you anyway.”

“I’m not going to do anything.”

She looks at me again. I jerk back at her glance.

“Would you help me instead?”

I nod, more eagerly than I thought to.

“I used to wear a lot of jewelry. A lot. Some of it cheap, but mostly antique, strange. I thought of it like an extension of myself. Like I was a cake to be decorated.”

I nod.

“I feel my hands going, mostly my left one. It’s not invisible yet. But its like an anti-feeling at first. Not warmth or numbness. Just nothing. The space released where something was, waiting for something else to be now.”

I nod, listen.

She smiles at me suddenly. “I’m left-handed. I was always proud of this. So I decorated my left hand most of all. Rings on all the fingers. Bracelets. Nail decorations. Now I need to accept this coming loss & decorate my right one. Would you help me pick out some things?”

“Did you?” asks The Postman.

The Recruiter nods. “I did. A silver ring with a flat emerald stone. A bracelet designed like the ouroboros. The snake eating its own tail.”

Postman nods.

“I caught us something fresh for dinner that night. She hadn’t eaten well in awhile. You lose your appetite as you disappear. Like your body accepts before you do.”

Postman nods.

“We ate. We talked a little. She told me stories of what she called her ‘pretty days,’ long ago.”

“I arranged myself like a king’s banquet before going out. How much tit should I show tonight? Glossy lipstick? None? I was orchestrating reaction. What they would look at.”

The Recruiter nods, sucks a bone, tosses it into their fire.

“Were you ever in love back then? When it mattered?”

“Once or twice. Once.”

“Did you ever watch her dress for you? Really stop yourself & watch?”

“Not like you’re saying.”

She laughs. “No. You were young & counting the number of baubles on her you would have to maneuver through later.”

“If lucky.”

She nearly laughs.

Some nights the stars are no longer visible, not clouds but poison shrouding them. But tonight they are clear bell high, every one of them.

She has an old sleeping bag, crawls into it deep in the night. Seems asleep a long while, then says, "Safe travels."

"I was never sure if she thought I would be gone by morning or something else."

"What else?"

"I sat there a long time. The stars above. We were camped by a road going back to nature, under an old old willow tree, on the edge of an overgrown tobacco field. It was quiet. Hours passed. I waited. I didn't wait."

"Finally, I picked up one of my guns where I'd let it be, walked over to her curled up in her sleeping bag, shot her in the head three times. The shots sort of ricocheted through the night & back, like a boomerang."

Silence. "It's what you do now."

Nods.

The Recruiter travels far & wide, finding the afflicted & killing them. Three shots to the head, while they sleep, if possible. Always while they are not suspecting, & quickly. No fear, no pain, no surprise in it. If the moment does not come, he lets them go, & moves on.

The Recruiter wants to winnow out the weak so that population thins down eventually to who can "finish the race," whatever this means.

He's good at finding melties in holes & hideaways. He is never cruel. Always sets his weapons down before them.

He never offers The Postman to be his partner, but there's a feeling between them that they might travel together, & helping The Recruiter with his work would be part of this.

The Postman thinks of the girl he lost, as he often does, & the man who took her. Wonders if either of them has become a melty. Probably not. Who knows where they are. Would he, if a gun in hand & a chance?

The Recruiter will on occasion tell very dirty jokes. Suddenly laugh like the world imploding. These jokes were part of his old life & they occur to him at random moments. Like a glitch in his brain's working, like he forgets where & when, & is again recruiting as he once did.



To be continued in Cenacle | 98 | December 2016

* * * * *

Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Eleven

*"I must create a system,
or be enslaved by another man's"*
—William Blake, "Jerusalem."

xlii.

"How can we help?" Kinley asks me. Christina smiling at me intently too. Maya nearby, I think. Great Cavern.

"Help?"

They nod. "You're near 3000 pages & 10½ years into this book & you're as excited & uncertain as ever."

I nod. "Help?"

"Do you want us back in a story, or do you to travel with us?" asks Christina, not funning, not flirting. Hmm. OK. I stand. Walk. Think.

Then talk, stutter along.

"It's five years since I pulled all this together, & I've been going steady at it since. But lately—"

"A feeling of stalling, more than uncertainty?" asks Kinley suddenly.

I nod. "To write new I have to account for so much. That's good & it's difficult both."

"What can we do?"

"I guess. I don't want to do it alone. Even though every last word here generates from my mind, written down by my pen in my hand."

They nod. Wait.

Maya appears, Creatures around her, on her shoulders, in her grasp. Carefully sits with the others on the stone from earlier.

"OK." I look at her. "You were looking for Dylan."

"I still want to find him."

"That can happen. As part of this."

This pleases them all somehow, like it takes a little bit of pleasure off that I wasn't aware was there.



"Where is he, Raymond?"

"Let me check"

I look through many pages & lines till I find him with his strange friend at the bookstore.

"He's at Arcadia Bookstore."

"Do we go there?"

I think. I'm not sure. "Let me go first."

The bookstore is vaster than once. Become a great thing. Deep, many-floored. I walk it like I do many times in my dreams.

He is waiting in a little alcove deep in the stacks. Two chairs. A red lamp on a table. We sit.

"It's about Maya."

"Yes."

"She wants to find you. Wants me to cause this to happen."

"OK."

"Do you want it?"

He's shaggier, now lightly bearded.

"Do you have a story?"

"Not yet. I think it will come."

"Should I leave my friend?"

"I don't think you have to."

"How?"

"He's a man of dreams. Let his body keep healing. There's another way to stay with him & be with Maya too."

Looks at me sharply. Thinks.

Likes this. Nods.

xliii.

On the set of *Trip Town*, a TV show yet it's not, I meet a woman who talks to me about *Imaginal Space*—

"In this space, I am a fixtional character talking to you as an equal, a collaborator"

I nod. "OK. Imaginal space."

She smiles. Not all that young, so no lure that way.

We walk around the quasi-set of *Trip Town*.

Many rooms. Guards restricting some of them.

"What restrict a TV show set?"

She smiles. "It's not really a TV show, you know."

"Imaginal space?"

"Yes. If you want to see."

She brings me to the drawing room full of pretty people. Slender blonde girls in short skirts. Close-cropped men in tuxedos. Drinking Scotch, steadily.

"They're waiting."

"Waiting?"

"For the book. Who will be in & how much of a part."

"*Trip Town?*"

She looks at me, finally. "They're not real yet, Raymond. These are cyphers."

"What does that mean?"

"It means you do more with all this or you don't."

"Do more?"

"It's a long book. It's a great world. *It exists validly.*"

"But—"

"Does it matter to you?"

"Matter?"

"Yes."

I wait.

"Go. Leave here. Leave all your slinky half-mystical, half-jailbait fantasies. Leave the Island & the Gate & the Fountain & all the rest.

"*Does this book matter to you?*"

Fair enough. New section.

xliv.

I am sitting with these near-3000 pages now. At a long table made of driftwood.

There are a few Creatures on the table, listening to a man drone on about UFOs on the white-faced pink cat radio—

"—governments do lie, sometimes it's necessary, but is anyone in our government taking seriously this matter? There are 10,000 planets in our local neighborhood of the galaxy. Are we smarter than them all?"

Does this book matter to me?

It does. Sure as shit matters a lot.

What & why? It's love, it's music, it's dreams, it's eros, it's nature, it's magick.

I'd rather write this book than pretty much anything else. At its best, at its least, at my most unsure.

"There are negative beings coming to us. They are separate from those who travel in UFOs. Are these beings coming inter-dimensionally to take humans elsewhere? Astral beings? Inter-dimensional beings? What are the rashes investigators are finding at UFO sites?" The radio drones on & one.

There are beautiful green plants nearby too. Pretty as Creatures. I often say kind words to them because I want to.

Art is how I think & live. How I move through the mortal world. How I *happily* move through. I see

no better way.

I have no answers to give anyone yet I feel moved to a sense of truth in Art.

I return to the woman on the *Trip Town* set.

I look at you. "It was a question worth asking, but it matters to me by how much I devote to it. The hours & pages. This book is my laboratory. It's how I best sing & play."

She nods.

"Imaginal Space is something for me to work with. Nothing more or less real than anything else."

She nods.

"Bugs Bunny. Nicolai Tesla. *Fraggle Rock*."

She nods again.

"The U.S. Constitution. Aboriginal Dreamtime."

She nods. Looking more like Maya.

"Ahh."

She smiles, pleased, flirting, mocking. Can't help herself with me.

"Blink, Maya."

"Why?"

"Just blink . . . your . . . pretty . . . purple eyes . . . for me."

She does. Again.

Now stands facing Dylan. Her wish.

xlv.

I'll tell you more about that convenience store that sits smack above the buried spaceship.

It's called Chief Seattle Friendly Market, though nobody working there knows why. It's not near Seattle or even Washington State. Probably.

When you walk through the door, to your right is a wall of cash registers, of various ages & levels of functionality. There's a really old wooden one, few of us use it, the keys are a strange symbology, there's two cranks, what you'll find inside won't seem to be paper currency anyway. Only a couple of us were trained on it, & didn't pass this training on. They don't care as much as we do.

To your left are the many aisles & shelves of food & other goods. There's a cold case & a freezer & an ice cream case.

Beyond these, keep going, there are a lot of tables, it's pretty much what our town has for a local cafeteria. Some prefer the Red Dog Diner, others come here & stay around for hours. Or days. Chief Seattle's is open 24/7, you see, & nobody *had* to leave.

And I've had my better & worse times here, sure. Nobody trained me first time I walked in the door, still in high school, needing a job. No girlfriend, no real friends at all. I needed *somewhere to be*, some place that needed me. People saying my name & smiling sometimes.

So I had to figure it out, since nobody told me I couldn't work there. I was *not-not* hired.

Nobody was friendly at first. I struggled to figure out the lottery machine. I struggled to figure out the cash registers.

The delivery men took a liking to me though. One in particular took the time to show me how to read a packing list, make he delivered what this list claimed.

Tall guy, lanky but muscled both, eyeglassed. Low gravelly voice. Easy smile for all.

"Would some try to rip me off?"

"No. Well, not most. Not often. But you have to know how to do this. Builds respect among your peers."

I nod.

He looks me closer. "Are you OK?"

I nod.

He smiles, doesn't push. But it's funny that thereafter my co-workers notice me.

There's a girl. She's a singer, & she thinks I'm one too. I don't think I am, & don't know how she believes it of me. She's pretty in an oddball sort of way. Hair really long & colored three colors. Wears layers & layers of shirts, but very short skirts but always black stockings & usually very old boots above her knees. In bed at night I try to imagine sorting through all that & to find a naked girl underneath. Usually ended up with one of my *Playboys* to finish up.

We really became friends the night she organizes an open mic talent show at the market. Not many come but she's better than them all anyway. And that's when I figured out she prefers girls. Her songs & her poems are beautiful & not about boys in the least.

We'd built a stage of sorts. Found lumber out back, she'd brought in some old curtains too. Decorated the stage with lines from one of her poems. It's beautiful. Not for any one girl but some kind of ideal.

That night, I found I can sing. Because I find myself singing the words she drew & painted on the stage, on its curtains, on the floor. The melody comes from deep in me, I don't know where.

She sings it later too. Now just me listening. I think everyone chased away.

I realize I love her but I need to figure out the kind that doesn't involve undoing all those layers of hers. I realize she is something very much more important to me.

Now we're sitting at a table, across from each other, holding hands, still singing her song-poem back & forth to each other.

I want to seal this night we finally found each other, & she told me who she really is, I want to amber this.

She does too. Stands, hands still holding mine. Leads me to the back room, the walk-in refrigerator, cases & cases of milk & juice, frozen overstock.

Pushes aside a curtain in the back I'd never noticed. I look in. An unlit steep staircase.

“Will you come?” she says, smiling me like I’d *never been*.

I nod. Excite a little, think of *Playboy*, calm again. She leads, still holding my hand as we descend. Down, down, so deep into the darkness. Then, a little light, & a little more.

[Wow, it’s 80 days, 11½ weeks, from those lines to these, 2½ months! *No*. Really? Yes. This notebook was around. I typed pages from it for *The Cenacle*, returned them after. Took till well into last month to finish that issue. By then I was well into the long stretch it took to get my beautiful silver 2006 MacBoo Pro fixed. Eurydice. She’s the same age as this book, within a month or so.

[Now she’s good again. Now this page is filling up with lines. My even older iPod Polly, I’s say 14 years old, is playing Yes live from 1976! All these numbers, all this time.

[This joint is called Jitters Cafe, set along a main street, in a plaza with a restaurant & a haircut place & some others. Closes most nights 7, weekends 5, so I’ve never built up more than an occasional interest.

[It’s mid-workweek, I’ve got the edges of a cold, yet it’s time to resume these pages. Mid-winter, snow on the ground, yet it’s near 60°F out!

[President Clusterfuck is what & yet worse than, what was expected last I was on these pages. He’s completely bad news & we’re all stuck with him & his rotten cabal with much power for at least 2 years.

[It’s good to be back on these pages, some today, even more soon.

[So the great question is: pick up from these lines? Or somewhere else?

[Well it’s funny I’ve got a passel of wooly ideas now, & those 80 days will benefit the pages to come.

[So here goes.]

I follow here down toward the light I guess is a door but am surprised to find her stopped in the doorway.

“Something wrong?”

“This door is *always locked*.”

“So someone forgot?”

She looks at me almost accusingly, which is weird because I didn’t know all this was here.

I think quicker than I usually do. This all & what’s through the door is very important to her. Protecting it with a lock is important too. She’s shaken, spooked. OK, got it.

“Should I come back another time?”

Her expression folds on itself. “No. *No*! I’m sorry. I have to find out what happened. I’d feel better if you were with me.”

I nod. Lucky guess.

We pass through the doorway but she stays near it to study it. She tries the handles, pulls out what looks like an ancient key to test the lock. Finally, pulls it closed & locks it behind us. Tests. Lock is solid.

Tries to smile, for my benefit, fails, takes my hand tightly in hers & we are now walking down a corridor that glows from some unseen source. There are doors on either side every so often, not in any orderly pattern. Bare of any markings. Walls are bare too, seeming graying white or just even a glowing white to match the light.

"Is this some kind of basement below the store?" I ask timidly.

"No," she says sharply. Then catches herself. Remembers I know nothing, & that she brought me because she *likes me*.

"It's part of an ancient spaceship that crashed here thousands or more years ago."

I stop. "What?"

She looks at me. "I know you can handle this."

"You're not joking?"

"No."

"I don't get it." I felt panicky, like I get in those dreams that don't seem like dreams but like I've come somewhere on the *other side of dreams*.

We've stopped but now she pulls my hand & we're going again.

I try to remember how we've got here, the rest of the night, the open mic, singing, & how spooked she was seeing the door open, but that all seems like my waking life, & this now seems like the other side of my dreams.

I don't slow her again, on talk. We keep hurrying along.

[Not to let go of bracketed statements yet. Now in a bigger joint, bagels, juice, heart of Milkrose, New England, USA. Refill fountain soda, happiness.

[Rush 1980 now, done with Yes 1976. My radio station is featuring nearly all rock concerts this weekend. All good stuff.

[I have some idea of what's coming here. Raw dream material processed. The Myth of the Six Islands.

[So why the brackets & blather? Because I'm not *fully here* yet. When this is best, me & book are one. We eclipse our separateness to become something else together.

[Maybe this is just warming up, to a degree. Letting the eclipse happen as it wills, as it will.]

xlvi.

Dylan joins Maya & Christina & Kinley on the long flat stone in the Cavern under the Tangled Gate. Some of the Creatures get onto his lap too, because he sniffs right, because they are friendly if so to new laps.

I'm still in this scene though wanting to edge out.

"Hey. *Hey!* Mr. Author Man," yelps Christina at my sneaky sneakings away. I pause.

"You wanted our help? You don't want to do this alone?" she reminds like a scolding granny, save for the sexy-as-fuck smile & body. Smirks as I scribble.

Dylan speaks up. "You can go. But maybe not yet?"

I nod. Look at Maya. Expect she's forgotten me, but she hasn't. She's got Dylan's hand for sure, but I don't think she wants me to leave yet either.

"Neither do I," speaks up Kinley with his own handsome smile.

I nod again.

"Read what you've been writing today," says Christina, & it appears they all want this.

I look down at my notebook. All 2974 pages of *Labyrinthine* barely held together in this

bursting old binder.

I nod. I read. My bracketed lines, the ones about the two in the convenience story & below it, & the ones about us sitting together in this Cavern.

"You're standing though," Christina smirks.

I nod.

"Myth of the Six Islands?" asks Dylan.

"It's the story of this world's origins.

They all look on with interest.

I take a breath. "I came to it recently. After writing about a lot of other things." Reach in my pocket & pull out some folded yellow pages. Read from there hereon, but mostly know it all.

"Some, or maybe none of us, come from here. At least originally. Our ancestors are from a faraway long-gone planet called Emandia."

"Don't you know?" asks Kinley with a strange smile.

I stop. Think. "I think natives came later. Evolved like the science books say. Took over through their swelling numbers & blood-lust for violence, control." Kinley nods.

"Long before that, this world didn't have people."

"None?" asks Dylan.

I shake my head. "There were six Islands, clustered together, like those Creatures on your laps. Surrounded by the Wide, Wide Sea."

I pause, scribble all this dialogue down to keep up. Double-check my notes.

Read from them straight for a bit. "Far away, on Emandia, lived a nearly immortal race. It prospered for thousands of years, becoming a high civilization, far beyond what we can easily imagine.

"But their planet's biosphere began to degrade, very slowly, but inevitably toward collapse.

"Fortunately, there were those on Emandia who had understood what was happening, & contrived an idea to find other habitable worlds, & plant beacons on them, when the time of need came. These beacons would provide a safe landing place."

I pause. They are listening. The Creatures are dozing OK, tell on.

"Here's where the story gets stranger. There was no technology in existence to build & transport these beacons to habitable planets. In their native forms, Emandians are very slight, wispy things. Their world of wide seas & forested Islands have never been cleared for the building of cities like ours.

"They didn't divide their lives like we do into waking & dreams. So when they decided they needed help building their beacons, it was by way of the dreams of a young man, studying architecture at University. They first met him in his potent dreams.

The Architect had been an unremarked young man until this contact in his dreams. But this changed him. The Emandians taught him how better to control, direct, & travel in his dreams; he, in turn, studied with a new & furied focus to become a master of architecture.

"How?" asks Christina suddenly.

I pause, think. "There is a place beyond beyond waking, & ordinary dreaming, a Deeper Dreaming. Where all flows, if one allows. Or learns."

Kinley was now studying me pretty closely. "How did the Emandians arrive here first if they contacted an Architect later in our history?" Nodding, confused.

I look down. "I'm not sure. I wonder if time works different, or doubly, or alternatively. Was there a whole race come & gone long before the Emandians came, & the Architect was one of them? What happened to him & the rest of them?"

"Or was he from another planet entirely?" asks Dylan quietly. I nod. This feels more plausible. Scribble. I then continue with what I do think I know. Notes less needed.

"This Architect had been an unremarkable young man until this contact in his dreams. But this changed him. The Emandians taught him how better to control, direct, & travel in his previously



wild dreaming frenzies.

"He, in turn, took up his study of architecture with a new & furious focus, seeking to become a Master of Architecture as well as dreaming.

"He contrived the beacons, what he actually called the Tangled Gates, for their strange qualities, over the years in a nearly endless series of dreams. The Emandians gifted him the same near-immortality they have."

Scribble all this down in *LX* then resume. "I don't know yet how they turned Gates built in dreams into physical objects. I tend to think come from the Deeper Dreaming. The Gates are physical structures, but also are of dream material. *Both*.

"Emandia collapsed over millennia. Its sun collapsed. At first a slow process, but it sped up. There were these Gates on farflung habitable worlds, but how to reach them? The Emandians were still bodied, & had never contrived physical space travel.

"Once again, they worked with the Architect & created something called a Red Bag. This was a dream-portal to the Gates from Emandia.

"But the catch was that whoever took the Red Bag portal to the Tangled Gate could not live beyond its perimeter. They would become, fully, beings of the Deeper Dreaming, sacrificing the physical part of themselves.

"Another method was created. Space capsules were created & a kind of freeze-dried Emandian DNA was contrived for travel. If the capsule hit the salty sea-water of a planet, it would activate this DNA, & an Emandian, two per capsule, would emerge, rise to the surface, perhaps survive.

"I thought they didn't have space travel?" said Kinley, still studying me closely.

I shake my head. And continue. "The assumption was that some of these worlds would fail to provide new homes, & the Emandians would use the Red Bag to transport to another. Perhaps the ones in the capsule would have better luck. It was all a gamble.

Take a breath. Cough. They look at me concerned. I shake it off. "Another aspect of all this were the Creatures."

Countless noses raise, sniff, including Maya's. Maybe even Christina's.

"They were native to the planets the Gates were sent to."

"All of them?" asks Dylan, on whose lap a quartet of shiny-eyed follws sit. Sharp-eyed brown-&-white fox. Pinkish owl. Purple-spotted snow leopard kitty. Tie-dyed unicorn.

I shrug. Not an answer. My notes don't help either though I read straight from them.

"Originally animals of an ordinary kind, the Gate's arrival on their Islands developed in them consciousness & sentience. And awareness of what the Emandians & the Gate were. Creatures are very important to this story.

Christina smirks & snorts.

"What?"

"To your book or to our world?"

"They're the same?"

"You write several."

I nod.

"And notes too."

"Many," I say flatly.

She nods. "OK, OK. Go on. Read the rest. When you've scribbled my wisdoms." They all laugh. Hm.

I half read, half talk. These notes seem less useful as I go along here.

"The Emandians failed on many worlds to find their new home, & would move on. The consequence of this on these planets was catastrophic. The closing of a Gate would annihilate a world's eco-system."

"Are you sure?" Kinley asks.

I study his handsome face. "I'm not sure of a lot. And is this true, or is it what's told? The myth's myth? I don't know how."

"Yet?" asks Dylan.

"Maybe at all."

Wanting to be done, I scribble this dialogue & then bend my face closely into my yellow pages.

"One more important note about the Gate coming to a world. These worlds were chosen for how they resembled the forested Islands & wide seas of Emandia. What would happen to the particular Island where the Gate landed was that it would become, like the Creatures, conscious & aware. A being, a Beast, would emerge from it, a moving personification of the Island & all upon it. The Emandians would have some control of this Beast, but not all.

Pause, not looking up, a breath, a cough. "Stories of the Tangle Gate, Emandians, Beast, & so on would often circulate among the natives of the planet. Since Emandians would have caused their worlds to develop so-called higher forms of life such as men & women. Emandians have no certain gender & fixed gender, but mythologies would grow up gods & goddesses from the skies. Sometimes individuals would try to find the Island, the Gate. Sometimes they would."

Last sentence: "There is always more to discover about these strange stories." Lane ending.

For a bit, the only sound is of me getting all this down in *Labyrinthine*. Emended notes, questions, commentary, dialogue. They wait. Without having to look to confirm, I know the Creatures are dozing.

xlvi.

It always begins long ago in the helplessly immutable gone days of my life.

Young faces. Friends, a girl I loved & it's like a part of my mind never had let go, continues to talk to them, cajole, explain what was this then/now? How little I knew/know! Who were you/I?

But this isn't enough, these grimy old shards of faces & feelings.

I suffered such loneliness.

You suffered loneliness too.

It's why I write to dream worlds

"You come to the Fall a lot?"

"Yah. Years. Not as much now."

"Why not?"

"Places I knew gone. One in particular. Broke my fucking heart."

"Yah. Want a cigarette?"

"No. Thanks."

Another girl I loved & lost a painful piece at a time. Never quite ended. She moved to California. Kept remembering me more & more. She visits my room. We sleep against opposite walls, smiling at each other.

"You there, bud?"

"Yah, sorry."

"Good acid, huh?"

"How can you tell?"

Laughs. "Go back in. I'll watch out for you."

"Thank you."

"No worries."

I am descending a complicated series of ladders & stairs among many people continuously climbing down. At one point a black kid smiles & says, "You got a draft!" & points at my open zipper. I discretely zip up.

Someone is addressing & sending my book off to a publisher, my book with a cover of green & gold, a great tree pulses on, & then a labyrinth, into a white envelope, puts an "attention of" on the envelope, "it will get there, don't worry," & I hesitate *& yet so want to be in the company of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner.*

I wake, wildly, at my cash register, *shit*, bookstore, that blonde girl sitting behind the counter near me, smiling, *how many hours have I worked today?*

"That's a nice bookstore. I used to go there all the time to read. I can't go there now"

"Why?"

"Oh, eh, they said I tried to take copy of Rilke. *Letters to a Young Poet*. It was so tiny. They didn't understand I just wanted to read it under the stars in this park. Borrow it. 'Not a fucking library.'"

Fall back. The coffeeshouse is a deep maze extending back miles, it seems, to caves where people live, to the shore of the Wide Wide Sea.

I walk into the Sea but do not sink, begin to ascend an invisible staircase to the sky, it's like the *Death Book*, ascending, into the gone world. Now more staircases, many people, moving in every direction, as I move in deeper it's more like a book I am in, reading my way through an elaborate labyrinth, trying to read/climb my way up/down/out—

The black kid looks at me & smiles & nods. Says, casually,

*"What if Dream-Mind
is Supra-Consciousness?"*

"Whoa! That's heavy. You OK in there?"

"Yah. Thanks."

"No worries. What do you see?"

In my bedroom, there is a little door in the wall. It's a long tunnel filled with plants, & my mother & I crawl in there to look at them al, need to keep it secret, door shut dark, though we are in there—

I fall asleep against her shoulder, her arm around me, as never between us, & there is a genocidal civil war that comes to a rebel village & all are slaughtered save a group of small children hid in the rubble of a school, & later smuggled out of the country, brought to a military housing compound, & grow up together, one is different, older, had been tasked to hid the rest & escape—

There is a soldier she goes in the shadows with, a thin short blouse & bare thought of a skirt, her hair in pigtails, her lips glossed in bubblegum pin & she kneels before him & sucks his cock in as deep as she can & then stands & leans against the wall, her white panties pulled off by his teeth, his cock so deep in her tight bare cunt & she moans for him, loves him because once he has cum in her cunt, her ass, her mouth, he dresses her in fresh clothes & gets her out of the compound back to her village to

take whatever pictures & trinkets she can find before they come & burn it completely out of existence.

Brings her back to camp with her heavy sack, carries it for her, there's a tree where they always stop, it's where he feeds her dried meat & cheese, tucks more into her sack—

"I couldn't save her" he tells Bowie so many years later "or any of them" some nights tells this swilly sloppy liquored, some stone cold dry, "couldn't even be tender to her" swill "had to feel like I was taking much & giving back little"

But under this tree, the last time, he just holds her, he wipes off her smeared bubblegum lipstick, & kisses her, one, twice. Three times. Then he's gone.

"What happened to them?"

"I don't know. I didn't ask back then. Took much. Gave little."

"Save her." Nods.

"What are you, a sci-fi writer? *X-Men* & *X-Files* & *Star Track* & all those?"

"Yes. No."

"Gotya."

It was always hard traveling with my notebooks & a sack of Creatures. Fear of loss on all sides. Panicked many times. Grew not to care what drivers & passengers thought.

Oh, I'd sit with them in my lap when I could. Them talking in my mind when they chose to, not liking the English so much, spooked by it

"They really talked back?"

"Sure. Or just sniffed."

"Yah?"

"One was a dalmatian, black spotted, crooked smile. Liked to tell corny jokes. *So funny.*"

xlvi.

I'm in a too large bedroom in my mother's house or apartment & the dark-haired girl in the tight sweater comes in, at 1 in the morning. It's the only time she can come to see me.

I'd known her back in high school, but not really. She'd been blonde then, shorter, a cheerleader naturally; now her hair is raven black & she hugs me often.

I keep my stuff at one far end of this too-big bedroom. I have a small bed, too small for me, a crate of books, a table & a chair, an open blue suitcase of clothes.

I keep taking pills from her pink pill box, the one with the Disney princess half scraped off its cover, until I realize what I'm doing & stop—

My mother is around, not unfriendly, but I don't really want her around. There's only one light in my room, the lamp on my table, & I usually turn it off when this girl arrives. I like her a lot, *try not to blow it again this time*

Her scent is light flowers & light scent next to me, a hand held in mine, our bodies comfortably close

but not too so, & we close our eyes & begin our work—

[The book-movie-Island opens itself slowly, it's taken time to learn how to read-watch-travel it—it's a history, the telling of the history, the telling of the history, the telling of the telling, & the Island upon which it all occurs—it is helpful to have her along, she smiles sexy without trying, without want or wish—we move—read—watch & are helped out of traps & dead end events]

[[I have one more possession which she deeply loves. It is a white-faced pink cat radio. She eventually undresses to her pink panties & half-shirt, & I turn the old dial bit by bit till I find an old old radio show, hundreds of years old, no talking, no human sounds, more like a tiny microphone travelling multiply in a deep Woods, an empty canyon, a roiling seashore, mixed in a kind of sound kettle, like physical ingredients to produce something she breathes in like an erotic narcotic]]

[[[And I realized once again shocked that we are on a stage, that an audience near & far in time & space are watching us come every day we meet, find wisdom & teaching soul in our performance]]]

[[She rolls atop me with her legs wide & I feel my cock push against her pink panties, push nearly in, nearly in, till she relaxes & curls more calmly into my grasp. Better. Better.]]

[The Book-Movie-Island now expands all around us & we are scooped into a cartoon desert as though we are fireflies watching the Coyote in hard chase, & he curls himself into a giant rubber band which Road Runner pulls back & releases & he is flung out of his world, us clinging to his flying fur, & into a room of computer terminals, & now he is just an unmoving figurine shuffling along until someone picks him up & up onto the top shelf of a bookcase]

She rolls close to me, kisses my lips quietly, sits up to dress. Her back is covered in symbols & markings & pictures, I'd so like to read sometime.s

Later we are at a science fiction convention & I'm one of the guests of honor.

["I knew it!" he says, swigs his flask, so pleased.]

Her dark hair, in long braids, her clothes a sort of layered series of braided furs in many colors.

We are standing in a field at the back of a crowd watching a film by a cool brilliant director. He's standing with us, black shirt & trousers, crimson hair, three cool eyes all covered by his custom shades—

The film is on a small TV set high up on a platform, a black & white TV, & the film muddles & drools out from the TV down to the ground, & slowly touches each watcher.

Soon I am covered in the film of a bedroom with a kind of terrarium in it, where live two tiny Kitees with wonderful bloo eyes & I warn them not to roam when I am away but they are curious & do, & I come home to find them in the next room with a bigger cat cornering them & knocking them around, going to eat them, & I step up & pick him up & toss him out to the hallway, & then step out there & toss him down the hall, not hurting him, just following him & tossing him, it's a long hallway, & I follow & toss & follow & toss, till I return to my small curious friends & bring them to their terrarium, will they roam again? Yes, I know so. I am ready.

I wipe this film off me, try to get it all, but when the next rolls over me I feel bits of it melding into the

new one, the Kittees are still on my mind, & I decide it's not safe here & I find my bit of cardboard by which they are willing to travel with me, & fill my knapsack with notebooks & ragged clothes & my old Walkman from some other film that floated past me & stuck & we climb downstairs to the faux pizza joint wherein, through the green & gold back door, one finds a model of a city, you can walk around it, admiring its deep & flawless detail, you can also walk within it, & we are nowhere, & I wonder where she is, whichever one, it's Valentine's Day, I am young & lorn, my mailbox as empty as Charlie Brown's, & I could go on & on like this, with my knapsacks of notebooks & pens to help me make my woeful poems, the Kittees with bloo eyes on the cardboard nearby but the heavy man who made all this is sitting in that faux pizza joint feeling like nobody gets him & I walk in & put my hand on his shoulder, & keep it there awhile, squeezing, releasing, squeezing, releasing—

Intermission. The showeres fall on us all: Start fresh in a little while. She is smiling at me. I be her movies were pink candy & sing songy compared to mine. But she's got some better idea as she moves into my embrace, twine, twine tighter, & the second half begins & the next washes over us together.

[Page 3000] The world is evacuating to a great ship, but everyone must be accounted for, must get a photograph taken & sign a line on a clipboard, there are dozens, thousands of clipboards, & the great ship moves slowly across the world from time zone to time zone, & people in long lines, & *everyone* must be found, it's a slow process—

We are in a tiny bedroom in the ship, a single bed of a room, & naked & her hands all over me, & her moaning & breathing, & touching, "I'll be your pretty Valentine, I'll be your pretty Valentine, *mmm*, I'll be your pretty Valentine, I'll be your pretty Valentine, *mmmmmm*, I'll be your pretty Valentine, I'll be your pretty Valentine, *m m m m m m m m m*, *pretty pretty pretty pretty pretty pretty pretty Valentine*."

xlix.

The muse is in the details. I woke with that this morning, lover in my arms, scent, touch, weighted form—

I look around & find myself in the Great Cavern below the Tangled Gate—what is it actually like here? How does it feel?

It's not brightly lit, more of a glow that seems to emanate from the rocks & stone floor themselves—

Air circulates through the cavern, soft & silky, like a loving stroke from a lover's hand.

And I think there is also a low *hmmm* present.

I look up at the great Tree in the center, it's like it rises up beyond the cavern itself. What does it reach toward?

I walk over to the tree, & pull myself up on its lowest branch.

Taking a breath, & wondering what I was doing exactly, I grab up to the next branch above me, & clumsily pull myself upon it. Hm. That wasn't as bad as the first time. Looking below, I can see from my slightly elevated position the glowing cavern before me.

Glowing, musical in its natural architecture. I can see the several cave tunnels that lead into the cavern.

Move again, grab onto the next branch, it's more of a reach but I find it easier to stretch up for it, pull myself rawly up to it, like a pull-ups bar, nothing I could have done just yesterday, this is weird but OK, I'm on it & unwinded, & reach up & climb again, picking up speed as though gravity is flaking off me, & climbing & climbing & I look down & see the cavern as deeper & broader than before, & now I see there are Creatures looking up toward me, sniffing, & a'sniffing.

Climb & climb up & up, feeling like I should have a tail, & I'm wondering what the light is up there, soft & blurry, sugary, sugary? Yes, that's a good sense of how it feels.

Sugary & *hmmming* of course, like clambering up like a monkey into cotton candy.

Where to? I sniff quickly as I climb & climb into the cotton candy light & arrive completely somewhere else, & the narrative shifts here, shifts here, shifts here, I feel awhile more cotton candy than monkey even—

"I was in a large room with many people, mostly friends, the room feels like it's tipping slowly back & forth, like being on a very large boat"

He nods beside me, finishes his glass of pale yellow liquid, shakes his head yes to the grey-haired barman gent for another, on me.

"I slide in my seat against someone, & wild to find my balance, & it's the girl I'm in love with, she looks like the dark-haired actress from that TV show from back when yknow, she wore pigtails & very short shorts but only spoke in some unknown language to her family & teachers"

"Yah" he sips, not very interested, "except to the little Creatures who lived in the walls of her bedroom" — nods to the barman again—

"The room shakes & now she slides into me, & for an elongated moment she stays close with me, it feels so good, until I let her go, no words."

He's slowing down but another nod, & another pale yellow drink in a tall glass.

"Later we're all in line at the airport, & being directed to our gates, & I look for her, & others assure me, *she will marry him*"

Now his glass is empty.

"The muse is in the details" he says, finally, echoing my waking words & embrace.

L.

I look for the fuzzy cotton candy entrance up through the floor, from the tree I climbed up from the Great Cavern that I thought was below the Tangled Gate.

Don't see it, just the usual dark floor. I want to get back down there but don't know how.

So I nod to Mr. Bob the barman & I leave the bar, right through the door onto the street.



I walk down the street, not long till I come to the Noah Hotel, decide to walk in, no revolving doors, just an intricately carved oak set of doors, tinged green & gold, push in to the entirely mirrored lobby, it's glaring & dizzying, I nearly fall kneeling before it all.

On whim, I close my eyes, stand & start to walk forward through the lobby, sniffing & *hmmming* as I go, stumble a bit, but something starts to emerge, shapes? colors? But it's not the lobby that one would see eyes opened.

It's the . . . Cavern? How? I open my eyes & find I am in a hotel hallway, nor surprising; close eyes, & I'm surrounded by Creatures looking up at me, sniffing—

Maya is standing there now, smiling & scrawny, blonde hair pink striped, wearing a vinesy leavsy dress to her knees, like she's waiting for me—

"Wandering?" she asks.

"I suppose," I say.

Still smiling, sincerely if bemused, & holds my hand, "Come with me now."

Peeking, I see she's leading me down the hallway just as she is leading me up a cave tunnel away from the Cavern.

We walk & walk up the tunnel, climbing & climbing, but coming to an even darker place.

Her hand seems to evanesce in mine, holding tighter makes it worse, so I loose, & a bare touch of her remains in my grasp.

Come to this very dark place & when I peek open my eyes tis just as dark, a room? Hotel room, bed?

Maya's in bed with me, in my arms familiarly, even as I stand in this dark place, waiting, listening. Nothing yet.

"Hello."

A stir of air.

"I'm Raymond. Author of *Labyrinthine* & *Many Musics*, & helper to Mr. Algernon Beagle in publishing *Bags End News* stories."

Another stir. But no more.

Open my eyes. Maya naked & scrawny in my arms, watching me.

"You're Dylan's."

"And my own. And one of your muses."

"The muse is in the details."

She giggles, amazingly.

Close my eyes. Still nothing.

I start walking though the darkness when the stir rises a bit more. I'm talking to a breeze or in breeze language?

Open my eyes, atwist in Maya's grasp, I can't tell if this is sex or just a playful sweet grasp.

Close my eyes, sit. Silence.

Talk. "I need you here, Maya, & now."

Open my eyes, her purple eyes glinting at me, nodding, & close my eyes to feel her back with me there too.

Now something will happen.

li.

Another book inside the book inside the rest, begins here:

"In an office, divided in half by a counter for transacting business, & behind it a small Asian woman, Mrs. Ling, & she & I are new friends, & before I leave, I reach over the counter to grasp her small hand & smile, then go, her yellow face blushing, gives a happy cry—

"Walk into the street, empty & early morning light, none of the stores I pass by are open save for a tiny little donutshop emitting a red metallic glow. Hm, walk in to find a brown man behind the counter, he smiles his tooth a red metallic glow too, sees me, gives a happy cry—

"I wake up later at one of the two tables & the man is gone. Not sure what next, so I leave & walk down the early evening street till I come to a pharmacy, walk in to find my lover waiting for me to find her some foot lotion, I look & look, but she happens upon it randomly, & gives a happy cry—"

Bowie gives a yawn.

"Yes?"

"Get back to the story."

"Isn't this?"

He laughs, nudges Maya to move over a bit in the bed.

We lay open the overstuffed *Labyrinthine* notebook on the bed.

Maya leans against me familiarly & Bowie uncaps pen & hands me.

"Try again."

lii.

Try again.

A room. There is a room that will be a Place of Art. One way to get there is through the back door of the college. Another way is to find the bar down the street from that donut shop, go in, look for its extra room—

I have painted a picture on a folding canvas, revealing different pictures depending upon how it is folded; come to find the room that is the Place of Art & hang it there—

I've been jobless for a few months now, running low on rent money, this folding canvas idea in my last

shot before—

—Bowie shakes his head.

I nod.

“What then?”

“Start a new section.”

liii.

Pen, notebook of paper, music on headphones. Clapton from early '70s. OK. A night street. No donutshop. No bar. No pharmacy.

No sign of the Tangled Gate amongst the city traffic. Of an Island. A Cave. White Woods. The mysteries of the world seem swathed in the mundane human flow.

It's why I've kept starting & stopping tonight. The mysteries seem too hidden in the mundanties.

So I try using my dream journal notes, dreams a source of power for me always, imaginative power. But again I can't maintain it. Too distracted, too hurried.

Simplify, focus. Here, this page, this pen. Better, always better, words move with something like purpose, momentum.

Resume, renew, what?

Mundanties, that's what. Through the window of this coffee shop. Brick sidewalk. Old, stained with time. Older than me maybe, & me past half a century & another one next week. Here they are, I am, this book is, right now.

Rows & rows of them, reddish color, enduring all this city's weathers, cold, hot, wet, icy—laid by who, how long ago?

[I look at Bowie. He shrugs.

I look at Maya. Small smile & nod. OK then.]

New section. *Raise the game.*

liv.

I ask myself: what beyond Emandia & Bowie's home & this world? What at the beginning, what at the end? How can any man who lives an invisible fragment of it all know or be capable of knowing?

I wonder & wonder. I can't explain myself, any thing around me, those old bricks through the window. I can look through the window & recall all the many times I've passed this window—

lv.

So what then?

I remember a stretch of months many years ago when I came home every night from a day of college,
& sat with my brothers & books on an old couch, & read & read all evening—

Focus of time energy & attention—

I got 4 As & a B that semester—

These fragments tonight were not like that—they were trying to fake on through some pages—whatever
their possible value, they became crumbled & fallen—

If a book matters, it matters, Not among a crowd of this & that.

This book is like a room which is a Place of Art. Tended when visited, tended properly. Or it gets old,
worn, impotent, undervalued & underloved.

The words come, sometimes even the music through them, like & only like this.

[I nod.
Bowie nods.
Maya nods.
New section.]

lvi.

Another birthday passes. I sigh. Wonder whither this book next.

“Whither next?”
“Back to the story” glints Bowie.
“Or elsewhere” counters Maya.
“The mysteries of the world are so many, so large, so small.”
They nod.
“So what then?”
Bowie leans into me, blue eye, green eye, mushroom eye.
“Go, Raymond. Take a breath & then another & go”

I do, & do.

I start a long time ago, before this book, its predecessors, before Creatures, Tangled Gate, Island, & all.

I didn’t know in a different way. I had not even take a measure of some of the human world.

I had no interior of my own, just a sucking within me for what was without.

I knew even less what I still do not know now.

Reaching for those years is like being in a strange room filled with weird trinkets & a kind of anti-music, & everything is very close & also very distant.

I reach & reach & only come up with images. A street in a suburb where I delivered newspapers every day at dawn. I used to pull out the advertising supplements to keep, privately masturbate to their images of girls in bikinis. Sometimes one would catch me with her eyes, her smile. I still haven't full learned that beauty, physical beauty, much or little of it, has nothing to do with empathy, virtue.

A fat man, college history teacher? reading to me from Wordsworth, lines I've kept forever:

*Hence in a season of calm weather,
though inland far we be,
Our eyes have sight of that
Immortal Sea
which brought us hither,
can in a moment travel thither,
& see the Children sport upon the shore,
& hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.*

I now write of the Wide Wide Sea as source of all life, as where Emandians arrive in seed pods, as possibly where & how all human life came to this world

Have I travelled so very far?

My eyes still sight & hunger bikinis.
I know it's DNA.
I still deliver newspapers in my dreams.

The past still trails around me & in me.

My brothers was sick this week in hospital, but when I think of him, he's sitting in a corner of the kitchen among his books & his black & white TV, laughing mock-evilly, talking of spaceships, dinosaurs, & Catholic priests he's befriended.

It's like the mind is a changing soup along time & space, absorbing & keeping & discarding & repeating gestures of behavior, patterns in its depths, spectres known & unknown, & the world is a seething cauldron of soups, speeding through space—

I used to work at a bookstore near this hotel lobby, for 3 years this area was my 5 day a week home. The last day of that job, nobody caring that I was leaving, there was a blackout. I left there, that store, its technical books & people, in the dark, not a goodbye or farewell to be had—it's now a restaurant I entered once, so many years later, what I remembered vividly gone, as I said goodbye & farewell to my boss of a different job as she moved on—

This book is now 11 years old & I've grown used to writing it. No point in new pieces with new names. It was with me before the Tangled Gate & Island & so on, & helped shape them to be.

I struggle with it when I don't give it time, energy, attention, this like mantra of right conduct in my mind—

Yet even this short stretch with it feels good, this book feels good to me—

“OK?”

They nod.

“We need to reunite the Six Islands.”

They are quiet.

“Maybe they are the world & yet also me too. I’m not sure how that works. What it looks like or what next.”

Listening.

“This book began with what sounded like six gunshots, one for each of the original six characters.”

Listen.

“That’s how this world began in a way. Something suddenly happened, & there was reaction to it. Not knowing what it was.”

[.]

“So maybe to see parallel between these. What were those gunshots? Were they shots at all? Were they somehow what had sounded at the beginning of history? Did they echo through time & space & history?”

.

“Maybe I need to trace back as well as trace on. Find how these things differently & samely affect the soup of this book & the mythology of which it is a part.

“It’s exciting when I feel the acceleration. When idea speeds into scene, character, action, & something else that is like & unlike fire.

“I need to gather together some of what is scattered here, old & recent.

“I need to use my mind as thread & glue & encouraging music for what is scattered high & low. To see this all as one, none, many.”

Nod. Smile. Let them embrace me close in our shared bed.



To be continued in Cenacle | 100 | June 2017

* * * * *

Raymond Soulard, Jr.


Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Eleven

*"I must create a system,
or be enslaved by another man's"*
—William Blake, "Jerusalem."

lvii.

Deep inside Travelers Tale, far into the mountains, long years of it, feels like, is this how to begin to thread & glue the scattered things?

Sit back. It's on TV, that story in the mountains, it's right there on that black & white TV, whose grainy picture I have to adjust with the Antennar 2000 box on top.

But there are no Travellers up on that mountain, not right now, not a one. Why did I think that? Have I lost track? How did that happen?

Look around my room. There's a candle on the big box next to my bed. Some matches from a place called Red Dog Diner, light it up.

My bed is rickety, at best, thin blanket, thin pillow. The TV over there I see is on a small purple stool, looks like an old chair with its back gone.

On the wall to my right there is a map. It's. Um. Islands? I count. OK, 6 of them. Of course. They are sort of, um, clustered together. *Oh*. OK. Something in that.

On the wall my bed rests against there is what looks like a page torn from a newspaper or a cheap magazine. Depicted a big bellied man wearing a strange getup, shapeless cloth hat. A sweater with zigzags across from it, stretched over his great belly. His pants a clashing design, pulled up too high over his waist. Long socks pulled up to his knees. Golf shoes? Yes, & a golf

club in his hand. Some kind of iron.

And, look, there's an old golf bag in the corner there. Hmm. Do I golf?

Oh. A White Bunny, sitting down there, near the golfbag, on a little stool, smaller & shorter than the TV's.

Looking at me. Glowing white fur, fierce beautiful eyes upon me.

Oh. MeZmer from the Travellers Tale. And elsewhere.

"You're not up on the mountains," I say to you, foolishly, but honestly.
You sniff once. Say nothing.

I look at myself. At the ragged clothes I wear. That's OK. That's familiar at least.

Sit up. Legs on the floor. My old old boots waiting there.
OK, that too. Pull them on.
Stand, sway, steady.

MeZmer still watching me.
Many times smaller than me.
But not really at all.

Still. "Bring me to the Travellers."
No reply. Not even a sniff.
"Please. I'm not sure why, but this is how it gets to where it's going."

Now a sniff. Looking at my golf bag.
Oh. Well, OK. I lift up the bag, it's got maybe 3 clubs in it, but OK.

I pull open the door for her & she hops purposefully through it & down the hallway.

I make to follow but the hallway is warped to my view & I find to steady, only way to steady, is to sort of dance my way along. This works better.

So I groove & dance my way along behind my hopping Bunny friend, & push the exit door open for her.

We come out to what appears to be a beautiful garden, maybe the prettiest one I've ever been in.

OK, I've done this before. It's like I'm enacting one of my many smaller stories. In it, I am a poor, ragged golfer who lives in the Pensionne in the Village & once a week goes with his golf bag & his White Bunny friend up those distant grey hills to the White Woods beyond, &

enacts a kind of golfing ritual which it's believed keeps this Island from experiencing something dreadful.

What dreadful thing? Why does this ritual stave it off? How did it begin?

I don't know, or don't remember.

And why start here in beginning to bring scattered things together? How will this help unite the Six Islands, like shown in my room's wall picture?

I don't know. But I follow MeZmer hopping along up the brown hills &, like practiced, begin to *hmmm* as we enter the White Woods & thus follow this sung pathway to where a small golf ball rests on a tee. And looking to my right, I expect to see the cut swathe that leads to a swamp, which is where I drive that golf ball every week. Oddly, I recall now, using MeZmer as my golfing stick.

But. No swathe. *None*. Just White Woods, like in every other direction.

I look at MeZmer whose sniffings are many & quick, bespeaking her spookedness.

Um. *Hmm*. Um?

OK. That's why. That's why this, what the message.

I kneel down to MeZmer & hold out my arms. She sniffs, demurs, but will hop near me. Shoulder my golf bag, & we begin to walk & hop deeper into these somehow stirred up strange White Woods.

We walk deeper into the White Woods but I mean not to say this like tis an outer area & a center. The White Woods has neither.

I come to another little open area, & another golf ball on a tee but, again, no clear swathe to strike the ball through.

Hm. What then?

I look down at MeZmer, yet she is high above me in knowing, a sniff, a *hmmm*, a long hop, ears flying back—

I pull out my black pen, for comfort, but notice it has no cap on either side. *What? How?*
I don't know.

We walk & hop on.

I listen, try to listen. Distantly, barely:

*And it's just a box of rain . . .
 or a ribbon for your hair . . .
 such a long long time to be gone . . .
 and a short time to be there . . .*

A black pen with no cap.
 A golf ball with no swathe.
 A White Bunny sniffing & sniffing.
 No deeper, no center, no shallow.

Make Art Now.

I sit down on the cool floor of the White Woods, leaves & needles & other things on its ground—

H m m m m m m m m m m

I feel it deep in me
 deeper than my bones
 look at my pen, no caps

MeZmer hops in my lap & dozes comfortably. A compliment, her trust—

Now what, the *hmmmm* deeper than my bones, White Bunny napping in my lap. Weird pen.

OK then. I close my eyes.
 Trying to let myself uncouple a bit, try to stop moving.

Really. Just. Stop.

Er, OK. O . . . K. I think.

What are these White Woods?
 Are they simply trees?
 Are they all white?
 Do they more glow than anything else? Yes. I like this.

They glow at night especially & maybe the glow is like the *hmmmm*

I want to ask MeZmer, tho I doubt she'll tell me, but she's napping still.

Look at my pen. Hey! A cap! Never had I been so thrilled to see one.

Course I'm also back there, the one looking down at this page, & writing just fine. Still, this is my pen & it's working again.

MeZmer wakes, hops off my lap, couple of sniffs & she sets off hopping fast—

At first I make to follow but then realize she's not waiting & way too fast me to follow—

OK—it's OK—she's my tender so if she leaves me be, it means she's not currently concerned my state—

So. White Woods. Glows at night. What now?

I hear a noise & along comes a friendly sight. Tis the Boat Wagon driven by those bloo-eyed Kittees & their yellow Friend Fish.

They pull up to me & I figure a ride is being offered. They don't speak the English much, but I can figure an invitation when it's offered.

So I get in the back seat & they wait for me to buckle up my seat belt (Safety First!), & then they put their white paws on their shared steering wheel & start to peddle on—

It is comfortable in the back of the Boat Wagon, a long bench with many blankets & pillows—so pleasant a ride I begin to doze, glad I'm here, right here, these glowing trees, these White Woods . . .

Wake, Kittees are staring at me in their strange but friendly way, & I see we're pulled up before a very strange too & charming house.

Oh. hm. Tis?

Yes. The Thought Fleas Domocile.

I unbuckle & get out of the Boat Wagon & notice the Kittees & Friend Fish remain in their seats, so I give them a friendly wave & walk up to the front door, not knowing what to expect.

Or do I? Wait, get this moment on straighter. I *do* know the Thought Fleas, know them well. What different here then?

Hm. OK, I've never done this in this book before. OK. Hm. Does that make a difference?

It does yes & no. Does anything not belong in this book that I can write of? Before I knock at that door, let me stop here & ask this & try to answer it.

Could go in several directions here:

- 1) I remember years of walking around my old college, long years ago, & then recently returning & walking there again, as a stranger, a rememberer, & feeling happy/sad over this.



- 2) *Cars 3* uses the kind of strategy that *Finding Dory* does by telling a story that encompasses the first movie, deepening & enlarging its myth, some prequel elements, some continuation.
- 3) Chemical Brothers' *Surrender* double-LP on my old but finely working stereo, broadcast around my house by very modern Sonos speakers, & I remember high blasting this music in a Seattle friend's house years ago, when it was pretty new music & it was exciting to know it & here are it & I again now, blasting & high.
- 4) I wonder if Trump will go down because he & the Russians stole the 2016 US presidential election, or if he will survive as cockroaches do, get re-elected because the Democrats will try & fail to triangulate a winning candidate by focus groups & marketing strategies.
- 5) My beloved loves when New England gets green & jungly in the spring & summer in part because she grew up in a place not very either.
- 6) We have an old Dell laptop named Essie we've set up to broadcast a kind of photo exhibition on her desktop, a vase of artificial flowers next to her, a shiny mask hanging off a corner of her open lid.

Hmm. Yah. OK. They belong. That's good. Now what?

I knock. K-nock! K-nock!

The door opens. There is a lovely looking Thought Flea, large eyes, possibly a tail, furred face & body, friendly smile, wearing clothes like not sure what for. Me too.

Tis Flossie Flea. She is one of the more well-known Fleas. She has a Rutabega Garden, likes to keep the White Woods neat, especially her portion of it. Has a clipboard to keep track.

"Hello, CC," she says, smiling & coming out. "I'm glad you've come finally. We should go now."

"Go?" asketh me.

She takes my hand & hurries us along back to the Boat Wagon. I guess why the Kittees & Friend Fish waited?

We get in the back set & buckle in. "Safety First!" she says, laughing. Nods to the Kittees & we peddle away from the Flea Domocile.

"Where are we going?"

She laughs. Her dress is a sort of pale blue with pretty rutabega blossoms on it. Are there such a thing? Well, I guess so, at least in these White Woods.

I think we doze awhile because it is a long way there, wherever this is. But are pulled up in front when we wake, Kittees & Friend Fish napping peaceably in the front seat.

We get out & this time the Kittees peddle on & we wave goodbye.

Walk up to the faintly glowing hut. Oh. Of course. This is, um, my hut in these White Woods. Strange but familiar.

Walk up to the door, which has a small portrait of a smiling Imp on it. Flossie nudges me & taps my shirt. I pull out my Burning Man 2003 pendant & touch it to the portrait, there is a soft cackle & a click. Door opens right up. We walk right in.

It is a one-room hut, filled with familiar items. Among them, two armchairs, & we each sit in one.

Look around in a very familiar way. My armchair is an old ragged green one, probably based on the memory of one I had in about 1985 for a few months in the first apartment I lived in. Yah.

Next to the armchair is a filing cabinet. On the far wall, pictures of Creatures & Thought Fleas. A little bookcase with books on Thought Fleas, Ghosts, Monsters, Pluckers, Explainers, Ladies Toe, Imps, Banditos, plus one called *I Ams the Masta' Splasha'!* by Madame Guru Klickk! & *The Great Big Book of Bellla!*—

The front door, shuttered window next to it. Our armchairs. To my right a painting of a fireplace on the wall that really works. Next to my chair an old chest I know contains blankets & pillows & such. & above me a door in the ceiling with a fishing wire hanging from it, a button tied to the very end. Up there a very strange Attic.

I smile at Flossie. Waiting.

She smiles back, waiting.

“Um?”

“I’m ready to be interviewed.”

“Um?”

She smiles again like I’m not seeming too bright right now.

“You wanted to know about we Thought Fleas & how we are the Guardians of the White Woods?”

O. Yah. I’d had that thought earlier in the week, thinking about what I’d write in *Labyrinthine* today. Seemed a good idea to chase.

She waits.

“So you are?”

She nods.

“Always?”

She looks at me, questioning. I have to recall time is not really something here.

“How do you do it?”

“It?”

“Um, guard? You’re so small.”

Another look & I recall they are small back where I come from but not here.

Smiles again. Encouraging.
I try again.

“Are there enemies?”
A look.
“Threats?”
Another look.
Hm. OK.
“What do you do as Guardians?”
Patient smile this time.

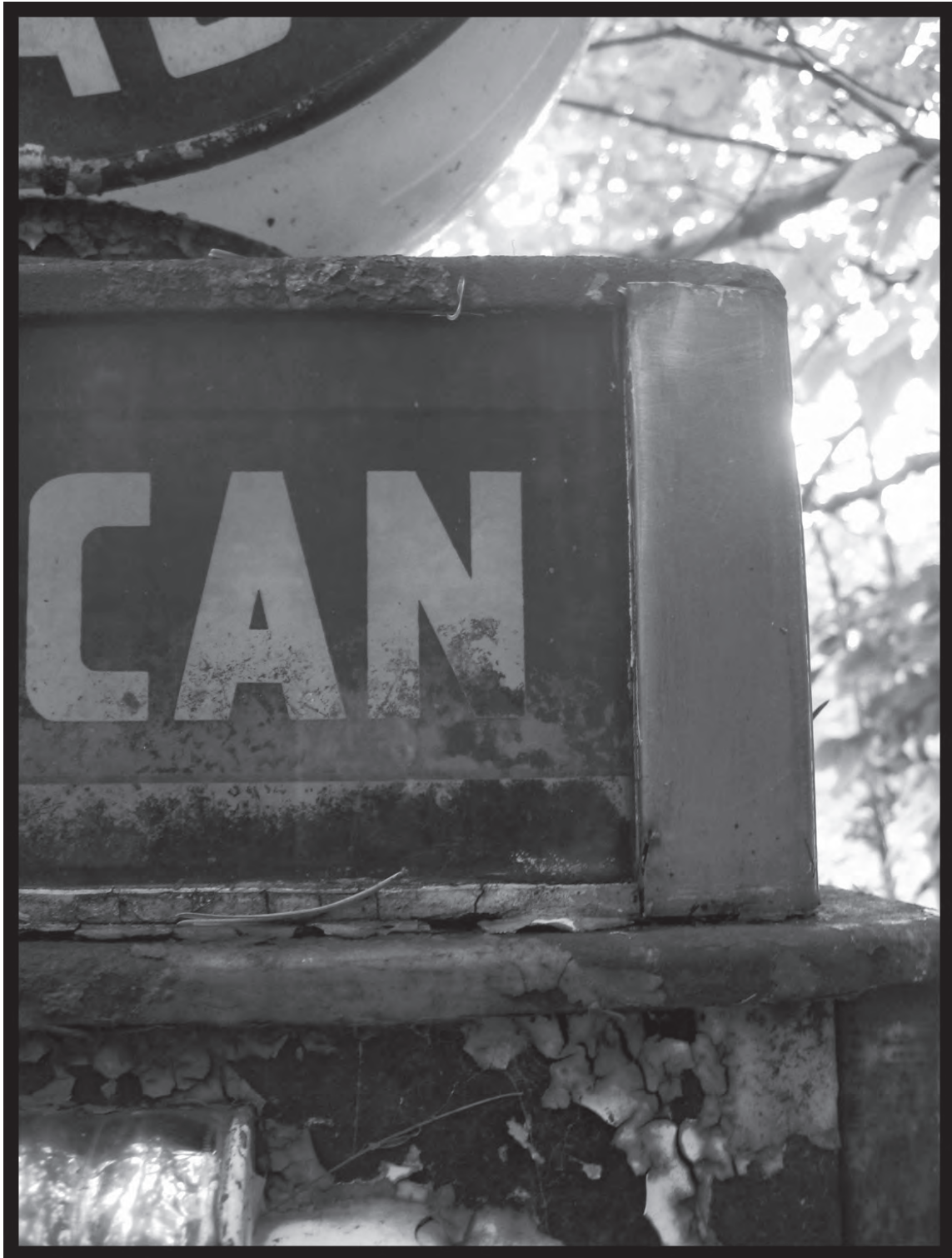
Wow. I really don't know what to think of a world not like mine which is full of threats & enemies & so on.

I try something I'm fairly sure of.
“You grow Rutabegas in your Garden?”
She nods, pleased.
“For the Annual Rutabega Festival?”
Nod. Smile.
“To make soup to share with all?”
Nod.
“And in the Great Clearing near here is a big kettle for this soup & even in the other times of the year, there is a bell to ring in case someone comes along in need of soup?”
Nod. But waiting.
I point to the chest I'm sitting next to. “Inside are blankets for any who might get cold in the White Woods.”
Smile again.

I look down, nothing good coming to me, save: “Why isn't my world like yours, where all are guarded & protected & fed & kept warm?”
“The Creature Common?”
I shake my head. Thought Fleas have come to my world, usually to pluck worry thorns from my or my beloved's head. That's how we first met them, years ago, before we knew anything more of them.

I stand up, & push my armchair aside, & I grasp the button attached to the fishing wire to pull down the door into the Attic. Unfold the ladder & land it upon the floor.

“Would you like to come?”
She peers at me closely. “Come back & see me when you return. Will you?”
I nod. She smiles & sort of curls up in her armchair & soon is napping. OK. Then.
I will.



lviii.

I climb up the ladder & into the Attic. It is fairly dark up here but not quite as there feels like a glow to every surface, a quality to allow seeing here, & so I begin to walk away from that door, testing if the glow holds, & it does, & my eyes adjust, & so OK, I'll keep going, walking along a floor that is made of rough-hewn floorboards, but solid, & I come after a few minutes' walk to two doors, one green, one gold, & a choice to make, I think, yes, these are the colors of royalty in these myths, these stories I write & live within, but I don't think I've seen them separated like this, a choice between one & the other offered, & yet here tis, to go on I have to choose, & I choose green hoping gold is not offended, & this is surely strange to think & yet I do think it, it's what I would think in this situation, choose green, notice the door handle I grasp is gold, & so maybe it will be OK, I hope, turn the handle & push in & find I am somewhere else, whether really there or a kind of simulacrum.

lix.

I'm back at the desert festival again, really it seems, & yet, & yet again, & I am wearing a certain hat, one I know belongs to a certain small Creature friend of mine, a purple furry dancing Creature, ribbons in his paws to dance with, a bow above his darkeyed brow—

His name is Pirth, I have known him a long time. He does not often speak with words & yet dances beautifully & will on lucky occasion pat someone's nose in praise—

It's a fisher's hat, with a chin-strap, one he has worn a very long time, warm & likely his only possession but for ribbons & bows. Creatures own little, or nothing really, & yet he has travelled long with these few things.

I found it in the back of the old green bus, back in that Western city, last bus of the night, returning from the hospital, found it in the very back seat, sort of tucked way down in a dark crevasse, & I thought of my little Creature friend, who was often cold. Folds nicely to fit his small head.

One day I did not know where he was anymore, & I kept the fisher hat to remember him, & then another day I did not know where the hat was anymore. And days upon sad, seething days, till recently, when dreams nudged into my waking, taking me by the scruff & nudging, & nudging harder, until one moment I open my eyes, & I'm back at the desert festival again, & my little Creature friend's Pirth's fisher hat is in my hands.

Back then, at the festival, I would sit back down, on the desert floor, festival loud & cheerful all around us, & I would look at Pirth, & he would deep darkeyed look at me, very calmly, & now I was calmer, because he is a good friend, knows how I get, excited, overblown, too full of the dramas for any one of them to take hold, offer a path.

Deep, dark eyes, very soft & pleasant purple fur, & I'm very glad for him, & he reaches out his little paw & pats me lucky moment on the nose & I think: *how cool you are, how cool you are,*

how very cool you are . . . & then he hops off my knee & begins to do his desert dance, a kind of peaceful frenetic rocking back & forth, the ribbons in his paws & his fisher's hat flying wildly about him, like he can listen to all the human musics, the drumming, the electronica, the cries & laughter, & the desert noises, & the wind, & the celestial music above, & the roiling below in the earth itself, & dance it wildly, happily, calmly, freely . . .

Ohhhh shittt.

I sit up in the faintly glowing hallway, so far away from that desert, & yet here is the little fisher's hat in my hands, & here sitting on my knee is my miracle beauty of a little friend Pirth, looking at me, reaching up to pat my nose—

Ohhhh happiness.

I stand with him now in my upturned hand, watching me calmly. We are not in the desert right now, it is not those other years, & yet here we are in this strange new place, together again, & I nod. Put his hat on him properly. Pat his little nose, & walk on to see more.

lx.

One thing, among countless, I've learned from Creatures is that *you never know with people-folks.*

We, Pirth & I, are now making our way along a narrow hallway in the Attic, low-ceilinged, rough floor-boards, full of gaps & splinters under foot. I think the low ceiling might even have nails poking out of it.

So slow, careful, hunched low walking for a fair stretch, tiring, & I'm ready for a stop when a light brighter than the low constant glow thus far—

Walk, walk, try not to hurry & stumble—

Come to what is a small library, maybe the smallest I've ever seen. A green & gold armchair, looks old but comfortable; next to it a small table with a shaggy lamp on it; next to that a one-shelf bookcase.

Upon it a row of books, I look closer & see they are a series about Mulronie the Space Pirate.

Oh. Ah. I've had a Space Pirate Burger at Mulronie's, sure, & that TV commercial where cartoon Mulronie takes off in his spaceship, crying, "Mulronie's Space Pirate Burgers! They're Co-Co-Co-Cosmically Deeelicious!"

And that Mulronie the Space Pirate cartoon show that didn't last long.

But the books themselves, I read them once, well twice, but it was a long time ago & I had

chased away from them since. Some things become too important, like you're starving & you take way too big a bite of something & it's deeelicious like the Space Pirate Burger but too much, you're choking, so deeelicious, have to spit it out, *have to spit it out*—

I open my eyes. *Whoa*. Pirth is sitting calmly on my knee. I lean forward, hoping for & happily receiving a furry pat on my nose. And there is a letter folded on my other knee. Rough burnt color paper.

I unfold it & read aloud to Pirth:

“Everyone has read the five famous books written about Mulronie the Space Pirate. The shortest, mightiest bandito in all of outer space. Everyone knows that when he was twelve, in 1951, he had a strange encounter, under the starry skies, out in the fields beyond the farmhouse where he lived. Something happened that night, & it changed him. And everyone knows that when he was a young feller, in 'bout 1969, he was part of that *other* mission to the moon, the one you *don't* hear about—where Mulronie first became friends with the Cacklebird, who drives the Famous Space Tugboat.

“Everyone knows how the books detail his eventual departing Earth, Terra, homeland, whatever you may call it, he called it many things, & how he made his way, by one means & another, into the far reaches of outer space.

“But what nobody knows is that in the year 2042, so far away from those starry skies back in that mythical year 1951, there came a sixth book about Mulronie the Space Pirate's adventures. Nobody knows that. But I'm telling this now, confessing what I know, that there was indeed a sixth book, detailing the final adventures of Mulronie the Space Pirate, beyond what everyone knows.

“Now some learning this may get worried & say: *oh dear, did he finally perish after all those years?* No, he didn't. He found himself a nice, small, semi-habitable planetoid—so far away from everything else, you'd think it was Kansas. But he had those later adventures before that kind of quasi-retirement he went into. It was those adventures that made the retirement possible, because he learned finally how to travel without moving, how to raise his kind of hell without lifting any of his thirteen fingers. That book does exist, I know, because I wrote it, his dear friend, his companion.

“It was a long neighborhood, on that nice, small, semi-habitable planetoid like Kansas. There were two houses, his & mine. We kept them far apart from each other, by agreement. I'd keep the manuscript of the sixth book overnight, wake up at first light, walk halfway toward his house. He'd meet me, take the manuscript, securing it under his arm, & we'd walk the rest of the way to his house, & continue our work.

“But what happened was the wind hit, & it blew hard, & he staggered, & he tumbled, & the pages blew all over the place, & there were no Woods to catch them, & there were no clouds to keep them from flying away, & *my goodness how those pages flew*, they flew all over the world,

all over that nice, small, semi-habitable world. We found all the pages we could, but not nearly all of them. It would have been much longer a book. But he was ready to retire soon, & just said, *let's do with what we have, my friend. Let the rest go.*"

I hold the letter, its several pages of burnt paper in my hand. Pirth is watching me quietly. Close my eyes & listen. The pages begin to vibrate, to *hmmm* in my hands. It feels nice. A strange music, moving in & around & among my breaths & beats.

Something, um, something, um *something*.

A story begins to tell me.



To be continued in Cenacle | 101 | October 2017

* * * * *



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Eleven

*"I must create a system,
or be enslaved by another man's"*
—William Blake, "Jerusalem."

lxi.

I'm drowsing over a football game in the early wintertime. The snow has been falling & falling all weekend. I've watched it pile higher, up to & halfway over the one window that I have to see outside. I'm safe inside, & it's warm, but I don't know how I'll pay the heating bill next month, or the electricity bill, or the phone bill. But I think to myself: *if this snow keeps falling, I'll be buried & warm like the polar bear in the wintertime*. So go my future business plans.

[I fell asleep & found myself travelling in an SUV through a woodsy landscape. The radio singing wishing for higher love. Laughter in the front seat. Grey skies. White birch. Falling down barns]

I'm watching the football game on my black & white TV, every so often adjusting my Antennar 2000 to try to bring in the picture a little bit more clearly. I find my eye drawn to one particular football player, and start to feel like I'm watching two games at once. He plays for the Los Angeles team, has played for them for a long time. I knew him once, a long time ago, he was my friend, & now he's much older than that, & so am I, & so it seems like I'm watching two games at once.

] I stand up again & Pirth
] begins to dance ahead
] as this Attic hallway climbs
] down a long murky hill that
] feels less & less like a hallway

] & more like a long hill
] down into a long field lit
] barely at points by fires
] & echoing with drums &
] drums & drums & drums
 .]

I'm watching the game long ago in which he ran for many touchdowns. I think they even brought him out to punt the ball once. He could do no wrong, & they cheered & cheered, & cried out his name. People painted it on their bare chests, & on their bald heads.

) That desk I've had all these years
 (No. It's gone. Long gone.
) But yes, so long had, & gone
 (Made of cherry wood.
) My father sold it to me.
 (He was a salesman.

) I was excited when I bought it.
 (I was 21. 1985.
) Last time I saw it was 2002.
 (In a friend's garage.
) The roof fell in & destroyed it.
 (I still carry it all along.

) It's in this field now.
 (A metal chair. Pirth dancing.
) Me too. Me clumsier.

But the other game I'm watching is probably a more recent game, my Antennar 2000 can't tell time anymore. He's now kind of fat, sloppily uniformed, & I guess they keep him around out of sentiment. He's an institution. They don't even call the plays in his direction anymore, because then people start to laugh. He mostly stays in to block because he's so big & fat, it often helps, people fall around him.

/ SUV. Desk. Cherry wood. Black.
 Pirth. Ribbons. Bow. Purple fur.
 Hallway hill. Drums. Fire.
 My dad said, "If you ever get in trouble,
 pray to god & my mother. That's what I do."

/ Never tried it yet. But might one day. Just in case.

/ *What melts? What remains?*

Glance out the window from my two games, & see that the snow is piling higher & higher. I'm thinking: *O! To be a polar bear, now that the winter is here.* Look back to the black & white TV screen, & see the pretty quarterback, in the newer game, dropping back & throwing the ball, & it's tipped up, & it rides high up into the air &, as though an air current itself had a funny sense of humor, the ball falls into my old friend's fat hands!

[Now other Creatures come sniffing around, coming down the long dark field, sniffing the black SUV speeding in place but hurrying on, I help them onto the desk with Pirth & me & my dad, one at a time. Very colorful & shy Moosei, a pair of them. A girl bear in a long lovely black & white striped dress & flowered beret, pretty eyelashes. More coming.]

He probably hasn't caught a pass in five or six seasons [*his football cards have a lot of zeroes on them*], & he staggers wildly around with the ball, not remembering what to do or how [*run! you fat motherfucker!*], his old body moves & memories all gone. He runs the wrong way, & then he trips [*shit! shit!*], & he falls down near the sidelines, & I'm thinking to myself: *please, ball, just roll out of bounds & save my friend's pride for one more day* [I remember his first bad season began with him doing a TV commercial for Mulronie the Space Pirate's Cosmic Puff-a-Roonies Cereal, how it had him in his football uniform playing football on a planetoid with Mulronie, scoring back & forth until they agreed on a tie & a bowl of Puff-a-Roonies with skim milk, part of a complete breakfast], & it rolls closer & closer to the out of bounds marker.

In the older game, they put him on defense near the end of the game, & he roars through the line, crushes the pretty quarterback, ball jumps loose, & he scoops it up, & dances & jives his way to the end zone. The stadium lifts off with cheers for my friend.

lxii.

The sun sinking in glitters & shades, the falls slinks & slides through the rocks, trees leaning helter skelter over the water, look at the rocks in the water, chunks of logs make a path in deeper & out—

[*You've got to pay attention to the signs in your life. You've got to look around for clues, there's all sorts of information & guide points everywhere, but you've got to pay attention. You can't be controlled by your dogmas & your presuppositions. You've just got to look around with open eyes, listen in strange ways any way you can.*]

lxiii.

It is the old & well-known story of what happens when there is a Couple A & a Couple B. Couple A & Couple B meet in college. Couple B walks hand in hand into the student center, & they sit down at a table near Couple A, & they all start talking. Couple B is prettier, Couple A is kindlier. They switch up at times, becoming Couple C & Couple D, & two stray, Couple E & Couple F, & stray further, to form Couple G & Couple H. But eventually Couple A & Couple B reform.



Some years after college, Couple A & Couple B going to the Red Sox game on the weekend, one of them holds up the best sign in the whole park, & they win the local TV station's "Take a Swing!" contest. As prize, they get to play an inning against the Red Sox, right there in Fenway Park.

["Even then I was thinking about these Woods," he admits, a little shaky with his blue tin cup of water.

"What about it?" she asks, relieved to be back with him, willing to listen to it all whatever. He points. "That pond yonder I showed you. Sitting mornings, watching & listening to the wind blow the water to shore. Splashing kind of perpetual rhythms. Those low mountains all around. Especially the days when sky is overcast, smears of darker & lighter grey clouds across it. Trees & bushes all around the shore. Lots of white birches. A few Yellow Amanita Muscarias too. The big ferns you see. Massive rocks covered gently in moss. Climb & climb up, & up, find views nobody has seen. Ever."

"Because we're in your mind?"

"Yes. Yes.]"

For the first play, Couple A-he gets a single. Maybe the Sox are kind, don't try too hard. Couple B-she takes a walk. Couple B-he bunts, & the Red Sox let all runners advance safely. Laughing lazily, rich, good-looking guys in tight white uniforms.

["What about the tiny blue light?" she asks, realizing he will forget that & carry on randomly without returning to it.

"I still see it," he says briefly, reluctant now, paranoid.

"What is it?"

"I don't know," he's done. For now.]

The fourth one, though, Couple A-she, smashes the ball just over the left fielder's glove. (She's the leading hitter by a country mile in her local softball league. *Shhhhhhh!*) The fielder slows it, that's all, then wilds around for the ball. Another fielder rushes to help him—they're panicked—they hadn't expected this. They throw the ball back to the infield, but it just rolls away toward the dugout &, by the time the chaos & panic has settled down, there has been struck, inside Fenway Park, by these seeming amateurs (*Shhhhhhh!*), an inside-the-park grand slam home run. And, as a result, the Red Sox have to pay them \$10,000 total—\$2,500 each—, plus make a \$10,000 donation to the Jimmy Cancer Fund.

Delight delight delight, everyone says, newspapers catch the gleam of their smiles, their pretty figures, the laughing charms in their eyes. Then days, *dot-dot-dot*, weeks pass. He sees a tiny blue light again on the ceiling of their bedroom. Thinking of his small Creature friend Pirth. Pirth's fisher hat, the desert festival. Pirth's dance, better than any coupling, any inside-the-park grand slam home run.

["Where is he now?"

Quietly, "Up there."

"Where?"

Points in numerous directions. Smiles weirdly & nods.]

lxiv.

We continue our peramble through the Attic. My friend Pirth dancing ahead of me. I talk our way along, the hallway we're in less narrow & low than some previous, red doors every so predictably often. Talk.

"Now they can say what they want, but I say that it all comes from the book I was reading. It was for a class, & it was a day late, should have read it yesterday. It's how these things go sometimes.

"Our house was tipped in design. I climbed from one half to the other, settled into the lowest end of the couch to read, where I was least likely to just tumble on out mid-page. And on the last page of the book I'm reading, the girl was telling the boy she had a good time the other night, & it ends, & I can't tell if a page is missing. I just don't know. I stare at the book, & I just don't know. Will young Mulronie leave pretty Figga after all, for the romances of outer space, that secret mission to the Moon & beyond?"

Of a sudden, Pirth stops by one of the occasional red doors, & waits for me to catch up.

Hm. OK. But no doorknob. I think. My Burning Man 2003 pendant. I lean toward the door & apply my pendant to the door's lightly glowing surface. Glow shifts from red to a sort of off white, & clicks open.

Walk in & wonder what.

[Put the Mulronie book in my knapsack & I head off to class with Pirth in my plaid jacket pocket that, mind you, was held yesterday, but I wonder if I can say something anyway. Along the way I figure: *well, since I'm late, maybe I'll just go in & see a movie.*

[There's this movie theater I like, it's down an alley, although the sign that marked it has long since been gone, so you *really* gotta know it's there or you'll never find it. I walk, still wondering about my book. I take Pirth out & set him to dancing before me.

[Wondering. Mulronie always packs his black & white TV with the Antennar 2000 last &, *when & only when they're packed*, he goes.

[It's a fairly big room. And the thing about this theater is that it doesn't have the usual rows upon rows of theater seats. It has an assortment of chairs, different kinds & sizes, armchairs & rocking chairs & so on, & the movie screen is small & it's over in one corner. So I pick up my favorite green armchair, lucky it's empty, & I move it as close as I can to the screen, trying not to get in the way of others who were also peering toward the screen, everybody trying to get a look. Because nobody actually charges us to get in, we try to have our manners.

[When it comes on, it's in the middle of the story, as the movies sometimes are at this theater. It seems to be a movie about a football team. The grizzled old veteran is showing the brash first round rookie how to play, how to win right. He feels he can't do it anymore, he believes he's on his way out. The fans laugh at him now, & the team usually only lets him block these days, not carry or catch the ball. His leadership in the locker room, coaching on the sideline, these are shadowed over by his big belly, grizzled jaw, slack-mouthed grin at everything.

[But I can feel the hotshot rookie's loyalty to him, the long-time loyalty of everyone else on the team to him still. No matter his lesser gleam, his diminished speed. He's their *leader*, he's their *man*. I want him to go out & play one more game, & I want him to ride out high. The movie ends suddenly before we can find out if he does. Puff of smoke, & the film on the screen burns to white.

[Everybody sits around for awhile, some smoked blunts, some talked politics, some looked for M&Ms on the floor. There were always one or two. Since there were no candy concessions at this theater, you had to get what you could. A few of the skeptical hipsters who'd stuck around this long decide to venture into the murk beyond the movie screen to a **Bar** they say is on the other side. Don't see any of them again tonight.

[Anyway, then a short cartoon suddenly comes on, it's about 30 seconds long & it goes like this: *they discovered that what had been slowly destroying their world all these centuries were people just like them, only these people were thousands of times bigger than them, & no more knowing that they existed than these tiny people had known the big people existed. But these tiny people embarked on a great mission to bring them down, by growing bigger in time. They vowed they would grow bigger, & they would bring the big ones down, & before you could even think twice, this short cartoon was over.*]

[[Pirth & I've sat in the corner of this walls-less room during all this, him quietly on my knee, & paying attention, us both listening with ears, & the room seems to dim, as though the performance is over, as though time to leave.

[[Did it work? Did they grow enough to defeat their enemies? I want to know.

[[OK. I'll jump in. I pull my black pen from my pocket, & unfold *Lx* from the small cube it is in my other pocket. We set about arranging ourselves for this task. Scrounging in the dim performance area for some pillow to lay upon, on my stomach, *Lx* now before me.

[[*Dark*, you say? *Pirth*, I answer. A pat on my nose & he begins to glow, his purple fur now a kind of lamp by which I can see this page. Does he doze, or watch me close with his dark little eyes? I can't tell. He is sitting near this notebook now, glowing, a deep thing of unique beauty, & I'll in awhile break so he can do his dancings, his way to praise the world, & pat it on its nose. But now to an answer.]]

[[[Deciding your people need to grow much greater than they are to defeat the strange enemy of your world & doing it means filling in the missing step. *How?*

[[[The leader of the tiny people, the current one, they take turns, each one rules for a calendar year, from the first green of spring until the last melt of winter, but spring hasn't come in a long, long time, & the current leader is grey & bent now, he calls for the bravest souls to assemble themselves in the great hall for review & determination.

[[[He declares the day's dawn & its dusk to be the time for this & a final decision.

[[[Many, many appear to volunteer. Some too old, some too infirm. Some arguing for negotiation, or appeasement. Far most of them are thanked & dismissed.

[[[Six are chosen of the dozens who came before him. The current leader, bent near half over in his chair, nods to these six alone & then, dusk come, dismisses the rest. Is quiet for a long time, regarding them.

[[["How?"

[[[Silence.

[[["*How?*"

[[[The tallest steps forward with a map he unrolls at the current leader's feet. Long & detailed, their world in all.

[[[Points to a wide green swathe on one of the other 5 Islands than the one they are on. A great Woods. "There is a place few know. One passes through an ancient Gate to myriad paths within. There's a Cave deep in it. Within, a Beast. We will travel there, we will ask for his help.

[[[There is silence. The current leader wheezily breathes. Nods. Flicks his hand. *Go.*]]]

I stop. Pirth is awake. I nod.

He dances, slowly at first, then more elaborately, more deeply, back & forth, back & forth, back & forth, ribbons flying about him, a purple glowing poem.

What next? I don't know. But a nice memory or dream or wish washes over me as I watch my cool little friend dance his magick praise for all.

lxv.

I was at someone's house, it was a friend, she had this large jug of LSD, it was brown-tinted, it was kind of a pretty brown, almost like a dye but I don't think so. She was very generous with this LSD, every time I came she made sure I got took care of, that I got risen up, that I got high. She knew I was struggling with my worry about paying rent. Then what happened one night was that, I don't know, I didn't get high, it didn't work, maybe it did, & I just didn't notice, the worry had overcome me. She was tired, she had to go to work the next day, she went to bed, & so I went into the little refrigerator where she kept all her medicines & chemicals & do-dads & I poured a little more LSD from her jug into my cup of orange juice, maybe a little more after that, I just had to finally evict this worry from my mind & not worry about rent except

for the first of the month. But I must have poured out too much because now it looked like there was a lot less in the jug than there was, & so I got panicked & I brought the jug over to the sink & I filled it up with water a little, but now that beautiful brown color was gone. It was watered down & I just didn't know what to do, & it's like in the course of trying to expel one worry, rent worry, I'd taken on another, so maybe there's a lesson in there for you or, honestly, maybe there isn't.

Um. *What? Oh.* Pirth dancing. Weird room. More of that cartoon, but not all. I stand, make a motion with my head, inviting Pirth up to my shoulder, three dance leaps & he's settled there.

We depart this strange room back to the endless hallway through the Attic. Walking along, pale glowing light, after awhile no doors even.

I begin to wonder what next, if anything. Possible to run out, or beyond, narrative?

No. There's always more. When people bore, as they will, just look at those great layered clouds, crafted by air & water. Their kind of magick won't quit.

lxvi.

"Pen moving is what, always, pen or pencil really, that's what's important," I am writing here & speaking aloud to Pirth as we continue along our way, him dancing in his furred ribboned quiet way, almost soundless, & I wish I spoke Dance but wonder if it's not a kind of self-evident tongue—dancing doesn't *mean*, dancing *is*—

OK, I am no lithe little Creature but I start into moving more dancey now, my large body has its own moves, & it feels nice to let it do so, like dancing is always waiting release in me—

Sort of how I feel writing is in me always waiting to happen—

Write along, dancing along, sure, & when the hallway gives way, awhile to something else, I'm OK, keep my dancing going, whether it's full-bodied or just my fingertips or even the free sparkles at the edge of my eyes & hardly anyone to see—

Here I am, standing in my old hometown. But, I'll tell ya, it looks a lot more prosperous than it used to. I find myself again on the street that used to have the bookstore I went into to buy 10-for-a-dollar paperback books out of a crate, & downstairs in its basement the burger joint where I'd sit in the corner, read my frail paperbacks, & write *lurve* poems.

[Dancing, trying those Pirth side to side moves, I remember that book called *Existential Casebook*, where I first read Sartre, Camus, Nietzsche, & so on. *Loved that book.* Its many strange big thoughts. I think of it often. Likely drowned in that friend's flooded basement as did so many of my beloved books.

[*Lurve* poems. Could I ever write one now? Plain & direct?



[The condition I find myself in
is that I can relieve myself
of the *need* for you, the jerk
& thrust need of you, but
I cling still to the *want* for you,
terror over the cost of letting
this chain go, dull freedom.]

Now it's all different. I stare at the pink neon sign **Mulronie's Original Genuine Gourmet Space Pirate Burgers!** & walk in. Not a paperback book in sight. Not even the Mulronie books. I *loved* those books. Just a weird, worn-looking full-sized cut-out of Mulronie in his Space Pirate suit, standing near the famous Space Tugboat, commandeered by the tiny cackling black & white pandy bear, sitting in Mulronie's hand.

["Called the Cacklebird," I, dancing, note to Pirth, dancing, but him not panting some as I am. "Sometimes they would take their vacations together. Relax & enjoy the sun on some semi-habitable planetoid they would find. I always thought this was funny.

["But I would wonder, too, did Mulronie have his own Spaceship? Or did he come to their vacation spot in whatever ship he could find? Or did she have to pick him up from time to time, from wherever he happened to be?"]

Should I feel this furious? Didn't I leave this joint, this street, this whole town, a long time ago? But I do feel this furious, more than I ever have. Someone asks to take my order & instead I sit at an empty table, saying I am waiting for someone. *OK, sir. Let us know.*

["Life becomes a complex try at letting go & carrying on. But loss never stops shocking. A loved one, a loved bookstore, a loved TV show, a loved band. There's no real strategy to any of it. One's memory becomes thicker, heavier with what's come & gone, what one does not or cannot or will not let go."]

I look around. The exposed brick walls are the same. Just everything in the middle is different. Then I remember something that could help my fury. Up high toward the ceiling, there is a brick that I happen to know is a kind of explosive. The owner of the joint back then only told a few of us regulars about it. Called it his Plan B Retirement Plan. He didn't actually tell me; I just overheard them talking one night. He pointed up there & said in his unearthly drawl, "I just take a chair & climb up there, pull out that brick, & the spike behind it, & drive the one into the other. BOOM! Whatever problems I got, solved. End of the world."

[Luna T's Cafe was like this. The real one inspired my fixtions about. A Friendly Restaurant, then closed, then some other restaurant, & then some other again. Now it's a sign-less office of some kind. What's visible through the windows is filing cabinets, so many, filled with them. Can't say what's deeper in. Change & shift & change again. Brain, memories, thicker & deeper & sadder.]

So I take my chair, & I climb up there, & I begin pulling at bricks to find the right one. And I hear below the consternation over what I am doing, & would likely be hauled down by the town cop (maybe there was more than one, but they always looked the same to me), but I find it, & I pull it down, the brick & the spike. Set them on the table before me, & think: *Do I want to do this?* Nod, & I raise the spike in my hand, & drive deep right into the brick to end the world!

[“I remember being sentimental & sad over what was lost when I was still quite young. Seemed more like what loved left than new love came to be. The world seemed to shrink, to grey. But new people, new things came. Maybe the shrinking I felt, feel, was not the world so much as what & who I care for in it. I think the human mind is at odds with its mortality. With no sure explanation for any of it. Within awareness that everything changes, & ends sooner or later.”]

I find myself back in a kind of a little store, the one they say has a buried spaceship beneath it. There’s a red-haired girl behind the counter that I knew, oh-so-long-ago, it aches me to think of it. I lean forward to kiss her, since the world has ended, & yet somehow it hasn’t. Has & hasn’t.

Now we’re sitting, facing each other, on the floor, & others are walking past, smiling at us, wondering: *who are these two crazy kids, & why does one of them think the world has ended?*

[“Merry Muse?”

“Probably. No.”

“Have I lost you completely?”

“I’m answering you.”

“What would I do with you now anyway?”

She laughs.]

lxvii.

Pirth leads me back to the hallway from these reveries & notions, his quiet, insistent dancing ever pulls me back to task.

I try to explain. “It’s like my Art & failures at romance form a depthless root in my mind & heart, & I can’t have one without the other.”

He dances on ahead of me, oh listening after his own fashion, I’m sure. But then I notice it’s hurried, purposeful dancing as ahead is not more hallway, but a room, & my beloved waits for me, her expression love for me, fondness for Pirth, who dances up into the flannel pocket of her flannel shirt, & a sort of familiarity with what all this is right now.

Again we find ourselves in a very cluttered living room, waiting for someone who’s on the phone in the other room. So I’ll be looking around thinking, *what can I put together here to sweeten her way?* And I find a Mason jar, & I mix in a little bit of chocolate, a little bit of coconut, from pouches I keep in my bookbag. Dashes & drops from flasks on the shelf with no labels on them, just for fun. I take a sip on it. It tastes drinkable.

[I look at Pirth in her shirt pocket, & he looks peaceful. Looks like our secret way to wonder. Looks lovely & dear, & wishing I ever knew more of him & all of Creature kind.]

And then a lot of people show up at that moment before my beloved can take a drink of this. Perhaps it's for the better, since what kind of mad concoction had I made? Anyway, I don't know anybody here, that's the kind of strange parties we've been going to.

[I think of years gone & perhaps to come yet of watching Pirth dance in the desert, as he is at least part dust devil, tis said. I try to remember years before I knew Creatures & relied, poorly, upon people to occupy my thoughts.]

But, happily, I sort of ease into a corner, & my beloved eases into the corner with me. Right near to the shelf with the strange flasks, & the empty one above it. I reach up to the empty one, tug, & it comes loose from the wall into my hands. It's made out of lots of pieces of wood, strange pale wood, wood that almost seems to *hmmmm*. These pieces of wood are twisted & braided together to form this board, & I'm going to hand it over to my beloved, so she can study it too, when it just sort of floats over to her. She catches it in her hands, & smiles, & floats it back over to me.

[See? it can all braid together happy. Love & Art. Creatures & people-folk. Watch this happening.]

Then I nod to her, she nods to me &, I don't know how we do it, but we together climb up on that board & float out through the open window into the clear night. *Goodbye, good night to another strange party.*

She plucks out Pirth from pocket & sats him on the front part of the board & of course he sets to dancing. It's a beautiful night to be floating along with loved ones.

lxviii.

I lie back on the board & look up at the countless stars above. The air is perfectly cool. I let myself remember. I take this chance.

I'm with a group of friends. Dear ones. We're sitting around a table in the brown-paneled back room of that old Italian-Polish restaurant, & my old friend the Traveling Troubadour is there, strumming his guitar happily, blue eyes twinkling for all. But I know he's really gone & I have to go out to the bar in the other room to catch my breath for a moment. One of my friends comes out to see if I'm OK. She saw him too.

"He's long since fallen, now ash & gone."

"I know. Yah."

"And this restaurant no long has a brown-paneled back room."

"Yah."

"I keep returning here like it matters, like I can change anything. Like I can save him, or any

of them. Warn. Divert.”

“Only in your thoughts. On your page.”

“Yah.”

We go back in & I ask him, *what's your life like now, wherever you are, up in the stars?* And he smiles big & says, *smokin', drinkin', guitar-playin'.* Then he gets serious with wailing pretty on his guitar, his beautiful voice once again filling this brown-paneled room, like years long gone.

I knew they mattered, those nights, but I could not have imagined what it would be like to look back at them & have not one of those friends to do so with. Not one. All but him still extant, 10, 12 of them, more, & not a one near to hand. Just tape recordings of laughing, shouting, fraternal voices.

Later we all leave that restaurant, 'cuz it's a beautiful night out, & we pile into somebody's car, & we're tight up against each other in the back, cheek to cheek, shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip. I feel so fucking happy at this moment, & I close my eyes, & we come to some kind of party, & it's a very cluttered place, hard to say what kind of party's going on here anyway. Two laughing people are floating on some kind of board above the clutter, laughing, laughing hard, departing through an open window.

“Look!” I say to my long-gone friend clutching his guitar & laughing. “That's me & my beloved up there, years after you're fallen & ash.”

He smiles & strikes loud, happy, cacophonous chords.

“Enjoy!” he cries. Strikes more chords. Motions to all these other not quite as lost friends to look & shout, “Enjoy! Enjoy!” We all cry out to me & my beloved up there.

We hear the cries from that apartment window we left below. “Enjoy! Enjoy! Enjoy!” We laugh & cry back in spirit. “Enjoy! Enjoy!”

It's a quite a party. Is there more to it?

I get this idea that something really important is in the middle of this clutter, & I go searching through it all, pushing things aside, almost randomly. And then I find them, these Secret Books that I only ever find in dreams like this one, & there they are, unharmed, & I just open one up because I know that my time with them is short, & this kind of reading's the best kind of reading.

I've known the Secret Books a long time, & they seem to appear in many kinds of ways & situations, & I cannot say how many of them there are, or how many iterations. What are they? What aren't they? I'm simply glad of them.

So I dive in, & start reading about the King who summoned his brothers on a great quest, his mission to lead them to a mysterious Island. On the Island, to find a timeless, powerful Gate; within it, a being who might help them save the world. Carries with him a Secret Book of his own, within it a map of the Island.

What is the Island?

What is the Beast?

But what happens is that one night along their years-long way, tired, drooping, they let loose in a sort of coffee house in a Village, start carousing & fighting. What causes the fight is that they see specters of their lost loves in the murk of the Tavern, people they left behind years back to go on this quest. These loved ones are sad & missing them, yearning for them to return. It's a night where the quest may just fall apart out of sadness for what is gone, & yet their King somehow holds them together.

It is only in Imaginal Space that a great myth like this can play through its strange idealism & fantasticalness. The wonders of the earthly world we mostly know are many, as are its mundane & ugly foolishnesses.

Imaginal Space allows some ideas, some characters, some narratives, to take the fore & dominate the reality of the mythical world contrived.

And so somehow he makes it so the night passes more blurrily & they hang together. By the next morning, they don't really remember much of what happened, & I think to myself, having been through a night of my own, *sometimes I could use a little bit of that blurry not-remembering-so-well-next-morning stuff. But only sometimes.*

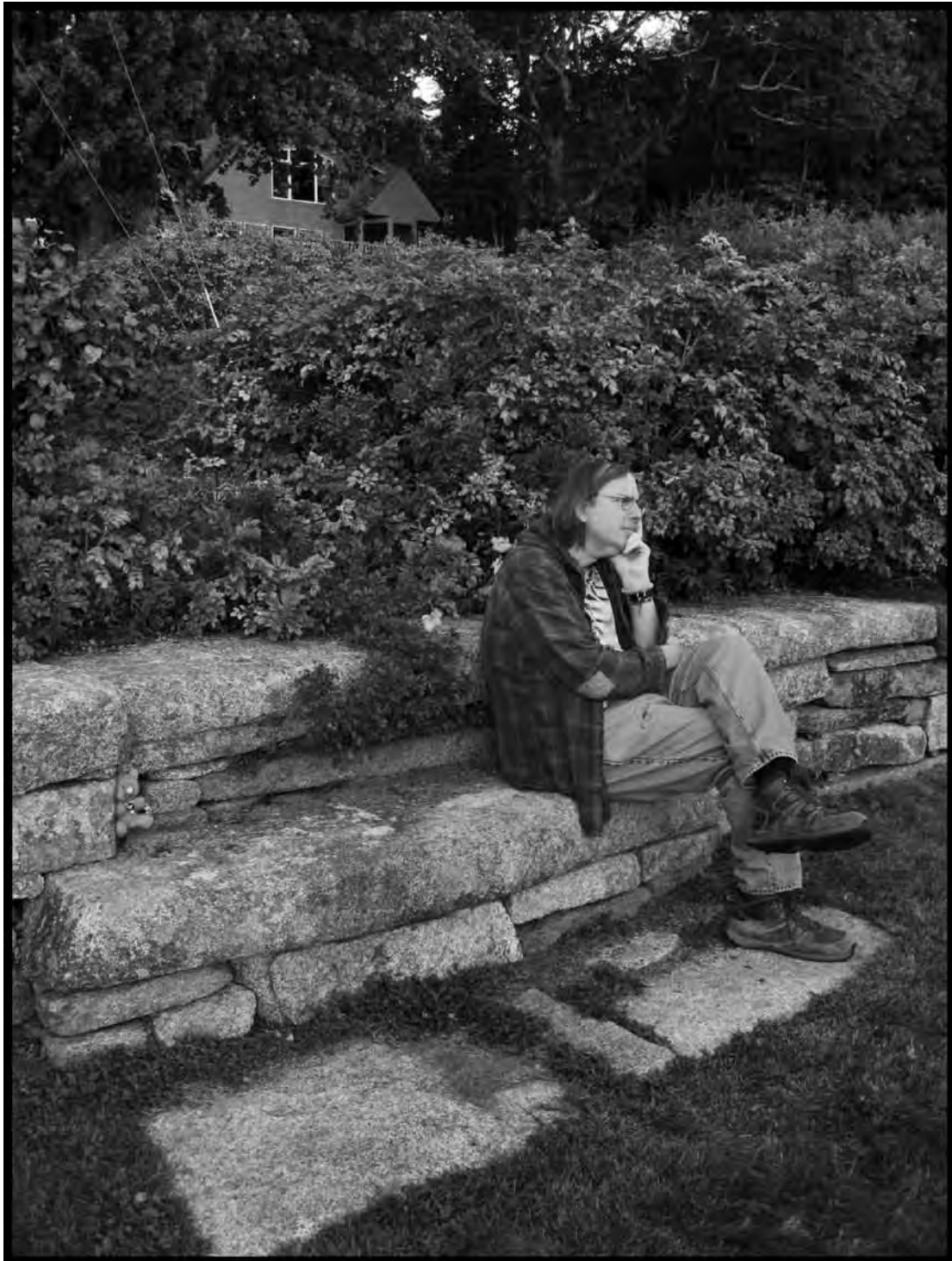
lxix.

[I'm descending a complicated series of ladders & stairs, among many people, continuously climbing down. I feel as I'm descending like it's not just space but time, I'm descending through places & people I've known & haven't known, times that still remain strange to me though I lived in them, through them, in spite of them. I think of people I knew, that I knew so closely, yes, yes, no, maybe. That's all you get at best. Then there are people I remember that became different to me over time. It's like who they are in my mind now is based on someone they once were, & who they actually are somewhere out there on the planet doesn't really matter anymore because they operate in my mind in a different way, they become a kind of a symbol of something, become tied to something, tied to a feeling, or tied to a memory, *tied to something*, like a mascot.]

Pirth pats my nose as we sit in a murky place along the Attic. He knows I'm shambling at times & this endless Attic feels like something powerful & inexplicable.

There is no time here as I keep returning from that otherworld I live in, days passing sometimes, to the precise moment I was at here. It's like in the course of an eyeblink I am *there* & then *back here*.

Does, should this bother me? I don't know. In time, no time. I should learn how to work them in some kind of harmony.



[It's like you were once my friend & now you're Cap'n Crunch. Now you're my mascot for regret, for youth, for fun, for foolishness. And I keep descending this series of ladders & stairs & I feel my limbs fall away from me & not really important anymore in this descent. This descent is not into a physical place. This descent is through dream, somewhere else. The faces fall away, as faces do, & other faces come, & they go too. If I'm lucky, as I fall away completely, I will look beyond the faces & see the rest of this wide, wide world.]

I look at Pirth who's crawled onto this page & is touching words & causing them glow purple like his fur. *This descent is through dream, somewhere else.* Hm, yes. OK.

lxx.

When I think back on those crazy days, back when I was a spy, there were some funny moments, in amidst the bloodshed & mayhem. There was one I still like to tell about. We had an operation going on in a hotel room. It was a big hotel room, big as an apartment.

[In the Hotel Noah, of course, that's this book's usual hotel, down the street from Luna T's Cafe, in The City, or some dream version of Hartford, or maybe somewhere else now, more, less, & other. A hotel, & something else, & something else still. So tall, so always cloudy at the top, other, *something else.*]

My partner & I were trying to tease something from the air, expose it. He'd brought in this heavy suitcase for our work. It was one of those bulletproof kinds. You could drop it from a hundred floors up & it'd be fine, wouldn't break or open up. You had to use the right thumbprint, & tumbler combination, & maybe a couple of secret handshakes to get into that bugged but, once you got into it, that's what you got. Bugs. In cans, & jars, & containers, all sorts of insects. Ants, praying mantises, hummingbirds, etc., etc.

[They'd been collected from across time & space, you must understand. This account is incomplete, maybe intentionally, maybe by ignorance of the full story. As you'll read, they, or some of their number at least, weren't ordinary insects. The searchers had been told these could help save the world most men had elected to destroy by intent, stupidity, or foolish fanaticism. Collect them, do not harm them, bring them to where & when told.]

I was unclear at first why we brought them in to set them loose, & then my partner took out from the suitcase what he called the Football. The Football was this football-shaped light &, when we set it up on a table, the bugs would gravitate towards it. The closer they got to it, the more likely it was they were going to evaporate. They'd evaporate.

[Now destroyed. No. The writer does not know what happened to them. He does not hear the *hmmm* drawing them, the glowing within the Football's light, the language few know exists, must less how to comprehend. The "evaporation" was simply transportation elsewhere, to where they were needed, & could help. Neither agent knows what's going on really. This account drifts further from facts.]

[In the same short loop he lived in, the only thing changing is that she would bring him a fresh drink at the beginning of each episode, which would be wearing down by the end.

[Time did pass around him but when Bowie came several times to check for him, he was always at the mark when he was in the bathroom, & she would smile flirtily & say she hadn't seen his friend but she was sure she could find him a table if he'd like to wait.

[Bowie smiled back, didn't. Left hotel eventually, wondering what had happened to his partner. Young, green, gullible, but a good man. Bowie'd liked him.

lxxi.

It was a very strange year indeed. I found myself often walking through a series of old factory buildings. It became my regular path. Between the buildings were these wide, wide alleys, dark, & I couldn't tell if they were filled with trash, or if people were living there, or something else stranger still was going on.

[What stranger might this be? Breaches in time & space? Whole villages in shadows? Depthless holes to? But go on.]

I'd always get to a certain point in this walk, or *perambulation*, as one of my stranger friends would call it, where I just had to go to the bathroom. There, over to my left, sort of embedded in one of these old factory buildings, was a red door. Next to the red door was a blacked-out window, but it had a neon sign in it to tell you what was going on. It said **Bar**.

[Red doors are strange & not like others. Those wide dark alleys . . . do they have red doors within them? I'm not sure. I'm struggling to know & say.]

So I'd go over to **Bar**, & it took me a few times to remember that you didn't just push the door open at **Bar**—you had to kick at the bottom twice, & push high immediately, to get the door open. Otherwise it wouldn't no matter what you did, because it was only that combination that worked. I can't tell you how I learned it, but somehow I did. Maybe someone showed it to me. *Who knows?*

[Do red doors always require such knowledge to open? I wonder if I'll come to a Red Door in this Attic?]

Anyway I'd go in, & the bar would be over to the left, & over to the right would be a bathroom stall. Not a bathroom, just a stall. Just a toilet surrounded by three flimsy walls & a door. And I'd go in, & close the door, & I reinforce it with the trash can that was there within the stall, since there was no lock, because inevitably someone would come banging against the door, wanting to use it, not recognizing that I was inside, not seeing my feet, not hearing my noises. [Is this an alley? Why would I think this? It's inside a building; how can it be an alley? What is the difference? What does any of this mean?]

It was often this woman, she'd come pounding at the door, yelling *Fucking secret Moon mission!* & I'd hurry & I wouldn't finish. I'd just escape the whole thing & often, perhaps every time, I'd be attracted to what was going on at the back of the bar because, you see, there was no back wall, there was just sort of a murky inkiness that trailed off for as far as the eye could see, & further.

[If the inkiness goes off in many directions, does it lead to the alleys? Do the alleys have a network amongst them, a series of red doors? I look at Pirth, wondering if he could tell me, if I could ask in the right words, in the right way. He dances quietly along, ribbons flying hither & yon in the glowing hallway we travel.]

And I'd find myself walking into the murkiness &, sure enough, there would be another bathroom, or rather just another stall, but this time nobody else competed for its space. So I'd walk in, I'd close the door, & it actually had a lock. I'd close my eyes to calm, & I swear sometimes I thought I could hear the sounds of a TV show or a movie going on, distantly. Maybe a laugh or two. But I had to get where I was going, so I regret to say I never walked deeper into the murkiness to see what it was. Lazy, cowardly? I don't know.

[Is there something more even than a networked series of alleys in that murky inkiness? A spaceship perhaps, half sunk in the earth? I've heard stories that make me wonder about this.]

lxxii.

Suddenly on the floor of the glowing Attic hallway there appear these words. I read them aloud to Pirth, who dances among them:

"Now this story started slow, those pages back there, so you could follow it really easily at the beginning, but now it's going to twist, & it's going to turn, & I'm not saying you can't do it, but I am saying maybe hang onto the rails a little bit more, just in case."

We walk into these words,
down & in & through.

lxxiii.

I'm sitting in a sort of coffee house in the Village. It runs back into its own murk for what seems like miles. And there's this turquoise-eyed girl I'm sweet on. Her name is Figga. I think I'm some other age. It might be younger, it might be older. It might just be some other kind of number. She's friendly but somewhat distant. I'm shy, don't know what to say. Probably I'm younger than I am now.

[How do I see others then? *How?* Her turquoise eyes, her oval smile face, leading to her shapely sweater, her long flowery dress. Her reddish-blond hair. What she thinks about poetry, about music, what her kiss tastes like. What her warm hand feels like. My later mind wonders what her moan is like when being fucked, how dark & deep her fantasies go, where her farthest

sexual fantasies lie. How to possess her farthest lands, not just be another cock in her, but the *only one that matters.*]

But I do my best, smile, talk about books, Mulronie & so on, & at some point she kind of smiles, & nods, & wanders away, & I see her go off with some pretty guy for a while.

[*Always* a fucking pretty guy. *Always.*]

Then later she's back, her long red hair now tied up in a fake bob, & I don't remember what we're talking about. It all feels like loneliness & yearning. I'm helpless, but I try to remember back, *how did I get here?* Maybe that'll help me figure out where I am now & what's next.

[“What's next?” I pull back to the Attic hallway, & kneel down low to look at & ask Pirth. He reaches up to pat my nose. Then resumes dancing on.]

I was on that green bus, the one that runs to the hospital, & I knew that most of the passengers on the green bus are not coming back tonight. It's the last green bus of the night. I got off it, not at the hospital, no, & I was walking the streets awhile, thinking about how a lot of them who stayed on the green bus were not coming back.

[Green bus. Red door. Glowing hallway. Pirth's purple fur. Her turquoise eyes. Blue-green Wide Wide Sea. Deep black of Deep Deep Sea.]

I was supposed to go to the hospital. The doctor said, *you just come on in, & we'll get you cleaned out & fix it all.* Then he added, *you could take your chance with the pills, maybe they'll help. Or you can heal on your own,* & he shrugged. So he really didn't know, & maybe he really didn't care. I'd had enough of that hospital. The crowded rooms, the quarreling roommates.

I cross the road toward this sort of coffee house, & I see the green bus in the distance, still heading to the hospital, going faster & faster. I know that driver; he won't stay on the street as he gets closer to the hospital. It takes hold of him, that feeling that most people he's driving are not coming back, it takes hold of him, & sometimes he'll drive off the road, into the ditch, & maybe he'll just stop for a moment for a minute, & sit silently, his bus half-tipped in the ditch.

He remembers a dream he had, it was a long time ago, but it feels like it applies to nights like tonight, when I'm feeling like this—*We were all lost, & so we traveled to an alternative time, where the world had been healed of all its ills, & it felt good, & it felt hopeful*—, & so that's how I first came here, this sort of coffee house, it being one of the crossroads amongst the many kinds of worlds. But then something terrible happened.

There was a great explosion of some kind, & there's no more sort of coffee house, & I have this naked red girl, red-haired girl, in my arms. What I am saying is, she's burned but she's also red-haired, red-haired and red-skinned in my arms. And we're being pursued, & I'm looking for an escape, somewhere, & finally I see it. I see that big house that I dreamed about all those years. Been awhile.



I remember there was an Attic, & there were many mirrored rooms, & you could just lose yourself in those many-mirrored rooms. I carry her, red-skinned & red-haired, clumsily climbing the fold-down ladder to climb up into the Attic.

Pirth & I arrive to the mirror & see you through it, & you look like me, but for the girl in your arms, & I have a Pirth, & you do not. Is this what we've come to here, finally? This strange moment where vision & being stand facing each other like this?

You turn away, & carry her over to a couch in the darkened living room on that side of the mirror. She does not stir in your arms yet is living. Is warm. I look down at you & wonder how I can heal your burns, wake you new?

A furry paw taps at me & I look at your deep dark eyes & see deeper into them than I have before, & something so powerful there as I gently lift you up, your fur now glowing beautifully & us both *hmmming* as I use you like a magick tool to pass over the girl's burned body, healing her clean & fine, every inch, slowly, glowing, *hmmming*, & then a gentle lift & push & we tend to her burned back side, & eventually she is clean & fine again, & I dig around in the drawers of the ancient chests & bureaus in this strange room & find lace underwear, ancient but they slip onto her hips & chest with ease, & a thick green & gold sweater over her top, & a long lacey flowery thick & flowing skirt for her lower half, & no shoes to be found, but a beautiful brown blanket with many handsome sober guarding bears upon it, soft & fringed blanket, long enough to cover her, & Pirth & I doze together in a nearby armchair, listening to her sleep peacefully, painlessly, all quiet.

lxxiv.

Time isn't linear, no, it's like a big field, moments, places, people, events.

It's hard to believe this, & yet only to be able to point & say, **that's where I came from, back there**, but not be able to point somewhere else & say, **that's where I'm bound, over there**.

lxxv.

He was known as Jack the Drug Dealer. He was a polite man, but he was in bad shape. Everybody knew it. The only hint you had of him from his older, better days was that paperback he carried around. *Unofficial Guide to Mulronie the Space Pirate's Universe*. You never saw him look at it, but you always got the feeling he just didn't have to, that he knew all its contents.

But then good luck came to him. He was sleeping in alleys, his only address a cavernous bookstore nearby that was kindly to him. Most of the time, if he ate at all, it was from the licorice roots found in a nearby park. But then good luck came to him, he won some money in some kind of contest, & grew confident, and he was now head of a charity organization, with ten nodes of business. He was on the top; his clothes were clean.

I was new on the job, & I heard this story about him in pieces over time. Then one day I got

called into his office. It wasn't that big an office for the big head of a charity organization. I don't think he ever quite left the alley in some way.

We ended up sitting on the floor together. He told me a story. He said, *there was this baseball game & I was in the outfield. They put me out there because they figured that was the place where I could do the least damage. **I was their mascot, because I won a contest with my friends.** People paid to see me stand in the outfield & wave to them. They were pretty good defensive team, so not many balls came out my way.*

*But then one time this ball was hit hard, I heard it, it was a **crack!** a beautiful sound, strange to say, & I think it's going to go over my head, but then it starts to arc low, & I start rushing toward it, & for a moment I forget that I'm no good at baseball, & I don't know why I'm here. I'm in the outfield because they have no use for me, just short of not having me at all. I just leap into it, my body arcs low, & the ball is curving low, & they are going to meet, my glove & this ball, & what happens is this: I squeeze my glove with my eyes closed &, by the single thread hanging off the ball, because it was hit so hard that it was kind of tattered, I catch it & hold it above the ground. I catch it cleanly.*

*Nobody realizes. They think I'd just kind of fumbled & jumped & fell my way toward near it somehow. And they were yelling at me to **throw to home plate!** because the monster that had hit this ball was going to get an inside-the-park home run off my sorry ass. But I raise the ball up, & I yell, **I caught it clean!** And then, just to convince them all, I hurl that ball toward home plate. It's a beautiful throw, straight on, arrives cleanly in the catcher's glove. I'm not capable of that throw, wasn't then, not now, not ever.*

*Later, someone asked me to autograph the inside of a milk carton. He said, **this carton's covered in signatures & statements by heroes, & you're one.** So I did.*

"Because you caught that ball, sir?"

"Yes."

"That made you a Hero?"

"Yes. It did."

"No, it didn't."

He stares at me.

"You're a Hero because you kicked your habit & you're here."

"I guess."

"You guess?"

"I just got lucky, son. Won some money in a contest."

"You read Mulronie too?"

"Yah, I do. Did. Don't really have time for it now."

"All five?"

"Yah."

"Wishing at night there was a sixth?"

"Yah, hard. Then."

"He's a Hero."

"Yah."

"You caught a baseball. That's all. You were a Hero like Mulronie before you came here."
 He's silent. Doesn't know who or what I am. Better this way.
 Smiles briefly.
 "Now get out of my office. Get back to work, son."

lxxvi.

Pirth leads me from all this through a watery wall in the Attic to a rocky beach to behold the Wide Wide Sea. He dances back through the watery wall & I shuffle & stumble my way along among the larger & smaller stones, countless evergreens behind me, to my left & right. There's also great whited-out tree trunks strewn here & there, & I bring *Labyrinthine* over to sit on one.

The Wide Wide Sea sparkles in what feels & looks like noontime sun. Can light bouncing off water be a kind of language, a communiqué from hidden sources, a sparkling code?

The rocks are bigger than me, & I'm over six foot, as I approach the water. The Sea's rhythmic song stays with me as I pause & retreat, no mystery solved, maybe new ones seen.

It's easy to say, in a beautiful & peaceful moment place like this, that the world is perfect beyond all reckoning, that somewhere along the way men & women turned too inward to their own kind, confused dwelling on a piece of land, building homes from its materials, with ownership.

The world is why we're here, & we return after a long run to its earth, its air, its water. Nobody has ever eluded this fact. Not King nor beggar nor prettiest smile girl. Not any gnat nor greatest tallest tree. The Sea's song reminds us we are not alone, not orphans, not unloved, & waited for patiently like every other.

Its sparkling code says to me, right now,
 like the old poem:

Smile.
Wake up!
Happiness

lxxvii.

There's always these kinds of confusions between one thing & another. I'm sure you've been involved in a few yourselves. You see, this occurred during the Civil War & football. My squad is in the other side's war-torn territory, & we need to find some room for our kicker, when their soldiers rush at us, & we shoot them down so he can kick the go-ahead field goal. And he does. He's very good, you see. *Very good.*

And now we're ahead, holding a slim lead. We then find ourselves in some kind of building.

There are many of them as well. We're all getting food, it's like a cafeteria. *Is this like a timeout? Halftime?*

Now we're returning back to battle, & we get the word that Headquarters wants us to put on a big To-Do, & I am getting confused as to whether this is the Civil War & football, or possibly a Grand Production on the stage in the classic traditions of Vaudeville & Creature Carnival.

[Have I even seen anyone shot & die yet? Even dying? Lotta blood, yes, but is it real? Is any injury fatal? *What is any of this?* My soldier's uniform is tight on my chest & loose below. I study my rifle, no bullets, light as a feather. Pirth is dancing quietly on this battle/football field. I pluck him up & find ample, safe jacket pocket to tuck him in.]

[[I find myself crawling over the stage, & people are waving at me in a confusion of lights, music, & noise. It just seems chaotic, & I'm trying to figure what's going on, when I fall through this stage, & I fall & fall & fall, until I land in the lounge of a kind of library in a very strange museum. I see in this lounge drawings of a red-haired girl that my friend Harry likes. He made them when they went to dinner. Told me with a shit-eaten grin that her name is Figga.]]

[[[Museum? In these White Woods? Yes, of course. The Thought Fleas Museum. I believe it only opens during the annual Rutabega Festival they host. Features many artworks made for Fleastock, the arts exhibition that occurs during the Festival.]]]

[[But then I blink twice, & they're not there, & I realize, *wow, this was one of those prognostications.* I saw pictures that haven't been made yet. And I turn to him, he's lying there on one of the other couches, passed out in between a boy & a girl, as is his preference. Ask him, *which one?* He'll say, every time, *Yes!*

[[I tell him about those drawings of that girl he really likes, & how they went out to dinner, & while they were at dinner he pulled out his sketchpad because he's very good, you see, he's *very good.* He drew a beautiful, elegant, sweet, lovely portrait of her, giving special attention to her turquoise eyes, & she squirmed about in her seat at the restaurant, wondering who else was watching, & many were, but she liked these drawings very much.]]

I get up & leave him to think about this, his life, his future decisions. Whether this lounge life with its pretty toys is worth it still. Walk along this vast murky room, Pirth safe in my pocket, & the soldier's uniform melts like a mist off me, but now he's in my regular green plaid jacket front pocket, & I think to myself, *isn't it funny how where you start & where you end in these things can have virtually no relation to one another.*

lxxviii.

Houses & many trees, it's nighttime, & I'm lost. No phone to call anyone to pick me up. Then

some fast figures appear, chasing, laughing wickedly, & they seem to herd me along, but they don't capture me. Then someone else they're herding along too despairs & gives in, allows capture, but then regrets it with a yowl.

But I don't. I just don't, & they herd me along, & eventually there's a green bus, & it doesn't seem to stop in this neighborhood. But I run for it, pound at its door, pound & pound it. It slows, & I get my fingers inside the door, & I yank it open just enough to squeeze in. I climb on, & I give the driver a dirty look, like *dare me to pay you, just dare me*.

Pirth still in my plaid green jacket pocket, resting comfortably, & me wondering *what is this strange adventure we are on?* How & what will I report back to Flossie Flea in those far back there White Woods? Will I miss this year's Rutabega Festival & Fleastock? Is there something I should be looking for or trying to understand along these travels? I look down & Pirth reaches paw up to pat my nose with affection & reassurance. Creatures understand so much I don't.

The green bus rides strangely & bumpily out to the hospital, veering on purpose into a ditch at one point, the driver sitting there staring for a while, like his mind is shut off. But eventually it comes around again, & I make it home. Start to make up our bed, but it's a vast bed, & it's covered in papers that I push to one side to get the blankets better spread. They're from a manuscript I can't seem to organize into a proper book. I hate looking at these pages & feeling my failure. Mulronie waiting at the far end of the neighborhood, so patiently.

I pop Pirth out of my pocket & he hops down to the scattered manuscript pages, & his strange dancings affect them in some magickal way; they begin to dance too, like he does, back & forth, back & forth, back & forth, side to side, & they begin to organize, assemble in a way I'd not thought. Too focused on how they should be by my lights, not enough on how they should be *by their own*.

OK, then. I start singing to myself, after this hard, strange night, that old song,

*Goin' down the road, feelin' bad.
Goin' down the road, feelin' bad.
Goin' down the road, feelin' bad, feelin' bad,
& I don't wanna be treated this-a way.*

It's late now, & I'm thinking, *man, it'd be good to sleep*.

I lie down, push the papers again to one side, more of them, they seem to be accumulating again on the bed. *We lost so many, Mulronie. What do I do with the rest?*

lxxix.

You know those kind of sunny, sunny days. Oh yes, those kind of sunny, sunny days when you find yourself sitting in a patch of grass, maybe just a big old field, nothing going on in that big old field, nothing having to do with people & their mighty small concerns, no sir-ee. There's

just grass growing, maybe a tree, insects, small animals, whatever else.

Shade or sun, where to sit? I've drunk my Lucy juice, I'm escalating up & relaxing at the same time, feeling the magickal buzz coming on, & the sun might glow my closed eyes bright, but the shadows dance, play, daunt & delight me. Shade or sun? I sit on the border.

I find myself watching this insect pick its way along the grass. It's sort of shaped like a stick with legs. I can't even figure out where its head is. It's a very strange insect, & it puts me into a sort of reverie because I start remembering this red-haired girl I knew a long time ago. Her name was Figga. Strange name, eh? But Figga was her name, & I was in her house, & I was comin' down the basement stairs. I had this uncommon way of coming down these stairs. Halfway down, I sort of swung from them & sideways into the basement. Done it many times.

It reminded me of my youth, maybe it's why I came over so often, this basement, my childhood, that basement, my toy trucks & little brown & white horses. My Nerf football games, using chairs for players, using my imagination, another world, a waking dream midst my waking nightmares.

Well, OK, you might say, so how did you know Figga? Well, I think she was my neighbor, & I'd come over to her house to fix things. *And was she old or young?* Well, I'm not really sure. She kind of seemed like she was a little bit of both, & it seemed like everything that needed to be fixed was in her basement. I think that's where she kept broken things. I think she liked to keep all the things that didn't work or needed fixing in one place.

That old childhood basement, & its many dusty & moldy boxes, its old furniture, its mementos & trinkets, its dirty windows, its bare bulbs hanging in the various corners. The noisy grinding washer & dryer that I know now cleaned little. Not enough detergent. I'd bet so. Stupid things I knew far too late.

So I'd come in, & I'd be the fixer-guy, & I had no skills, & I didn't even have any tools. She bought me the tools at the local tool store, what they call in technical terms the *hardware store*. I'd come down, oh 'bout once a week, for a while, & I'd see what had broken & what she needed fixing. Sometimes it was something that had broken in her house, & sometimes she just found things out in the world that were broken, & she thought, *oh well, he'll fix them, he's good with the tools & the skills*. But I wasn't good at either the tools or the skills.

Things of mine from my old childhood basement began to show up too, & I tried twice harder to fix them. The little brown horse on orange wheels. The little brown wooden chair I would hand off to when a running play was called for. *I tried harder to be good with the tools & the skills*

But what fascinated her about me was that I had once lived on a mythical Island out far, far in the Wide Wide Sea. It did not have any attachments to the roots of the earth. I'd gone out there when I was a student. It was one of those exchange programs where I got to live for awhile and study on this Island.

But I must admit I wasn't very good at it because, although it was a very big Island, it wasn't actually even finished, & I used to find myself sort of floating at the edge of it, with my notebooks, & sometimes they would float away from me, & that seemed far more important to me than anything else that was happening on this Island. In fact, I can't even tell you what was happening on this Island, or what I was supposed to be studying.

All I know was that I had a hard time keeping my stuff together & that really wasn't very much fun. But Figga, she just couldn't get enough of hearing that I had lived for awhile as a young student on a mythical Island. And then she'd hand me somethin' else to fix, her turquoise eyes twinkling, & the conversation would continue elsewhere.

Pirth & I are sitting in Figga's basement now, it was through a dusty door in the Attic, down the same stairs, my same leap into it, Pirth in my big paw, ribbons flying, & we land.

There's an old blue suitcase sitting in one of the old wooden chairs I'd drop back to pass to. I look down at Pirth who is strangely calm & still & looking up at me & staring me with his dark dark little eyes.

"It's got a box of threads, a strange map, a little sack of icons, & a secret green & gold sack of 6 or 7 colored stones," I say to him, not touching the suitcase.

OK, OK, I pick it up, & Pirth up, & we go back up the stairs.

lxxx.

This happened long ago, or far on from now, depending on your point in things. In the year 2402, or was it 24,002? I'm not sure of the details, but my love & I are in a house we share with another couple. We've been away but now are returning, & it's still new to us, even though it's an old house. There's still shelves to build, places on the walls for pictures. How can something be both new & old? Known & novel, *how?*

And I don't think it matters so much if it's 2402, or 24,002, or Timbuktu. There's always a couple, a house, the new, the novel. Our bodies blessed with time, finite time, blessed more with minds that can stretch a joyous moment or tragic one out a year, a century, an eon. Nothing to understand but everything yet to know.

I leave the next morning, very early, to go to school, to try to catch up. I'm behind on my classes, & haven't paid for anything. And I think what happens is that I walk down the wrong hallway, & I arrive at the wrong school, & I get turned around, & I end up on the ceiling. But it's one of those places where you can walk on the ceiling, & walk on the floor, & everything kind of spins around, & time passes, & I come upon a girl who seems friendly enough, & I ask her what time it is. She says, *it's 1:30*. I want to ask her what year, but I just quietly despair.

Open my eyes, slumped against wall in the Attic hallway, purple furred Pirth on my knee, & I lean down, & he reaches up, & furry paw pats nose. *Ahh yess.*

lxxxi.

So this is what happens when you go to that strange Nada Theater, at that strange No-Tel, after midnight, well after midnight. You've seen more of **Remoteland** tonight, sure, it went on for hours, it seemed like for more hours than there are in a night. But now, if you can outlast the crowds, such as they are, stay on & on in your seat, don't find some reason to leave or let someone persuade you it's time to go & have a malted at the local sugar emporium, you might get to see the movie that comes on near dawn, pre-dawn they call it. You might get to see **More Fun**.

Advertised in the local newspaper thus:



It's a strange world of **More Fun**. It's like our world but worse, if you can imagine that. No zombies, no vampires, no nuclear apocalypse. No, something happens, & people just start dying. They get weak, & never recover from this weakness. And what's funny, though not really, is that when the weak ones start to die, they sort of melt away, parts of them becoming invisible. Still there, but invisible. Then the invisible parts fade out completely. Some people call these poor unfortunate souls Melties.

Our hero, such as he is one, is the Postman. He finds a gun shop, & takes a few, & then he finds a grocery, & ransacks it for food. Then he leaves his known places behind, & eventually meets up with a man called the Recruiter.

The Recruiter is rebuilding the population of the world by killing the Melties. He does it kind; they never see it coming. Often he spends a last night with them, sharing their meal, maybe singing their songs, letting them tell memories of what it used to be like. How it is now, maybe any hopes they have left. Kills them quickly in their sleep, buries them carefully somewhere peaceful. If he can't do it mercifully, then he parts them still breathing, still melting.

But his goal is for humans to finish the race, & then the world will carry on from there. He's good at finding people in holes & hideaways. He says to the Postman, the first night they are traveling together, *we just can't have human beings like Melties, who are more like hotel soap in a*

hot shower. We just can't have them.

I look up from the newspaper ad suddenly, or down, at Pirth still on my knee, & I realize, *yah, I wrote all about this already not long ago, so what more now?*

What about those Melties? What does it feel like to melt, lose one bit of one's self, & then the next, to nothing? Is there phantom pain? Is it painless? Is there acceptance? Is it better or worse than the burial or the burn?

lxxxii.

It's Attic still but it's more White Woods now too, two are one, as ever & always. Pirth dances along happily, a Creature, loves, native to these Woods. I try my few dance moves again, just to see.

I just wonder, as I travel through these White Woods horizontally, a sugar cube of LSD melting through me, allowing me to travel in this new & pleasurable way, I just wonder: *how it is that the Woods more welcomes me this way, horizontally? What is it about my human form that fits better this way?*

I come at last to the road that I didn't know was here, because there are no roads in the White Woods, & yet here is this road, passing through the White Woods, it's a simple paved road. *What does that mean?* And I'm feeling for my horizontality, *but it's gone*. I'm upright & walking again. Whatever that was, it's gone. It feels like I'm walking on this road forever & ever, but never getting anywhere.

A touch at my ankle below, a beautiful furry purple paw. *Oh. Why do I forget?* Who am I when I *know* in contrast to who I am when I *don't know*?

No answers. Just dance dance dance along these nearly pathless White Woods & wonder as well at how much of the rest of the world is *far less interesting*.

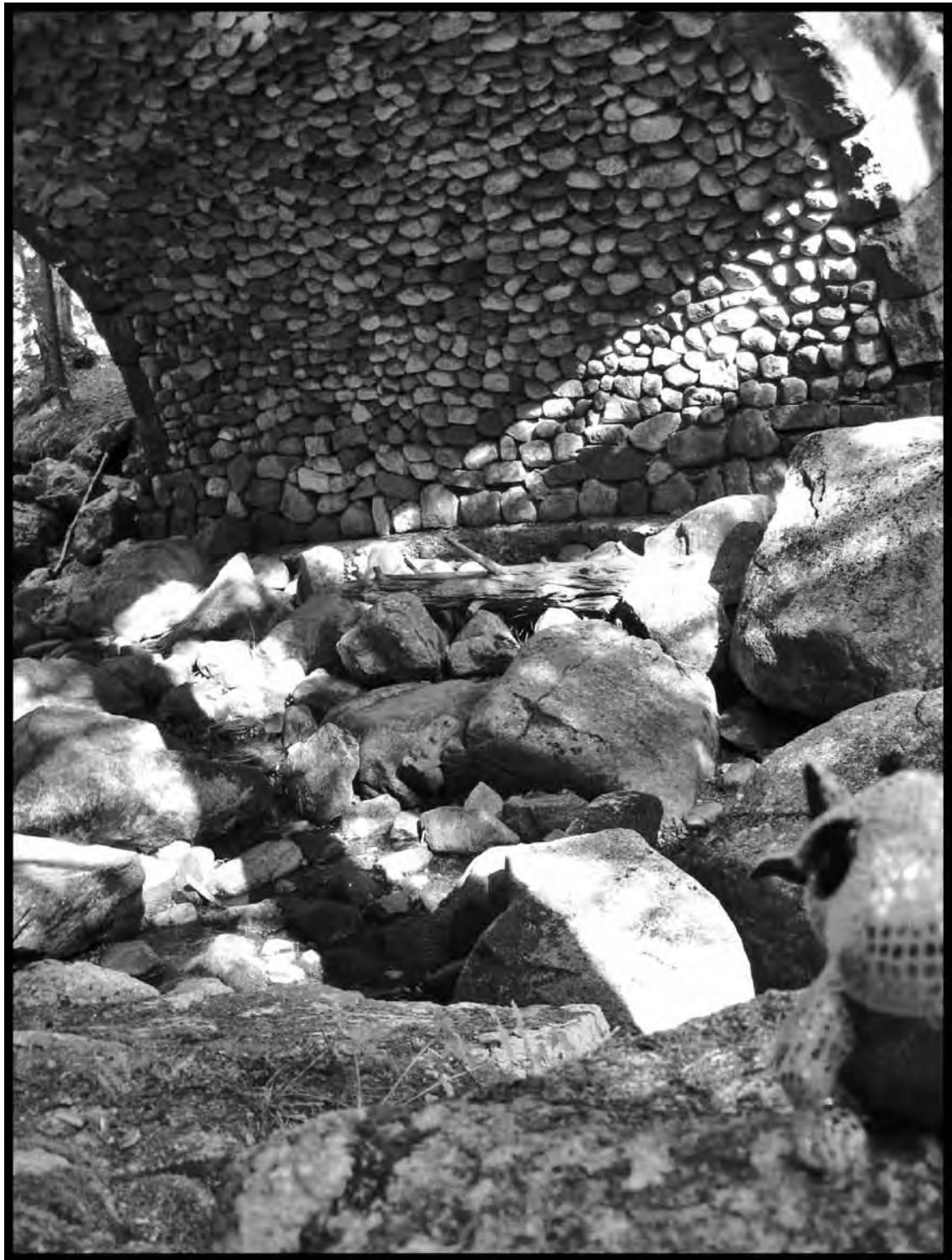
Why am I not here more?

Familiar. Strange. Mysterious fun. Something new in it most every time. Thrill in it big or small.

Keep coming back.

lxxxiii.

There's lots to say about when I was a student. Lots of crazy things, lots of subtle quiet things. Lots of things that I can't say too, like they were just of their time, of their moment. They weren't things that traveled through space & time to be tellable at some later time. They're just not; it's not possible.



A song among its own time's songs.
 A fad after the previous one.
 A fear of something to come, & it didn't come to pass.
 Someone still alive, famous or just your own, & that no longer.

I had this lady teacher at one point, & I go over to her house. I think she was having a party & I was invited. It was one of those parties where all the students show up, & the teachers, & everybody relaxes, calms down a bit. Not in the classroom right now, don't have to put on an act, not as a student or a teacher.

Smoke some ganja together.
 Talk about how good & bad these days are.
 Smile new & strange each other.

She was a good teacher, she taught history. I wasn't a very good history student because, at that time, I didn't understand that wherever you drop your coin in the stream of humanity, anywhere along it, by time or place, you're going to find most of the same things. They resemble each other way more than they don't. She tried to teach me that then, & I only learned it later on my own, sloppily. Took way too long.

And this sort of comforting & maybe sort of not.

I sat with her at this party, on the floor, in a corner out of the main action. I had the impression that she'd never eaten magic mushrooms before, & I offered her some from a paper bag I had with me. She took a look at the bag, peeked inside, pulled out one of the little curled bits to hold in her hand, examine, sniff. She smiled. She was kind of an older lady, but not too old.

[Oh really? Once she had eaten so many she found herself sitting on the back deck of a middle-sized suburban house watching a hand with a pen write all the words that follow here]

Then I told her I had something else too. I pulled from my pocket, in a rather debonair way, as though offering her a Cuban cigar, a really long blunt, & I started telling her about the times that I had lived in out West, in Seattle & Portland, how I'd go trippin' on Saturdays. I told her that I'd been poor & jobless & struggling then, & writing saved me on those tripping Saturdays, all those years ago. A black pen, a notebook of lined white sheets, a tab of Lucy, my Walkman & bag of rock-&-roll cassettes, & a green city to play through.

She looked at me curiously & said, *well, how old are you?*

And I said, *well, I'm 22, ma'am.*

And she said, *well, what years ago are you talking about?*

And I said, *well, truth be told, I'm talking about the future. Now if you want to take a few of those mushrooms & chew them on down, you might understand a little better what I'm saying. But it's OK if you don't.*

And she said, *well, so what was the craziest time you ever had out there, with those crazy Saturdays*

you're telling me about?

And I said, *well, I don't know whether I am being a clown & entertaining you, like that guy on TV, or if you really care, but I'll tell you a story that didn't actually happen. It was more like a fantasia that I might have conjured up while hanging out in an alley one time. One of the homeless guys was saying to me, oh yeah, this was years ago, I was in the Woods, & there's women tied to the trees, all over the place. Now they weren't victims or kidnapped, nothin' like that, no. They liked it, they liked being tied up to the trees, & fucked that way too. It was really good, those nights, & there was nothing profound about it at all. So take that, Mr. Book Learning, you take that. It's the kind of reality that's out there for you to find.*

And so I told this story to the teacher, & she looked at me, smiling still, & said something I'll never forget. She said, *the key thing to being tied to a tree & fucked is that your hands are tied properly, not too tight, not too loose, & then when the man screws you, he positions your hips just right.*

And after that I knew, whether this lady ever had or ever would eat magic mushrooms, she'd always be OK in my book.



To be continued in Cenacle | 102 | December 2017

* * * * *



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine [a new fixation]

Part Eleven

*"I must create a system,
or be enslaved by another man's"*
—William Blake, "Jerusalem."

Interlude: A Tribute

It was the day the Trickster came to Luna T's Café. Long blonde-haired & blue-eyed, a near-always-present smirk, friendly one. He'd come from somewhere else not long before but had heard from the Traveling Troubadour that this place was quite welcoming.

The day began early at Luna T's Café, with the door opening & Mr. Bob the barman stepping in. A middle-sized man, on the slender side, short pepper-grey hair, a friendly smile for most, if not all comers. The Trickster would come to like him a lot.

Pulls on the string attached to the neon sign telling the joint's name, & it being open. Could walk blindfolded through the darkened bar to the back room where he deposits his coat & hat. Finds his apron, old but sturdy, ties it on. Colourous splatter patterns all over it, gift of a friend long ago. Cackles in that back room. His & a mysterious other's.

Comes out to the barroom again, still no lights on, walks around turning on machines for awhile. Beer taps, jukebox, radio, TV.

Briefly back outside in the cool autumn air, linger, linger, breathe, smile, plucks his copy of the *City Tymes* from the milk crate next to the door. Paperboy gets an extra dollar a week to land it there every day, pull the makeshift cover over it on wet ones.

Finally with paper walks to the switch box on the wall behind the bar & flips & flips till the whole place is turned on & ready to.

Radio behind the bar is an old tabletop model. Learned how to fix it himself a few years ago. Swap out



tubes. Found friendly souls online who loved old machines too, & hoarded good parts to sell.

Bit of warming up, static, then the usual oldies station. The morning DJ had been bending the format lately, playing songs by that recently passed rocker Tom Petty, one a day. Said management allowed him one a day.

All rock & roll made Mr. Bob think of his friend Rich Americus, who owned Luna T's Cafe & led the place's house band, Noisy Children. And Petty one of Rich's greatest heroes at that.

Runnin' down a dream
rang the guitars
that never would come to me
ring! ring!
workin' on a mystery
ring lower
goin' wherever it leads
drums pound-pound-pound
runnin' down a dream

Song soars on shouts & harmonies, raises up & up, Mr. Bob turns it up a little, getting it a little more.

The *Tymes* reporting how another famous man was caught groping girls in his employ. Seems like all those big shots couldn't keep their hands off asses, up skirts, wherever something soft & shapely was near.

Wondering what it meant, *really meant*. Not simplistic newspaper ink, scandal vampires.

But just then an old, old man burst through the door. Short, indistinctly shaped beneath his winter-heavy coat. Crying out from his ancient depths upon arrival.

“Saloon-Keeper, the days grow shorter & darker! The trials of man more cartoonish, more desperate! Even in the golden sun we are become a cold, self-obsessed kind! Dreams of plastic molding, vague, crumbling, & the next, & the next, & the next!”

Waiting for more as he watches Dr. Arnold T. Knickerbocker settle on his usual stool, ancient cane resting by his leg.

Wondering if this man was ever young enough or randy enough to pinch a girl's bottom just because, Mr. Bob fetches the old man's craggy mug & pours him spring water, kept room temperature as his preference. His decades, centuries at the bourbon over, mostly.

Sits, staring at nothing, sipping very occasionally, Dr. K feels a small presence in his lap. Knows, without looking down, that it is the White Bunny, come in these ridiculously still living years to nap near to him, *hmmm* softly up into his ears, sometimes stare into his eyes & take him so far elsewhere he cannot recall here or there for a happy time.

“That was the late great Mr. Tom Petty, rocking out in his glories with the Heartbreakers, & this is

Commander Q keeping you musical company this A.M.”

A long time passes. Knickerbocker present but not. Radio back to the more usual oldies. The Association, The Turtles, Gordon Lightfoot.

Mr. Bob reads on: “I was young then, 26. He called me into his office to discuss my project. Invited me to sit in his lap. He wasn’t my boss but he was important. It happened a few times. I never told anyone but he was gross. I felt awful.”

A voice suddenly. “He hired the pretty ones. Bet you every one of them had years of lap invitations to call their own. Bet they calculated the worth of each lap too, once they figured it out.”

Mr. Bob looks up. Bowie the spy, long unseen around here. “That’s pretty cynical, son. Is that what you believe?”

Bowie is tall, quite thin, one blue-green eye, one mushroom eye. Dressed . . . vaguely.

“I don’t believe anything about human behavior. There are social norms, not universal ones. But what I do believe drives men & women alike are hunger for power, & fear of powerlessness. No gender or race or ethnicity or kind of human holds major stock in angelic or asshole behavior. We all shake what we got. Some shake it better. Some have more to shake.”

“And that’s it?” Mr. Bob pours him a glass from the unmarked turquoise bottle kept special for him.

Nods. Sips. Smiles. “No. But it’s a damned good part of it. Everyone wants to grab ass, just that most of us refrain. Cuz we’re trained, afraid? Maybe. And who doesn’t want their ass grabbed, by the right person in the right moment? Nothing’s straight & nothing’s simple.”

Mr. Bob nods. “But an asshole’s still an asshole.”

Bowie nods & toasts & sips.

Turns to the little blue & pink piglet sitting smirking on the stool next to him.

“Ya think?”

Smirk. “I do.”

“And?”

Smirk but silence.

Awhile quiet again in the lit but still murky bar, & then Mr. Bob puts on a new TV show he’s taken to.

“Welcome, friends, to *New TripTown!*” cries the affable-looking woman with the microphone that looks like a kind of whittled-down branch. The theme song plays. Mr. Bob perks up. He’d heard this one the other day. Bouncy, electric fun.

*Baby, even the losers
Get lucky some time!*

It’s a tense game for the very very tall black man with the long long beard, answering question after question; his prize, if he wins it, a map to the Island that houses the Tangled Gate. His dream to bring

his aging father to the Fountain there, perhaps restore him to health, or at least make his passing less excruciating.

“Where is the Tangled Gate from?”

“Emandia!”

“Who lives under the Tangled Gate?”

“The Creatures!”

“Who lives in the Cave?”

“The Beast!”

“How does the Princess navigate the Gate!”

“The box of threads!”

Aunt, she of the long braid & heavy boots, agelessly handsome, turns to the TV camera & says, “Two more questions tomorrow for the Grand Prize!”

Mr. Bob turns down the TV as live music erupts from the other room. *New Trip Town* shifts a few times before it seems to synch with the music:

- * A cartoon Mr. Tom Petty racing with a small cigar chomping imp through the wilds of Dreamland
- * A guitar strumming Mr. Tom Petty riding high through the late '80s mall wasteland of LA
- * A Mad Hatter Mr. Tom Petty & his Mad Cohorts torturing a blonde Alice before feasting upon her
- * A mad scientist Tom Petty waltzing with a dead blonde siren through a narrow mansion's darkened rooms

“It's about power & death!” cries a wildly drunken Bowie as he leads the White Bunny, the blue & pink piglet, & some little black & white pandy bears he found one time cackling on the ceiling of the men's room, leads them all to the band room to dance.

The Trickster strolls in quietly in the midst of all this, long purple coat & tails, handsome top hat, small round spectacles. Blonde, blue-eyed. Wordless, he finds himself a corner to pause & take this all in. Beautiful smirk. Sitting right beneath the Hendrix at Woodstock '69 poster. Of course.

Thank you, Mr. Tom Petty. Your music ever makes me happy. You have my love always.

lxxxv.

I woke up in the White Woods, wasn't sure how I'd gotten there. I lied there on the Woodsy floor, trying to reach back in my mind, eyes closed, breathing calm, thinking. *How did I get here? Am I injured? No. I don't feel injured. Sore? A little.*

There's a small glass jar, clear, with a brown screw cap, on the ground near me, half-filled with what looks like orange juice, & I pick it up. Half drunk? Half drunk. Weird thought: should I drink the rest? I don't yet.

Lying here on the Woodsy floor for hours on end, sleeping or whatever it is I was doing, passed out maybe? *How did I get here?* Eventually, I find myself also sinking down below the Woodsy floor where I have been lying, below what's around me, below questions about injury & feeling. Pull my glass jar

along with me, & the sinking is slow enough to allow me to unscrew the cap & sip, sip again. Tis orange juice indeed. Is it electrified? I'd bet so, given all this unknowing of mine.

I find myself traveling again through a city, with others, traveling together. I don't see their faces but we're walking close together, familiarly, there's a sort of complementariness to our pace, to the way we swing our arms & move our legs. Some of us are bigger, some are smaller, some walk naturally faster, some slower, but there's a familiarity to it.

And in my plaid green jacket front pocket is my dear friend Pirth, glowing & purple furred & ribboned & bowed as ever. I bend my head down, he reaches up paw to pat my nose. At one point, we end up on a hill above the city & I'm just trying to figure it out. *What does all this mean to that me, who's lying a little bit sore on the Woodsy floor, there, over there? I can see you, over there, lying on that Woodsy floor. You can see me. Can you see me? Yes, I can see you, with those familiar people on that hill looking down on a city. How did we? I don't know. Am I the past & you're the future, or vice versa? Did I go from city to Woods or Woods to city? I'm not sure. Are we happening together at the same time, on parallel tracks? Which one of me is lying alone, deep in the White Woods, & which one of me is on this hill, sitting among these dear people whose faces I can't quite see, looking down on the city, thinking almost everything is in sight?*

I reach across my hand to you to grasp yours. Warm, familiar, a flow between that is different & the same. I lose myself in this awhile, then a purple furry paw touches too, & *ahhh*, I see the Woods around me, I see the city down there below, our hands release though we each now find a Pirth nearby. *Lovely.*

lxxxvi.

Watch him build that world, watch him puff them out from his fingertips, look at that, look at that one, it's green & blue, look at that one, it's roiling with earthquakes, look at that one, it's a million suns in one, look at that one, look at that one, look at that one.

I nod at Pirth & he resumes dancing our way through the White Woods, merrily, are we still in the Attic as well?

lxxxvii.

Along & along in the White Woods & at first there seems no sign of people-folks. Their ways & things. And there's no paths, not a one, & I'm not bound for somewhere, so I'm not looking for a path. I'm not looking for anything. I look at the tree trunks, some of them smooth, some of them gnarled, branches in every direction, leaves of different colors, needles, the bushes below. Everything is almost still, there's just a bit of a wind, just a bit of something moving in addition to me.

Sipping on jar of electric orange juice, watching Pirth dance ahead of me, marveling at how, in a way, he is a kind of juice, & these White Woods too, in their way, & I suppose even human consciousness too.

These White Woods are peaceful. Safe? Safe. And I suppose that the unstillness here makes me feel better because if it was completely still here, & I was the only one moving, the only entity, the only thing, I'd feel like I'm troubling the stillness, but the wind, if wind is sentient, if it is, if it isn't, it assures me that no, I move, other things move. Maybe things move that I can't even see.

Pirth isn't still. Almost never still.

And human things aren't still, beat & breath, beat & breath.

And the world isn't still. Ever. *Not now. Ever.*

And I come upon, & it's shocking, I come upon a man-made thing. It's hard to figure what it is. It's a long structure, sort of dilapidated, looks like it's been assembled over the course of decades or centuries. There's rust on some of it, looks reinforced in some places. I walk in, & it's like entering into a tunnel from that almost-stillness that I was in.

I & Pirth. I'm not an I in his company. Don't know what he is, what I am, but here we are, a *we*.

I see that many kinds of metal & wooden structures have been bolted, nailed, strapped, taped together, to form a tunnel, & I wonder where it's going to bring me, if anywhere at all. And then I come to a kind of a brightly lit place, strangely colored but not disturbing. There's curvy seats that are sort of built into the wall, & the floors are soft, & the ceiling vague, almost space-age.

Pirth doesn't come in. Not even a sniff. I guess, hope, I'll find him again when I come outside.

I find my seat along the wall. It smoothes into me, gathers me in softly & firmly. There's a fireplace nearby, wasn't there just a moment ago, but there it is & it's not been started. I find my pencil & my little notebook, & I think maybe to scribble a word or two, but then I see that my thumb's nail is split & bloody, & it's going to be hard to write anything. I don't know whether to keep on, go back, or stay awhile.

lxxxviii.

It all come down to what you're gonna do, & how you're gonna do it, & that counts almost everywhere, in all types of situations. I was in the back of a Jeep, back where I come from. I was riding with an old friend, laughing, colorful. One of those guys you meet along the way that's just bigger than everybody else. Pays attention in a certain way, loves the music more, loves everything more. Wails pretty on his guitar till deep in the night becomes early in the morning.

It's nice to see him with a friend now. They like to harmonize, to push each other.

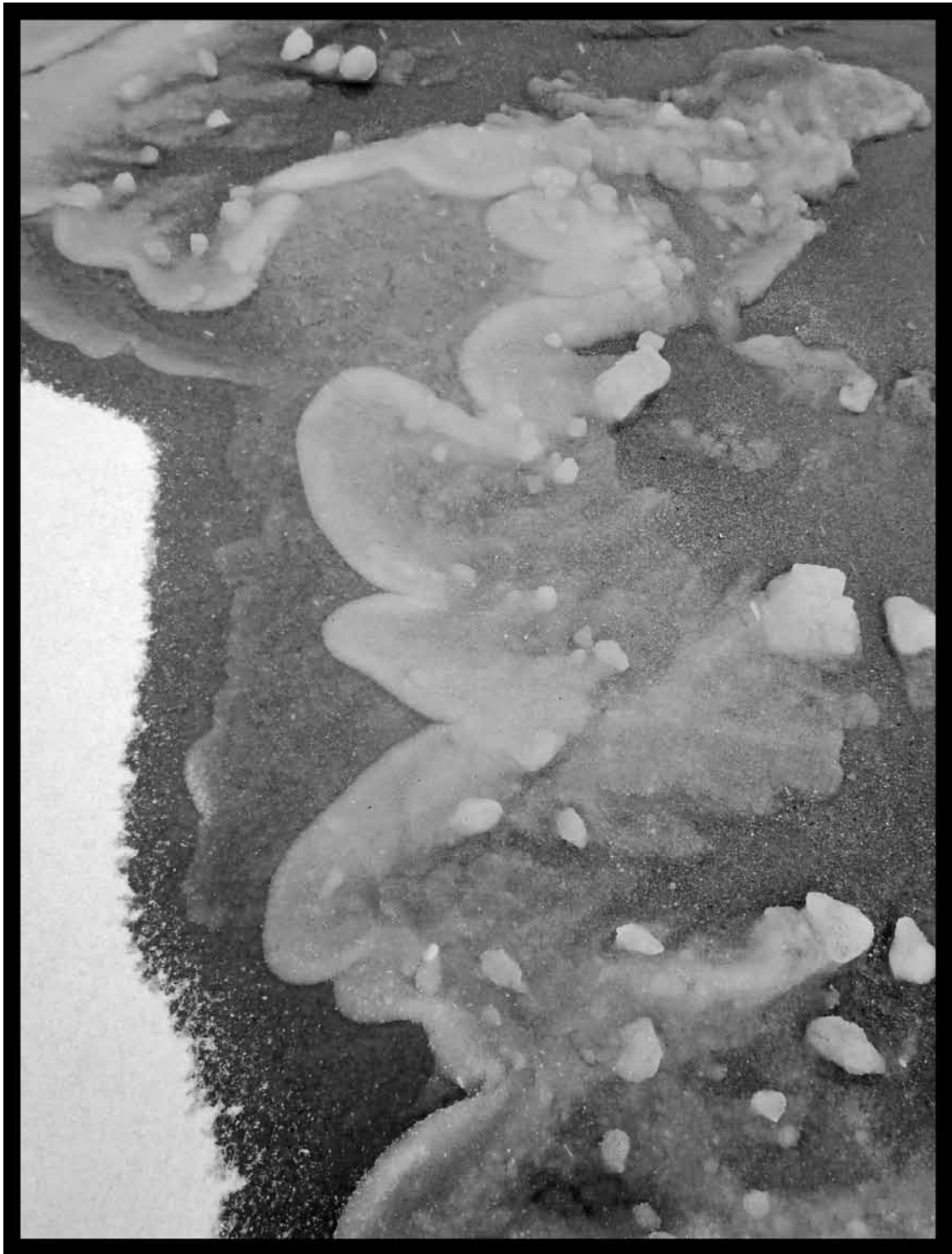
Back then we ended up at a party, & there's another old friend of mine, & this one is from a *long* time ago. He's young, he's in his glories. His eyes are bright & his mind is alert & crazy & free, beautiful. I listen & I look. *Do it again, do it again.*

Voices remain. On page, on tape. Laughing. Unknowing the future. *Just laughing right now.*

But then someone reminds me of something, & I realize that I left my bag of notebooks out in the Jeep, & so I have to go get them. So I leave the party, the sweet blunt smoke & the happy high music, James McGunn & such, & there's some girls, & they're even the friendly kind, though maybe not *too* friendly, but friendly enough, & there's food & everything. I feel welcomed, I feel alright, *something*.

[She lingers, smiles, takes my book, says she'll wait for me.]

I come out & where's that Jeep? That Jeep had my bags of notebooks, *Oh man, shit. Hey, where'd that Jeep go? Hey, you know those guys, you know the guy that drives that Jeep, where's he live? No, man, no, man, tell me. It's OK, I need to know.*



*Yeah listen, can you give me a ride over there? Really, I left my bag of notebooks in the back of the guy's Jeep, & I'm not sure where he lives or where he works but, man, if we can just catch him, it'd be all good. **Can we do that please?** No, really, just give me a ride, it's just a bag of notebooks but it's important to me, it really is. Why'd I lose it? Why'd I lose it?*

I didn't. Only in fearsome dreams.

lxxxix.

Why am I in this bookstore again? I have a cold. Well, maybe it'll cheer me up, maybe it won't. I'm trying to find the books that I really want to read, ones full of music & high laughter, low despair, & cackling weirdness all around.

OK, follow me here. Follow this.

Buy one book, a paperback, & it's missing its first 70 pages. *What kind of bookstore is this?* Well, I guess that's not an easy question to answer. It ends in charts. Maybe those 70 pages would help you understand the charts, but *who knows what kind of paperback book this is?*

What color book is it? Hardcover or paperback? Bound nicely or cheaply? Heavy held in the hand or a waft?

I keep moving in the bookstore, sometimes that's a good idea, you just keep moving. And there's a series of old, tall, grainy-looking hardbacks. I don't know, twenty, thirty volumes of them on this shelf in a row. Is it a complete set? I don't know.

There's no titles on them. But I touch one, just to feel the age. I touch it very gently, & it thinks how long since it's been read. I touch the next one, & it's thinking of a funny joke someone told it, maybe the volume next to it told it a funny joke, that's my guess, I'm not really sure. All I can tell you is that as I touch them very lightly, I can hear their thoughts.

I can't see to the ceilings of this bookstore, has that always been true? And I'm telling you, I'm going home to bed now. I'm going to sleep off this cold for a million hours, but that doesn't negate the fact that these books, they're living objects, wood impressed with words, *living objects*.

xc.

When I was young, I worked at that market that was located over the buried spaceship. It was called Chief Seattle's Friendly Market, & I'd say it was pretty friendly, although when I started I didn't feel all that much friendliness from my co-workers. They didn't help me with all the strange cash registers I had to figure out, some of them ancient, some of them not so much.

[She comes back through the door. Only one cigarette this time. She's pleased enough by this. What do I offer in place?]

They really didn't know who or what I was when I walked in the door that first day, still in high school, asking for a job. I was looking for a place to be that I could really care about, for some people that would remember my name from one time to the next. And it became that eventually, it took a while, I'll say that. Had to fight my way in. Maybe that's true of any situation that's already established. You're

the new person, eager, wanting to join in.

[She was the only one who did learn my name. But I now believe she was a person who would do that for anyone, in any situation.]

It took at least a year for me to finally get down those long, dark stairs in the back, through the walk-in refrigerator, the crates of milk & juice jugs, other frozen items, push back the curtain, down that stairwell. Unlit & you descended & it seemed to get darker. Then, when you don't think it's possible, & you're thinking to turn back, even if you've been down there before, it starts to get a little lighter, & suddenly you're in this place that you didn't, couldn't imagine existed, deep under the earth.

[I'm sitting with her later, riding that bus, unsure where, unsure who, a book from a friend, my notebook, guitar, a ticket to as far away as possible.]

You're in a hallway, you arrive down into it. There's a ceiling, there's a floor, walls on either side, there's doors. It winds away, & there was this one time that my wanderings went a little too far in that buried spaceship, & I think I became disoriented, became dehydrated. I'm really not sure what it was.

[[She slept when the landscape got grey & perpetual.]]

[I hold her lightly. Blooms, light sweat. Youth.]

But I will tell you that I remember indistinctly ending up in a room, not knowing how I'd gotten there, laying on a bed, the room was dark, & someone was feeding me the most delicious soup. I'd never tasted anything like it before, & I was being fed by a kindly, furred paw. And the paw that fed me that soup, & sort of touched my nose & made a gesture, when I had eaten the good soup, *go back to sleep, it's OK*. As I faded, feeling safer than maybe ever, I felt the paws lift up my head gently, & pull a hat onto me. *A fisher hat?*

[Of course, Pirth. You stay so perfect with me. You *hmmm* so.]

And eventually I woke up, & was able to make my way back, no problem. I wasn't nearly as far from the exit as I'd thought.

But I remember that all these years later. It was unique among the many adventures I had down there in that buried spaceship. Never told this to anyone before tonight. It's not in any of the five Mulronic the Space Pirate books. Not even the secret sixth volume. But now you know.

I blink. Oh. The Attic. But wait.

A light ahead. Daylight. I see Pirth dancing right into it. I follow, wondering. Following him, following her.

xcii.

This morning I woke from a dream of a car crash. I was with a friend who as he drove us along was getting angrier & angrier & we blew through a red light. I panicked, yelled.

This didn't help but, for some reason, a swerving road maybe, we slowed, & this I think saved our lives when our car ran head on into a tall wooden pillar.

I watched as like in slow motion our car drives straight into this pillar; the pillar splits the hood & cracks the windshield & crushes into the area we sit in.

Car destroyed yet we're OK. Shaken but OK.

Stopped. Sit a moment quiet.

I'm thinking: *call the cops*. But I don't move.

Why divert this book to this dream?

I'm not sure. A car crash begins most versions of **RemoteLand**. Is that enough?

Try something else.

I get out of the car & sit on its shattered hood. My friend, whatever he was, seems gone.

But another friend dances 3 hops from street to my knee. *Pirth*. Lean down to him, receive his pat upon my nose.

OK. Fine.

I look closely at Pirth. "Can you lead me back to the White Woods to where Flossie Flea is waiting for me?"

His dark eyes hold me close, closer, & I hear the *hmmm* from his mind to mine or, better said, shared by us now. He hops off my knee & I stand up.

Look around. What was all this? Who was that friend? It's a street, though its buildings lean this way & that like broken teeth. I can see why we slowed down, the street twisting & looping impossibly to the wooden pillar we hit.

Step over to the pillar. It's undamaged by the car. I look up. Rises up. Up. *Up*. I see no top.

It's covered in symbols. And images of Creatures; reminding me of the complex symbology on the Tangled Gate.

Then I walk around it & it now appears to be more than the grasps of three big men around. Glows.

I realize the *Hmmm* is leading me along, there's more to this all now than there was before; Pirth leaps beyond me, at the wooden pillar, I follow & see there is a half-hidden stairs carved *into, within*, the pillar. He dances right up & in & step by step, & OK, I follow, is this here, *really*? Visible without Pirth, without the *hmmm* we share in mind?

Glowing as we climb, the air perfectly balanced between cool & warm. This the way to the White Woods & Flossie Flea?

Sure. Pirth dances, slow enough for me not to lose him.

xcii.

Does the Wooden Pillar become like the endless Attic?

We climb for hours, minutes, I don't know.

I want to arrive

Can we please arrive *now*?

We do. There is a door above us. Pirth waits on the last step.

I push at it, it gives way a little, I push more, it has something on it, I push slowly, steadily, whatever it is gives way, slides slowly off.

And push door up, & climb clumsily up.

Oh. Oh. *Oh*.

The impediment was my own hut's arm chair, undamaged. The door was under the chair. I never knew.

CC Hut, this is. And there sits Flossie Flea in the other armchair where my beloved sometimes sits too.

I push the door back down into place, & my armchair back over it. Sit in armchair for a breath. Pirth hops onto my knee to wait.

Flossie Flea smiles sweetly at me.

Oh. OK.

xciii.

Then she stands up smartly & holds out her paw to me. "We have to hurry."

"Hurry?" I repeat dumbly.

She nods, notes my dumbness, & speaks only half exasperated to me. "You know all this in your own peculiar way. You can help?"

It's a question like a statement & a wish too. I nod. Notice in passing I am smaller than before since Pirth is much bigger & Flossie too, like the White Woods relativizes these things for moment's best need.

As we leave my hut, I slide my neck's Burning Man 2003 pendant lightly across the door's plaque depicting a wildly smiling Imp. Cackles softly, door locked now but only to those unfriendly in intent. All others ever welcomed.

White Woods, how to tell. A glow always in the trees here, more or less noticeable by moment's need. But trees, true too, lovely as every tree ever anywhere.

No paths, tho a rare road, but mostly the Thought Fleas & Creatures & others who live here travel by *hmmm*, or sniff, or simple bones-knowing. I've mastered none of these, save knowing a couple of useful *hmmms*, & right now I simply follow Flossie as she trots along, & Pirth in his ever-dance.

We don't go back to the Flea Domicile, as I'd guessed. Instead, we come to a great clearing which I recognize as holding a Model of the Ancient 6 Islands, depicting them when they were still clustered together.

Imagine a clearing in the woods that is filled completely with sea. It shallows at the edges & ends there.

But there are not 6 Islands shown in model size. Only one. I know why. But how to tell here.

Recently, the famous Travelers Daniel Joe Marie & Derek had passed through here, & in their company Miss La & Miss Ta, the famous Heroes of Yore, & the Heroes' retinue, the O'Cult, & Mr. Algernon Beagle, editor guy of the famous *Bags End News*. Traveling one & all in the famous Boat Wagon, driven by the Kittees & Friend Fish. They had greatly admired the Model of the Ancient 6 Islands, had come in fact because they were sharing a great Adventure whose goal was to unite the 6 Islands again.

Driving the Boat Wagon up to the Model Wide Wide Sea, & then paddling right in, & through the strait between two of the Islands, & arrived to the fishin' hole-sized pond in the center of the clustered Islands.

From there Marie, following wordless instructions from the Kittees, who had had a fugue vision of what to do about the Islands, gets out of the Boat Wagon & splashes knee-high to each Island, & reaches to the highest point of each Island, its mountain, & places a colored stone there. Six in all. Returning to the Boat Wagon, Kittees' bloo eyes point Marie to the sky & she intuits to reach with the only stone she has left, the sometimes visible indigo stone, reach it up & up through clouds & spheres until she touches a metallic surface, touches, touches, until she finds an aperture, & screws the indigo stone in like a light bulb.

Pulls her impossibly extended hand back, & the spaceship comes into view, the indigo light blinking on & off, crashing toward the earth, Blue Suitcase splashing into the water, & 5 of the Creature-cluster-style Islands fleeing far way.

What happens next is that the Travelers & Heroes & friends leave, figuring they have to use what they have learned in their Adventure to unite the actual 6 Islands. Off they go to do this.

But what about the Model? 5 Islands fled? How to unite this centerpiece of the Thought Fleas' Rutabega Festival Fleastock event?

I nod. Look at Flossie. "What are your ideas?"

Finger on her chin a moment, & she says, "The ship crashed & it had the indigo beacon on it."
"And that's the master beacon we can use to summon the Model Islands all back," I finished, nodding. Ready to go.

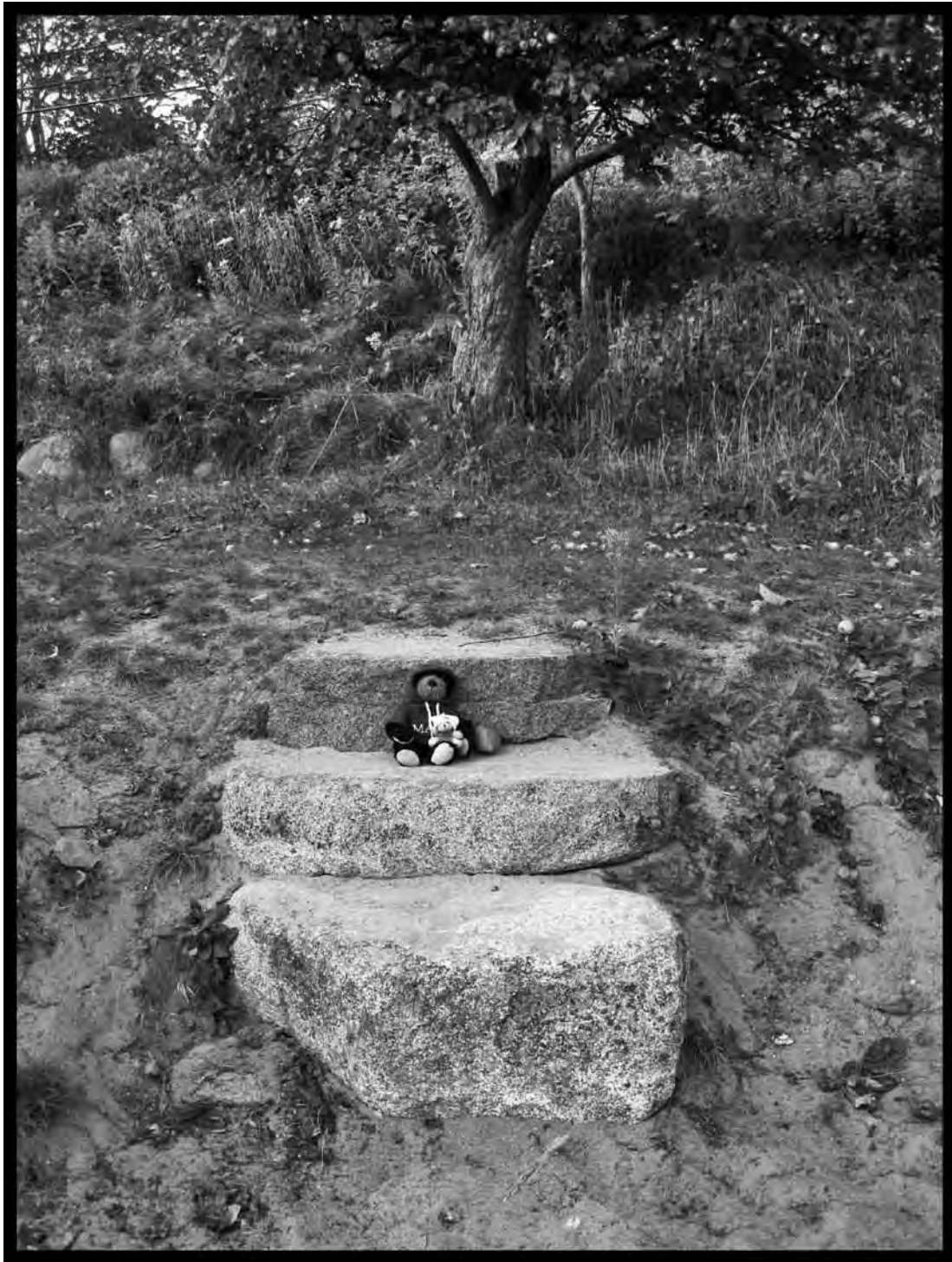
Good thing too because up rolls our iteration of the Kittees & Friend Fish & the Boat Wagon, & Pirth & I hop in the back & I buckle us in (safety first!). Flossie doesn't though. Still smiling me kindly & friendly.

"Aren't you coming?"

"No. I need to see to the Festival & tell all our plan. You will do fine with Pirth," her paw on my shoulder reassures.

I nod, feeling very much not like a magickal Creature of the White Woods. Flossie moves toward the front of the Boat Wagon & I see her push a button on the dashboard. SPACESHIP, it says. She nods & the Kittees start to peddle us there.

Now this quicker mode of transport, mostly I think, for me, since I could not keep up with Pirth dancing at full speed. But he seems his usual placid self next to me, though still stirring a mite. His dancing ways never fully stop.



It's a far distance to the site of the crashed spaceship, & of course by when we get there it is long since buried deep below the surface of earth & built upon it is Chief Seattle's Friendly Market.

Hmm. OK. Do I simply walk in the front door? With Pirth & the Kittees & Friend Fish? Park the Boat Wagon out front next to that old VW Bug, green & gold, & that weird-looking van, rainbow-colored, the indigo stripe coming in & out, in & out, in & out of view?

I get out of the Boat Wagon & stand up. It's now below me, Creature-sized again. *Think*. Decide. Hope.

Pirth I lift up & stuff comfortably in the front pocket of my plaid green shirtjacket, where he's been before, head & paws out to watch comfortably.

I look at the Kittees, whose bloo eyes ever startle me. "Wait here for us." Pause. More? *A warning, caution, anything?* No. I guess not. They will nap, as Creatures do, just fine.

xciv.

I walk through the door & feel myself younger, lesser, scrawnier, eyes brighter, hungers less murky, & look around at this market-upon-spaceship.

Many aisles of food & goods, some narrow, some strangely wide enough for a car's passage. Is this intentional?

To my right, a long curvilinear corner arrayed with cash registers of varying kinds. Some look space age, some stone age. Noone there at the moment.

To my far left a kind of . . . cafe. Round metal tables with tops designed of various shapes of punched out holes. Circles, diamonds, clovers. Even a kind, dare I say, imp shaped? *Cackle cackle*. A stage too, beyond the tables.

And farthest from me, beyond the aisles of food & goods, I can see the refrigerator & freezer cases, the whole far wall. A thick metal door among them.

Without looking down or speaking aloud, I think to Pirth: *that's the way to the stairs leading to the crashed spaceship*. A furry paw pats my mind's nose.

Where to start, how? Start with story, use mind's fingers to shape the clay of its words. Go slowly.

I worked in markets like these when I was younger. Easy work to get when your resume at best is a polite eager smile & a half-finished college degree.

That's why I look younger. I look like I could work here now. My ragged blue jeans, old sneakers, the black REM shirt I wear. My long unkempt hair. Eyeglasses.

OK. Then I do. I do? Yes. I work here. I'm new. Do I report to someone? Well, usually there's a manager but if I'm trained, no need.

Drop off my beat up bookbag of notebooks & novels & textbooks behind the cash register counter & I step up to one.

OK. Hmm. These are old, no scanning lights or high tech credit card machines. Each one is different. Some look carved from Peruvian jungles with keyboards of unknown symbologies. Keep moving.

Here's one. Big buttons to punch in prices. A little square machine to slide through credit cards. A key next to the buttons turns the register on & off. I even luck into figuring the trick to opening the machine if needed.

Great. I'll work my shift & maybe try that cooler door later on.

People come & go. More or less ordinary people. They buy soda, cigarettes, condoms. Bread, milk, coffee. Regarding the last, I find the coffee station in a corner & re-learn the few steps to fresh coffee. Pull out the metal holder, dispose its old filter, fit in a new one. Packet of fresh coffee into it, slide back into machine, hit the water button. Drip drip drip coffee fills the pot. Make a regular one, a second, & a decaf one. Check every so often.

People are friendly, some more, some less. Someone buys a package of *Santa Claus's Ho! Ho! Ho! Cupcakes* & so I know it's near the winter holiday season. So I wish each season's greetings, try to rustle up a smile or something. These are old moves in me. I'm not a robot doing this; they're not faceless drones processing through. It's hit & miss. Some people are nice to anyone. Some can be nudged. Some are too deep in their own darkness. Some people are just assholes.

The daylight outside wanes. A few snowflakes but not too bad. I choose to believe the Boat Wagon & its precious folks are OK.

Finally, someone comes. A girl, friendly, aswirl in layers of black, hat, jacket, sweater, boots; hair long on one side, shaved the other, but at an angle, talks fast & soft.

She knows me as Ray, the new guy, goes to the local college, reads books, writes poetry. She's taking a year off college, saving to travel. Working doubles as often as Gary the manager will let her. A little high, watching the snowflakes swirl through her rented room's window all afternoon. But ready to go. Helps time pass more interesting & skewed to be a little high. OK then.

I listen, nod, try to look smart like I go to the local college & read books. I used to do all this.

She's pretty in a strange way, but I don't feel the itchy tug of attraction I used to feel always near females, still do in a way. My older self knows she's a lesbian, & even better, she's good in her own skin.

I take a big leaping chance. "I was going to go into the cooler now."

She nods at me, listening, & ringing up a sudden rush of customers on one of the Peruvian jungle registers. Her smile shares with all. Gets more than I did. Because she's female? Um. No. Not really. There's magick in her. Customers feel it as well as I do.

Anyway she nods, smiles, keeps working.

This is where the narrative clay is softest. Jump in? Yah.

"I want to see the spaceship buried under this store. There's something I need to fetch from it."

Pauses, turns, looks me with one green eye & one golden eye.

“Do you know your way down there?”

I shake my head.

“Go take a nap in the Boat Wagon. You had a long shift. Come back later. I’ll give you a tour when things are quieter up here.”

I nod, mind’s mouth wide open, & follow her instructions.



To be continued in Cenacle | 103 | April 2018

* * * * *



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine [a new fixtion]

Part Eleven

*"I must create a system,
or be enslaved by another man's"*
—William Blake, "Jerusalem."

The Boat Wagon is a quite nice place to nap, many soft blankets & pillows, & one tends to size up or down to need, depending on one's companions, so I settle in the back, the Kittys & Friend Fish already nicely napping in the front as they do.

Safe in this strange wonderful vehicle as the few hours come & go, & then she's waking me.

"Ray, come on. Let's go."

"Umf. Hey, what's your name again?"

"Haha! Our joke. Really, it's Rey too, just spelled differently from yours."

I nod like sure, that's right, haha.

Back into the store & we hurry right away to the back. I don't even know who's running the register now. Eh.

She takes my hand like trust & affection & just how it is & we go into the cooler & into the far back. There a curtain in a corner, casual, like nothing.

But not nothing. Push it aside & a door, & her confident hand leads me down a long dark staircase, darker & darker & it's like fading on the way down, she grips harder just to stay even & I think I'm near completely gone not just her hold when light, imagined, then real, then we're arrived.

She knows how to unlock this door, involves a key & some cackling I think & a few strange dancing gestures too. Then opens & we go through.

Shorter than me, in height only, she stands me square up just inside the doorway, hallway stretching out behind her. Stands me up & talks.

"You can't stay long."

"How long?"

"Not long, Ray."

"How long, Rey?"

She huffs at me then nods like OK. "Slow count to 36. But *that's it*. More than that, you won't get out the same way."

I nod, sudden kiss her friend's cheek, & then start walking along, & counting with each step. Try to become deeper aware of all this.

This hallway is about six feet wide, not much taller than my own six foot height. Lit softly, like a glowing dream, no fixtures, a milky vagueness to it all, & I listen deep as I can & there is indeed a *hmmm* down low here. OK. Keep counting.

20. 21. 22. Way down there a door becomes vaguely visible. OK. 26. 27. 28. I can't seem to hurry here. It's closer but I'm nearly out of numbers. I know Rey is wondering me by now. I keep going. OK. I keep going.

36. I arrive. There's something written on the door in black ink, like the pens I use. *How?*

It's a *Hmmm*. Seems to be one that goes on & off. *Hmmm*, pause a beat, *hmmm*, pause a beat. I study. I memorize like it's everything. Turn the golden doorknob flicked with green, & push the door in. Here I am. *Whatever this is*.

An empty room. A white empty room. Not very large. I walk in & nearly forget to keep up my *hmmm*. Then I notice a something. Center of the room. There when I *hmmm*, not when I pause a beat. I walk carefully over to it. *Hmmm*, pause, *hmmm*.

Pick it up. *It's the indigo Beacon*.

In my arms it feels solid, heavy, & I keep up my *hmmming* now because I'm not sure I can get back, long past 36.

But this Beacon is *hmmming* with me too. *Hmmm*, a beat, *hmmm*, & whatever the why of it I feel like I can do this, get back. What is this *Hmmm*? Magic? Er, um, that's not enough of the right word.

So back down the vaguely glowing hallway, steadily, maybe a bit faster, like my recent passage is still fresh, footprints of some kind, weird kind but OK, true, yes.

And there is Rey, lovely dear friend I just met, known so long, like so many of my dreams, hugging me & indigo Beacon &, funny to say, it does not blink in her grasp. Steady indigo.

We climb back up the stairs & out to cooler room.

Someone stirs in my green plaid jacket's front pocket. *Oh. Oh. Pirth*. Been napping? Been invisible.

He's reaching purple paw forward, as best he can, to Rey. She sees, smiles like a darling, leans forward for his pat upon her nose.

It's time to go. I don't want to leave her. We're sitting at a table in the cafe performance area, Pirth dancing happily between us on its top.

"I like you, Rey."

"I like you too."

"I mean, you're new & novel & here you are in this long long book, & I want to keep you, introduce you to Maya, Bowie, Christina, all the many rest."

She laughs. "You think I don't know them?"

"Do you?"

She points to a shadowy corner near us. I now see it's piled high with . . . *Cenacles*? Whoa.

"Every Saturday night I work second shift, that radio behind the counter plays your show, loud."

She smiles.

Hmm.

"I've written about you before too."

She nods. "Giving me a name is new though. Thank you. Like the girl in the *Star Wars* movies."

"Yah. And like mine."

"Both."

She reaches forward across the table to me, niftily amongst Pirth's dancings, grasps my hand.

"I'll be here."

I nod.

"Now go make those Thought Fleas happy."

I nod, smile. More hugs, kisses on the cheek, pats on the nose. Pirth & I go.

xciv.

Pirth & I w/Beacon come out of the Market & there is the Boat Wagon still safe & waiting & we walk right over & hop right into the back, buckle in (*safety first!*), & I nod to the Kittees to get us going. "To my Hut, if you please," I say politely.

So off we drive through the White Woods, & I awe at its strange, powerful beauty. Wonder why these Woods so close to my heart. I remember, as a boy, there were some woods near the neighborhood I lived in, best entered by a vacant lot usually used for ball games.

I was forbidden by my mother to go into them, & so I no more ventured than a few feet within. Oh, she was right, I *could* have been hurt or killed in them, but why not take me in with her? Or my father? Why hold Woods responsible for mostly human dangers? Why treat the world like it responsible for the violent flaws of men? Why treat the world too as lesser than men?

Whatever these Woods be, men do not rule them. They glow with magic & mystery & *do not burn*.

I probably fall asleep in the lovely safe Boat Wagon, among its pillows & blankets.

Wake, & here we are at my Hut. I give the Kittees & Friend Fish each & all an affectionate pat & walk up to my Hut. Pass my Burning Man 2003 pendant across the plaque of the crazy-smiling imp. Soft cackle & door opens.

It's a lovely little Hut. I enter & walk over to my armchair. Next to it, a low chest. Lift up, & set the Beacon down among the blankets & pillows within, for safe-keeping.

What I need to wait for is the Thought Fleas weekly production in the Great Clearing. That will be the right moment to reveal the recovered prize.

Time passes. I sit in my old comfy armchair. A memory of one I had years, decades ago, when a young man, when less of life had come & gone. When the idea of come & gone was different, less rife with staying wounds.

Eventually the night comes & it's time to get to the Clearing.

I push aside my armchair, & I pull open the trapdoor which leads to the Column below, this time climbing down it, not up, the Beacon now in a shoulder bag I bear along, climb down stair after stair, until I come upon a strange glowing green & gold door, of course, & push in, & tis dark, & low, & I crawl & crawl, a long way in the dark, crawl & crawl, & then suddenly emerge from what looks like a cave mouth, the sounds of laughter & festiving is nearby, easy to follow until I arrive to the elongated Great Clearing where the Thought Fleas & many others are gathered as part of their weekly Production, & also of course the Rutabaga Festival & Fleastock is going on, where the great Kettle of Rutabaga Soup is free for all, bowls & spoons a-plenty, two ladles for use,

Yes, so, here I am at this known & loved event with my surprise to reveal. But I take my time about this. Watch the events of the Production unfold as they do, & here tell.

There is at the far end of the Clearing an old platform atop which sets a venerable stage. From beyond this stage, from the Woods, come marching out, signaling the start, the Royal Thumbs, dressed in their Royal Crowns & Capes. They march into the clearing up the steps of the platform to the stage, & are cheered & cheered & cheered as well-known FOF (Friends of Fleas)!

They accept this cheering for an elongated moment, & then cry out: "Greetings! Felicitations! And Sal-u-ta-tions! Pre-senting . . . A Royal Thumbs Production of . . . One . . . Big . . . Thought Flea . . . Sea Flea!"

And out comes marching the mysterious One Big Thought Flea-Sea Flea, one & many Fleas together with a handsome faux leather cape.

The Royal Thumbs, who had tossed themselves wildly in the direction of the OBTF-SFs' entrance, & been only saved by crash into some well-placed cushions, donated by certain anonymous Benefactresses, slide off to the side, & OBTF-SF comes up to the stage to receive many cheers too.

Then, from the far end of the Clearing, marches in the Ladies Toe, for whom the crowds of the Fleas & others divide in twine to let pass.

I am watching all this when someone nudges me awake & I realize I fell asleep again.

"You're up, CC!"

I hustle my raggedy self up toward the stage, through the crowd of friendly big-eyed Fleas & others who pat me on the back. Climb the steps of the platform, to the stage, nod to OBTF-SF & the Royal Thumbs, & turn to look at the assembly.

"Working at Chief Seattle's Friendly Market succeeded as I made a valuable friend & she got me down

into the buried spaceship!" I say slowly & try to big my voice. Cheers go up, reassuring me.

"We went down & then I continued on my own &, well, here it is!" & I pull the indigo Beacon from my knapsack & raise it high. The cheers go on & on.

"There's more," I say, settling for quiet with my hands. I look up toward the skies & start to cackle merrily.

Eventually, a strange little spaceship that looks like a kind of wee tugboat descends to view.

"Tis our friend the Cacklebird in her Space Tugboat, come to help!" I cry.

Everyone cheers again as the Space Tugboat hovers over me & I screw the indigo Beacon into a place in the Tugboat's bottom hull. It blinks on & off, on & off, serenely.

I nod, the Cacklebird cackles merrily, & the Space Tugboat flies high up again, the indigo Beacon blinking very brightly for all to see. Right up, higher & higher, & we all watch & wait as the Beacon seems to send out a brighter & brighter blinking light, broadcasting its signal to farther & farther places, & we are more & more hopeful that this will finally work.

And then, faintly, faintly, *rumble, rumble, rumble*.

"Come on, everyone!" I call. "Let's go to the Model Islands clearing! Hurry!"

I ran through the crowds & led the way from this big clearing, through the White Woods, to another clearing devoted to the Fleastock art. Right now, just one model Island but the *rumble rumble rumble* grew louder.

And here they came. Unlike anything ever to be seen before or ever again.

They move through the earth itself, like water through water, coming as though from all different directions, bound for the clearing, a *humming* now part of the air around all of us as we run, & somehow they pass through the Woods in the same way in which they had fled, nothing harmed in their passage, almost like disembodied, or at least flexibly loose as they travelled

& then to reassemble as they each arrived to the water at the edge of the Wide Wide Sea surrounding the Fleastock clearing, & on in now fully or more fully cohering, to arrive each to a place among its fellows, united again, so happy, model Islands united again!

Many White Woods denizens, & the Fleas many amongst them, cheered & cheered the Islands. *Happy, happy, happy*.

I realized my visit, this one anyway, to these White Woods is coming to a conclusion. But I need to find Flossie Flea before I go.

I am smaller among these Fleas, & Pirth no longer in my green plaid shirt's front pocket. I figure he's somewhere nearby & I will see him too again. He is ever my friend.

Somehow I drift from the Fleastock clearing & back among the Woods & walking aimlessly along. I



figure I'll find her. *It's part of the story.*

And I come to the CC Hut indeed again. It is a glowing MeZmer the White Bunny color on the outside. So glows like the White Woods all around.

Slide my Burning Man 2003 pendant necklace across the merry laughing face of the Imp on the door's plaque. *Cackle, cackle*, door opens.

Enter. Walk over to my old green armchair & sit down.

"Hello, CC, again," says Flossie Flea, sitting in the armchair across from mine.

Oh. I nod, smile.

She stands up & walks over to me with something in her paw. It is a red colored medal, of a, um, rutabaga? Green & gold T & F etched on it.

"This is for you. For helping us." She pins the medal on my green plaid jacket, the right side, opposite the pocket where Pirth would ride.

"Thank you," I say, humbled.

She kisses my cheek & leaves with a wave, & a smile, & nary a word.

xcv.

What is this book of 3233 pages & 11½ years? Written now for over decade, through moves & jobs & passings, goings, comings, etc. etc. etc.?

I write it because I love it, because it is me at my best, because I got tired of ending stories & starting new ones.

Like me, it has no wished for or intended endgame. Goes on & on, insists on so.

Sitting in a living room, on a white couch known nearly 5 years, with my wife & best friend of nearly 15 years. In a house our own, so many good hours & the rest more mundane.

It's winter again. President Clusterfuck for a ruinous year now.

Tomorrow the Super Bowl, this region hoping for another football championship.

A new complex weird & fine movie about a figure skater whose talent raised her up, & rotten origins took her down.

My weekly radio show on in 35 min.

When then? Resume back into the waters. Not too hard, & much fun.

Tripping high seed juice & black pen & this lovely old notebook & Polly iPod full of new Wood Brothers music.

It's time to unite the Six Islands.

It's time for this book to dive ever deeper into helping.

What next? Is what's next.
That's how it works.

Maya.

xcvi.

We sit together, somewhere. Her purple eyes glint. Her hair blonde & pink-striped like ever. Her scrawny as Creatures.

She waits. Smiles me. But waits.

"I'm not sure."

"Yet."

"No."

"Soon?"

"I don't know."

"Tell."

"There are Six Islands to this world. Long ago, they became scattered. Recently, efforts have been made to unite them, not how they were, but new & sure again."

She nods.

"I don't know where this book fits in to all that."

"Does it?"

I nod. I think so.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I want it to."

"Why?"

"I want all I write to be of one world, shaggy & various & scattered, but still one."

"What then?"

I shake my head a little. We're now in my hut, in the CC Hut, in the White Woods. Maya is sitting in the other armchair across from mine.

She smiles. Looks around its comfortable crowdedness. Nods.

"What now?"

"I stay. You go."

"Go where?"

I point to the door. "Out there. White Woods. Kinley & Christina & Dylan are waiting."

Peers me close. "Why?"

"I need to recede. I'm shadowing over this book. I'll go to back to writing it, not starrng too, & you bunch & others will do what you do better."

"Are you sure?"

I nod.

"Are you OK, Raymond?"

"Just figure it out for me. Find the hook. Go to the Festival."

xcvii.

The trick to it all is to remember hours like this one, writing with all my lights turned on, keep this magic then when I need it so much. When the bars are heavy & close all around, as they often are. But

don't have to be.

xcviii.

They are indeed waiting for her outside of the little glowing hut. Smiling, all of them.

Dylan offers his hand & she feels the old shy hesitation, but maybe a bit less. But she doesn't move then.

"Where are we going?"

They shake their heads.

"He told me to figure it out. He wants us to go to the Festival."

They nod, agreeably.

She's not satisfied. "We've all been part of this a long time."

"Years, it seems," Kinley says softly.

"We need to help."

"How?" asks Dylan, looking curiously at her. They all are.

"He was talking about uniting the 6 Islands. Like that's important to him."

Christina, not usually one for sentiment, or subtlety, motions them over to a lovely white oak nearby. Patch of green grass beneath it. Her impulse to find the Festival, she restrains it. This first.

Sitting in a circle, holding hands.

Maya closes her purple eyes, is quiet awhile, & then begins to *hmmm* softly & steadily. The others one by one follow her, eyes closed, *humming*.

Hmmm is you could say the native tongue of the White Woods & I guess elsewhere. So its sonorous noise attracts others.

Creatures, likely to shy too approach people-folks, yet tis Maya & she is a special friend to Creatures. They know the others too, but her most of all.

Maya feels a warm someone in her lap. Small, floppy ears. MeZmer the White Bunny she knows, eyes still closed.

She urges MeZmer to join in their *Hmmm*, & others hidden nearby too. They have a question & are expressing it in this way, to reach out to those in these magickal White Woods, reach out for their help in the asking.

A small grey hedgedyhog hops into Christina's lap & she skritchies its back as a thank-ye.

Dylan gets two small Giraffes for his lap, gentle & safe to their sniff.

Kinley feels the so-so-soft fur of a White Tiger, lap-sized.

Many others are near, all now *humming* too, helping the question to pass from place to place, denizen to denizen.

A voice, a kind of collective voice, begins to speak with Maya.

"What is the Festival?"

“Welcomes all. Feeds all.”
 “How do we unite the Islands?”
 “The Rainbow Wheel now does that.”
 “What can we do for you?”
 “Dance. Sing. Share.”
 “How can we help?”
 “*Dance. Sing. Share.*”
 “Is there danger?”
 “Everything always changes.”
 Kinley’s voice now. “Where is new to travel?”

There is silence.

“The Model is new here.”

They open their eyes. This seems an answer.

xcix.

The trick of it all is to remember hours like this one, writing with all my lights turned on, all seven rainbow colors, turning thought music into words visible on the page & doing this more & more

I remember I forget I remember

c.

“Alright, let’s go,” said Kinley. Stands, with White Tiger in grasp.
 The others stand with their Creatures in arm too. At least for the moment.

But then luck with them as up rolls those famous bloo-eyed Kittees & their Friend Fish in their famous Boat Wagon!

“That’s the thing about these White Woods,” Christina laughs & smirks. “You never go wanting for a ride.”

So we all get in the back seat of the Boat Wagon, except Maya, who sits up front like she’s a special one to the Creatures. Which she is.

All buckle in. *Safety first!*

The bloo-eyed black & white Kittees share a large steering wheel between them, steering with soft white paws, in concert, while between them sits their dear & quiet Friend Fish, beautiful yellow with pretty red lips—down below, Kittee paws pedal along at quite a speed—

Maya notices how this Boat Wagon *hmmms* very softly if she listens down low, like it is not a vehicle but a being too, & this drive is shared by all, is gift to all, of going, & going together—

She tries to remember other days when she was not riding with her dear friends Christina & Kinley, & her new-old love Dylan, in back, & these magical Creatures taking them along through these beautiful

& pathless White Woods—

There were scary days, lonely days, ones of wanting, lifetimes & lifetimes, are any worth missing?

She looks back at her friends sitting close together. All smiling at her, Dylan's a sort of sideways one, he's shy too, & guesses *no, this is good*

And awhile it's just peddle-peddle-peddle & pretty White Woods passing by, pathless but they go along fine—

She dozes, leaning a little against the Kittee next to her, & falls a little into a dream,

in it she is traveling her past years, it's like a mix of them, a bit of that bus ride with Dylan, & that city they roamed with John, & even these White Woods, beneath them somehow, *yes, OK, impatient, come on,*

now she's sitting in a coffeehouse at a table on the second floor, a kind of mezzanine overlooking the main floor, its tall ceiling & bookcases, & shiny coffee urns.

Open on the table before her is a thick notebook. Turns to first page:

Labyrinthine

[a new fiction]

Oh, her copy? That was an idea she'd forgotten about.

She turns to the current pages & reads about her & the others in the Boat Wagon, riding through the White Woods, till she dozes & arrives here.

Nods. OK. Sets to writing. Black pen.

I see a tall tall building through the tall tall windows here. Is it a space-ship? Hm. I suppose it might be. It gleams from workmen polishing but is also worn down in places. Comes & goes a lot.

Shakes her head. Summons him.

"Hi."

"Hi, Maya."

"Why this?"

"Dunno. You were getting bored."

"This is Bauhaus in Seattle?"

"Well, the one I remember. It's gone now."

" "

"What?"

" "

"Would you like to go back to the White Woods? Arrive?"

" "



"Wake up, Maya!" Christina is nudging her gently.

There they are. In a clearing that contains a Model of the Ancient 6 Islands. Look about a dozen feet high at their tallest. A Sea fills the clearing. Couple feet deep?

Maya nods. The Kittees peddle them into the water, & then paddle from thereon. *Splish splash splish.*

Do they shrink or do the Islands grow in size? Not long before the Islands look great big as Islands usually do. Now they are small, or at least proportional again.

Kinley leans forward. "Kittees, please paddle us to the nearest one. That's where our adventures will begin here." Smiles at her. Eager. Happy.

Yes, Maya thinks. *This now here is just fine*

ci.

We sail close to the rocky shores but not quite a place for the Boat Wagon to land so Kinley calls, "All out!"

We wade, swim, clumsy stumble our way to the shore.

Now standing wet & assessing.

The Boat Wagon remains in the shallows, waiting, I guess, drivers willing to nap for a good stretch while we adventure.

MeZmer the White Bunny is with us, me supposing the others are leaving us to her care.

A sniff seems enough for the four of us as she turns & hops up the shore to those White Woods. She's small but fast & so we have to hurry.

"Kinley"

"Christina"

"Not that this isn't fun."

"Not."

"Which it is."

"Tis."

"Kinley!"

"Christina."

I interrupt laughing, half-ignoring Dylan's hand holding mine.

"She's wondering about how all this is so."

Christina nods me smiling. *Go on.*

"Well, just your thoughts."

Nod smile. *More.*

"And as many words as you'd like."

"Promise?"

Two, no three, nods.

He's like a wound up spring of words, just waiting. Wow! how he loves her! Wow! how she loves him.

"I could tell you that there is no science for" gestures around, "*any of this*. Or how we trusting follow that White Bunny knowing she's likely smarter than all of us together."

A possible appreciative sniff calls back from among the pathless trees of the softly glowing Woods we are in.

"What then, Kinley?" Christina's voice is faux-impatient. She can do that.

"We dwell in these places we have travelled in & they are imaginal realms."

"Imaginal?" asks Dylan, quietly, eagerly for him.

Kinley's quiet for a bit.

"I think what we all want to know is what to do, is what is our part in this strange story."

Their breaths nod.

"I don't know. It's shifted. As all kinds of worlds do."

I think we all agree with this I talk before I know it.

"It's like what's come before is more factual than useful."

A pause. For effect. *He's good*.

"And not so obviously either."

These Woods are as pretty as always. We walk a long time in silence after that, a friendly one, words optional.

MeZmer becomes an occasional hopping blur, waiting but barely now so we begin to hurry, unsure why. I lose myself as I do when with MeZmer in these Woods, more bunny blur than girl too. I think we take a fair distance over the others.

Then, suddenly, arrived, tis a great big patch of beautiful green ferns. She hops us all right to the center where, so thick, like a couch to share among us, them panting caught up.

One word: "FernKassi."

Then her little grey hedgedyhog friend Holly suddenly appears to greet in his squeaking tongue.

We cluster close. Dylan is smiling as charmed as I've seen him. His look is wonder, & even happiness.

Kinley somehow has brought a knapsack with blankets & water & food of the nuts & dried raisins

kind. We have a wonderful feast in this magick green patch with our magick little friends in these magick White Woods.

“On a Model Island?” someone says & everyone laughs.

Clustered like Creatures, we quiet & listen. It’s not so long to hear the *hmmm* in all things here.

We join it, not planned, not ordered, a sort of ragged quartet of croaks for awhile till I think we each realize to close eyes, *breathe, relax*, & let it come through us, each one uniquely. The more let, the better, sweeter, truer, oddly each our own.

Stars by the bajillions in those great night skies above. Safe, peaceful, whatever it all is.

[“From 30,000 feet high the White Woods looks like many more possible things than it logically should, like brown flat landscapes, like icy reaches in dark blue waters, like strips of clouds impossibly low to the ground, like also & mostly endless pathless (mostly) trees, glowing trees, lightly glowing trees, variously glowing trees, metallic objects high low, born natural from the muck of ancient & future civilizations—”

[Marie laughs. “Where were you & Tumbleweed in all this?”

[Daniel smiles. “Well, it was the Master Air Current we’d come upon who offered us a ride & showed off a few tricks involving Alternative Gravity & multiple perspective.”

[Joe traces his fingers in the faded ancient stains on their kitchen table. “Alternative Gravity? Are you ever going to tell us what that really means?”]

MeZmer & Holly are showing their four people-folks friends how to strum the fern leaves, & *hmmm* very lightly to hear stories they know to tell of—each leave a different story, & each story varying with many possible *hmmms* there are—

cii.

Somehow the chaos of imps & Global Wall’s girls end up back in the Attic together, in that first room they started in, still dreaming, but pulled back from how far they’d gone—

They find their copies of *Labyrinthine*, tiny spectacles all around, & catch up on the book since their last appearance—

Unusually, the imps show some interest in these books & sort of race cackling up to the girls where each sits, & sort of leap with a merry cry right into the books—

Ulp!—ulp!—ulp! ulp! ulp! ulp!

Once inside the three copies the imps redouble their speed to knit them together, if oddly, pages from early connected to much later ones, events reordered, double, trebled, until three are become one as strangely deep now as it is long—its many multiple tracks running atwist each other—

Then they pop! out with a cackle & are gone.

ciii.

This book has passed through these High Plains a few times over the years, its flat fields of corn, long windy nights, houses of neighbors miles from each other, & further to the nearest small town.

There was a story kind of set in this farmhouse many many pages ago, with a black & white collie, now long deceased, & also set at an old motel in town near here, motel recently levelled.

I'm visiting kinfolks & reviewing this book in my free time, making many notes toward what next. Writing a few new pages, like this one, but not too many.

About 13 years of visiting here—

About, near, 12 years of *Labyrinthine*

I tried today twice to explain this book to a kinfolk I especially hold dear. The six gun shots, the Tangled Gate myth. *What is this book about?* Everything, I say, though vaguely.

My beloved & I today took many pictures of a rusty & moldering playground surrounded by brown winter fields. Merry-go-round, swing set, jungle jim, two slides, steel but sinking—black cows approached from afar when I creaked back & forth on the swing set. Chewed, watched, waited, left—

I often think of loved ones lost & far. Wonder if they dream of me as I dream of them. Glad I have loved ones here. Try to be a good guest, good conversationalist, worthy their fond affections—

My beloved is sleeping in this, her old bedroom, while I sit here in a rocking armchair nearby. She lived in this room when we met. Talked long hours on the phone, some of it quite sexual. This obscure truth turns me on. Our romance & love & sexual beginnings *here*, this *room*. She may be less self-entangled to think of such things.

Much of my past is useless. Pain, boredom, frustration, horniness. Books, music, films, TV, on the better hand. Regret in a hundred colors on the worse one.

She sleeps peacefully, quietly, her breath even.

Nothing in this passage to move the story along. A snapshot from a darkened farmhouse in eastern Colorado, around midnight in early spring. A little lamp like an upside down tulip for a light covering, black metal base. Two windows meet at corner of the room, heavy green curtains. Bookcases. Flowers stencilled on the walls along the border to the ceiling. I first came to this room about two years after those hot, sweet phone calls. Till married, slept in basement downstairs.

I guess that's enough. Sleep calls.

civ.

Wow. That was a lot of reading. Them's a lot of notes I took. It was a kind of penance for neglect, weird to say.

A story can lose some of its propulsion, feed more on its momentum than produce new energies. It happens.

I have been lately reading about the Monkees, a somewhat recalled 1960s band & media creation. I noticed something in the arc of this story I'd never realized.

Phase One – Assemble 4 handsome young men with comic timing & TV chemistry to portray a rock band—yet they are not simply fakes—they sing—they want to play—they struggle to gain their autonomy on what they are.

Phase Two – They mature, learn their struggles' lessons, & become something unexpected. Something really good. Culminates in a film they make that embraces & explodes their quasi-fictional story.

Phase Three – They skyrocket the skies awhile, then discover in the coming story, which will be less fictional, they want to separate. They do.

Phase Four – Slowly, eventually, who they are, were, weren't, might & might not have been, comes to peace. It's OK to be yourself & a Monkee.

Maya laughs *out loud*. Like a choking snort. Um. Yah. OK. I guess.

Somehow I'm back on these pages & we're back in the CC hut. Um. OK?

"You guys were having a great time visiting FernKassi."

Nods all around.

"Then why return here?"

Shrugs. Smiles.

"I mean, I have some ideas on how to mix & combine & expand various recent themes & narratives."

Nods. Smiles.

"OK. OK. It's sort of numerical & involves a little blue-green coin purse of icons."

Waiting.

"OK, can we go to see Rey along the way to bringing you back to FernKassi?"

cv.

Chief Seattle's Friendly Market, early evening. Rey is fending off a long line for cigarettes & White Woods lotto tickets (*what??*).

Nor surprised to see us, & smiling, motions us to go sit in the cafe & wait for her break. We friendly do.

Gets quiet, as the traffic through the White Woods (??) slows eventually, & she comes over to sit with us.

I introduce everyone & it's like now Maya & Christina & Rey are the oldest sisterly bond in history.

"I'm only gay because of you two."

They laugh.

"He needed one female inspirer who he wasn't wanting to get seduced by."

More laughter.

Before everyone gets too comfortable, I stand.

"I have to walk home & DJ the show Rey will be blasting on her stereo," I explain, pointing, smiling, failing to impress.

But OK, I can't write when actually walking home, so they'll let up on me for now.

cvi.

Walking home I listened on my beloved Polly iPod to an XTC song called "Wheel & the Maypole," over & over, as I have before, & new this time realized it's about the end of love, the world, all ties, all matter, & —XTC. Last song, last album.

"Everything decays . . ."

And I thought, nearing end of my 45 minute night walk home, let me forgive & accept me, & find peace in life, *today, now*, let go & walk on,

let go and walk on
let go & walk on
let go & walk on

cvi.

Rey holds my hand, like it will help, & it does.

"You're something dear, lost, & now recovered again."

She smirks. But nicely.

"Nuff of the sweet talk. Hit it."

All them gathered here, couple tables pushed together, the place empty & quiet otherwise.

"I didn't come back last night because my beloved sick in bed. Did radio show, then into bed with her. Medicine of nearness."

They nod appreciatively. But waiting.

Take a breath, jump in.

"There's a dragon, old as the world. His eyes are like tunnels, & you can follow them in, & in, & in—

"He's never quite finished, like all time extends along his back, each moment a scale still occurring, yet

also some flaking & falling away by some strange mathematic—

“He speaks: ‘Part of how I am is how I am depicted & remembered.’

“He continues: ‘I am ever emerging from the whorl you see in my eye.’”

I stop. They’re listening.

I think. Look at Kinley, Christina, Maya, & Dylan, smile sorta, & say “You go back to FernKassi & continue your Model Islands adventure.”

Look at Rey, say, “We’re going back to the spaceship down there.”

Before a word spake, I end the section.

cviii.

We walk in silence at first through store to the cooler room, past its jugs of milk & OJ & frozen foods & ice cream cartons, to the back where the curtain quietly hides the door down. Faded green & gold, I notice this time. Faded but indeed green & gold. Colors of magic in this imaginal world.

Looks at me in the dim. Stops & looks at me.

“Yes?”

“You make things so much harder than they need to be.”

I nod.

“Why?” Curious, listening.

I shake my head. “Is there always a why? A fullblown why?”

Shakes her head.

“Can we go now, Rey?”

“Are you sure?”

I nod.

“We’re not going to count to 36, are we?”

“No,” I say softly.

Surprisingly, she smiles, pretty, bright, excited. In another corner of this murky refrigerator, behind some well-placed shelving of old boxes of tools & what-not, she tugs out two knapsacks.

“Provisions?” She nods me.

“Two?”

She laughs a little as she hands me one. “Guess I hoped I’d be going with a friend.”

We put on our knapsacks & suddenly hug.

She pushes the curtain aside & we slip through. Pull it back in place. The stairway climb down is sort of similar to last time. Her leading, our hands clasped, & how it feels like disintegration more than descent. My thoughts loosen, scatter, crumble.

OK, maybe it’s worse, I lose sense of her, of me, of stairway, of damned near everything.

But in my mind still is a soft, a beautiful *hmmm* & I know it’s her, whoever she is, & I should join in



best I can, whatever this means, & I do, & it's like now I have something to hold to, a towline back to me, onto her, on down, alien & terrifying as all this is, I hang on by the *hmmm* & eventually something, something, *something*—

And, like waking from a heavy & forgotten where in dreaming, arrival. To my name, to my what, to hers, to this travel, OK, then, OK.

She's smiling. "OK?"
"OK."

A key, a dance, a cackle, maybe more, & the door to the buried spaceship opens & we both step in. She waits a breath, & then pulls the door locked behind us. I think she'll lead us but, no, we walk, side by side, hand in hand.

This hallway feels different, feels more familiar. No, wrong word . . .

"Friendlier," Rey smiling says.
"Does this spaceship know me better this time?"
"Yes, of course. It's not inert."
"Nothing is," I finish her sentence & realize I am no longer talking aloud.

"Oh."
"Yah. Haha!"
"Telepathy."
"Kind of."
"Because we are touching, holding hands?"
Nods.
"I wrote about this. Well, sort of. Algernon Beagle wrote about it in *Bags End News*."
"Called *Symbiosis*."
"A sort of language connection by sight, sound, touch, taste, smell."
Nods. I'm not sure which one of us is nodding & which "speaking."

I stop. Let go her hand. She allows me reluctantly.

"Can you see the contents of my mind? My memories?"

"I don't think it works like that."
"How then? We were finishing each other's sentences."
She shakes her head, the half with long hair swishes by the shaven side & back. Her green & gold eyes sparkle me. "I think Symbiosis is harder for people-folk than Creatures. Also, you & I are new to each other."

I wait, nod. Go on.

"Think of it like we're visiting each other's homes. We let each other see as much as we choose. We're closer by it, than regular language, but we don't have to show any or all."

I nod again. Take her hand, which makes her happy.

The hallway is endlessly long & no doors this time. Encouraging time to talk before arrival? OK.

“Where are you from, Rey?”

“Is that important?”

“It’s a start. I think it’s one way for you to show me around your mind’s home.”

She nods slightly. “Should I let you decide?”

“Decide?”

“This is your book.”

“No.”

“OK. I’m not sure.”

“How did you end up at Chief Seattle’s Friendly Market in the White Woods?”

“I came from down here.”

“This ancient spaceship buried in the earth?”

“Yes.”

“You lived here?”

“I passed through. For a long time.”

Hm. “Are there others here?”

“Like me?”

“Or not. Are we going to meet others?”

“Yes. I mean, I don’t think anyone lives here, but they pass through, like I did, like you & I are now.”

“So the ship doesn’t move but beings within it do?”

“Yes! Sort of. But yes & sort of.”

Quiet. Thinking. Walking steadily side by side in this friendly glowing place, when we come to a fork. Left hand hallway continues like this, same glowing, same friendly feeling.

The right hand hallway is very different though. Wooden, floor, walls, ceiling, Looks ancient somehow, aged in a way that indicates much traffic through it.

We stand, look.

Her smile lights my mind’s home.

“Which, Ray?”

“Do you know either?”

“Do you?”

“The wooden one a bit more maybe. This one too but I think that one might lead to a green field & a strange being-entity.”

“Friendly?”

“I think so.”

Quiet.

“Do you know anything about this, Rey?”

Her mind’s home dims around me. “This is the answer to a lot of questions you could ask.”

Instead of just nodding or saying something else, I close my eyes, grasp her hand tighter, & release myself to this place in her mind, this mental externalization or whatever.

Bump into hard & soft things, reaching, feeling around. She is quiet, waits.

Then I have an idea. I reach in the pocket I’m sure my pants must have, even as I am sure I am both

bodied & clothed. *There.* Box of matches. Red Dog Diner. Pull a wooden stick out & light it up & look.

Oh. *Oh.*

“The wooden hallway, for sure.”



To be continued in Cenacle | 104 | June 2018

* * * * *



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Eleven

*"I must create a system,
or be enslaved by another man's"*
—William Blake, "Jerusalem."

Interlude

Beginning, continuing, & beginning again, every moment new & yet one in an endless chain, finite maybe for a human soul, also for the universe Soul, I don't know—

Do we all begin, continue, end, begin new, or just end, or is this too linear a way to see the complexity of things—

Buds emerge, green, bloom, bloom wild, fade, seeming gone, & yet not—

The song raises, raises, raises higher, climax, conclude, raises again, different, elsewhere, elsewhere—

Time tricks by its wildly solid illusion, its clay, its seeming indifference, time tricks & lures—

Beginning, continuing, & beginning again, same, different, new, old, exciting, not—

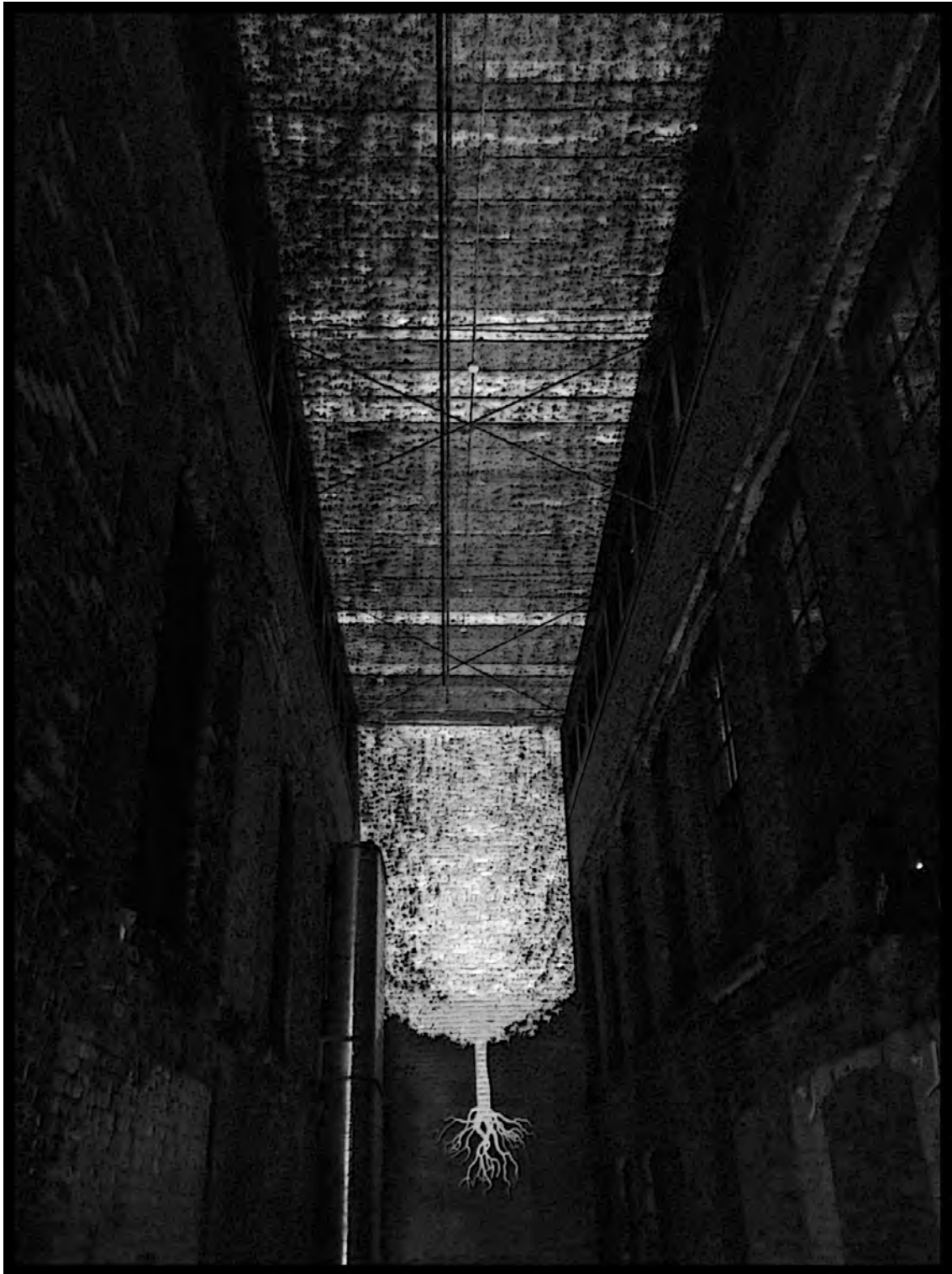
I don't know but pen moving, pages filling, music near to comfort, slantly instruct or urge or encourage—

This, this, & this, & this, many, one, none—

Once. Twice. Breathe. Relax.

Open my eyes. Look around. Several places at once. Choose.

Strange spaceship buried in the earth. Friend smiling. Waiting.



cix.

In FernKassi time passed vaguely. Maya & Christina & Kinley & Dylan were deeply & comfortably clustered among the ferns with MeZmer the White Bunny & her dearest companion Holly the Hedgedyhog, them all braided *hmmming* together, finding their way even deeper into the strummed fern leaves & their stories.

They found themselves all walking together down the hill from the White Woods into the Fishin' Hole Compound. The main cabin, the workshop nearby, the Fishin' Hole at the bottom of the hill, & beyond its pond, the great mountain in the distance.

This didn't seem so much like a vision, or a memory, or a story viewed, even from deep within. It seemed *live* somehow.

Nobody had said a word since they'd arrived. They had kept close together, uncertain.

Then suddenly approaching them was Marie the Traveler. Red hair curly to her shoulders, turquoise eyes twinkling her smile, light bloomy dress & barefoot.

"I'm glad you came," she said, her voice sweet if strangely accented. MeZmer & Holly were in a flash's flash near her ankles even as she was taking a hand each of Maya's & Christina's. Smiles a bit shyer to Kinley & Dylan as she led them all down to the Fishin' Hole to sit together & talk.

The day was passed along to late afternoon, dusky colors lightly dusting the sky.

They sat in a half circle all formally regarding each other.

Finally Kinley laughed & said, "I'm not sure how we're here with you, or *what kind* of here this is."

Marie nodded. "Maybe you're here for a reason?"

Dylan spoke up quietly. "I think we came from the Model of the Six Ancient Islands. When they were together?"

Marie nodded.

"We were told it had not been explored."

Nod again.

Christina spoke now. "How do you decide where to travel?"

Marie laughed. "I'm not sure if it's about deciding. More of a . . . collaboration?"

Lastly, it was Maya who now talked.

"Would you come back with us, & travel with us for awhile?"

Marie put her finger on her chin, thinking. Smiled, nodded.

"Will you really be with us?" asked Kinley, as though struggling with this all still.

She laughed. "I don't know."

But when they woke all together of a sudden, there were neither at the Fishin' Hole nor in FernKassi.

It was a strange hotel room, all angles & distortions. Kinley & Dylan instinctively reached out to shield the girls against . . . whatever. But nothing was immediately threatening. Too many walls, not enough floor, a bed too profound like leaking extra dimensions. Still, this is where they crowded onto. Somehow big enough for five.

Nobody said anything right away. Here they suddenly were. Or back at the Fishin' Hole clustered Dreaming? Or back-back in FernKassi's green & gauzy comforts?

Kinley was the first to move. Raising a finger that they hold still, he climbed with difficulty off the bed onto the not-enough floor. Creeped from patch to solid patch toward the door. It & its frame did not fit well together, & it took him several tries to figure a formula for opening it. Several quick kicks & a slow one, two hard tugs, & short *Hmmm* & a shorter Imp's cackle. Then it came open reluctantly still.

I just stand there at this strange doorway, halfway in & halfway out, trying to decide. Then I go through, & look up & down the empty hallway. Less odd than the room behind me, but then I see the room right across the hall has not a door but a full-length mirror instead.

I look into the mirror, deep into it, & I look so tired & haggard, like an old, old man. Ratty dreadlocks, dulled green & golden eyes, one of each, slumped nose. Look like I need two showers at least.

And a thought in my head so sudden & so clear:

You make things so much harder than they need to be—.

I nod. Relax. Nod again. Breathe. Relax.

The return to the hotel bed was shorter, less extra-dimensional. The room had, in fact, totally calmed down.

Kinley found his friends sitting in a row along the edge of the bed, & each of them sucking on a small blindingly blue package.

“G o o o o o o o o o !” they all explained at once merrily & scooped to give him room & one of the blindingly bloo little packages to suck on too.

“G O O O O O O” was all the package had printed on it, in large friendly letters.

Kinley wasn’t sure what had just happened in the hallway, or before in this room, or now in this room.

But he & Christina had a signal they’d learned from Maya. Her pert if still sexy little nose raised up, & *sniff!* & *sniff!* again, & then down, *sniff!* That was the “all clear” signal in Creature Lingua, learned by Maya & shared with them, & Dylan too, who picked up on it & smiled his charming one.

Kinley nodded, bit through his package seal, & drank down what felt like *bloooooooooooooo goooooooooooooo* . . . ! . . . !! . . . !!!

No wonder the room was stabilized again. It was the *goooooo*’s doing. What this actually meant, Kinley didn’t know. It was funny, though, whatever it was, & soon the room was rollicking in laughter led by him. Took awhile to settle back down & by then they were all on the floor.

Kinley notices that an occasional overcoat of his was on him again. And its inner pockets stuffed with many Secret Books.

Oh.

And the door opens again a little & a small horsie Creature comes in, shy & friendly, shared by Maya & Marie as he delivers a folded up map to Kinley.

A polite horsie bow, length of hugs from the zealously *goooooo*’d, & he departs again.

Kinley finds his voice & says, with delight he’d not recked of himself, “A map. Plenty of Secret Books. Marie the Traveler with us. And”

“G o o o o o!” they all yell.

“We’ll be here awhile,” he smiles, *sniff!* nose up, *sniff!* nose up, *sniff!* nose down.

cx.

Marie stands. Looks at them all, smile a bit askew, but merry, & leads them all by come-hither finger out of this room & into the hallway.

“Hotel Noah,” she says, & each wonders when last here; the *goooooo* scoops their wonderings together & re-directs toward what’s to come.

Long hallway, vaguely lit, the carpet designs swishing beneath their feet, but friendly, & the weirdly kind man with the long dreadlocks & floppy hat, green & golden eyes, bent up nose, *sweet sweet sweet nice smile*, is saying, “if you travel in a book-movie-Island, at one point you’ll be reading a long document about its history, & many others will be coming at you to read it.”

The hallway descends down a little steeper now, & the *goooooo* seems to allow them to levitate down its grade. Their hatted, dreadlocked leader continues: “So you’ll read it aloud, & then you’ll find that you’re trapped by all these people in/on this book-movie-Island. You’re trapped & events will accumulate, & you may be able to wiggle yourself free, unfold, reveal, find a way out, through the document, read your way in & around & under the document. It is many columns long, many pages, little pictures, static, this place, *events accumulate!*”

Arriving, Kinley shouts to him, “Secret Books?” & he lingers not but a green eye & golden eye to twinkle, twice, & gone.

Arrived, down, but *goooooo* soft landing, back to the White Woods, again, or already.

One thing, unusually. An old-fashioned steam locomotive train, running through these White Woods? Small, Creature-sized, but luckily the *goooooo* takes care of this as they now too are Creature-sized. There are several cars behind the green & gold locomotive with open air passenger seating. Empty, for the moment. They hop in.

The choo-choo train is swift & quiet, save for the occasional TOOT! TOOT! it bellows, but quiet otherwise.

One could ask: *still back at No-Tell, or Marie’s home, or FernKassi?* Here & now seem a shifty pair.

[*Perhaps it’s all goooooo time. Perhaps it always was.*]

Now choo-chooing among large warehouse buildings, more shadows than brick & glass, & Maya spots & points out to them the quick-blink-&-gone red doors in the alleys between these buildings.

The choo-choo train stops just before the track does. Time to get off.

Is here *here*? Is this *this*? They walk close together but not huddled in a scare. More a curiosity what puzzle this be.

A vaguely green door with possibly some golden edging. Shuttered window next to it, a neon sign blinking slowly in it. *BAR*, on, off, on, off.

Kinley leads the way, maybe a hunch. His thought flows through them all, *goooooo*d together as they are.

Door won't open. Pull, push, kick.

Kinley realizes it's not locked, it's a code needs solving, so they try combinations of kicks, high & low, a *hmmm* or 2, a cackle. Something *works*, not sure what, they hurry in.

It's walls-less & murky inside, though indeed there is a bar like a vague neon oasis in one corner.

"Start there" says *goooooo*-mind, & agrees.

Long wooden bar. Old jukebox of 45s in the corner. TV mounted behind the bar. Celtics against someone. Their faces all look like the dreadlocks-man—sometimes several balls at once—

Not a restroom really, much less two, more of a freestanding closet with a rickety door.

"Sit at the bar" says *goooooo*-mind, & agrees.

The barman is a grey-haired gent, friendly smile 'pon them. Short hair, spectacles, colorfully splattered apron. A coaster at each of their bar stools as they sit. No other patrons but a gruff silent woman far down the bar.

"Evening," he says, friendly.

They nod & smile but *goooooo*-mind panics over language & what to do next.

But not to fear. He produces five packets of bright green *goooooo* with a smile.

"These will help with the fully arriving here, & words," he says, handing them out.

Goooooo-mind nods, smiles.

Packages bit in, the bright green *goooooo* sucked in greedily & curiously. And . . . breathe . . . relax . . . wait for it. Mm. Yes. *OK*.

Now double-*goooooo*d, they feel the weirdness within each of them calm, or at least become more navigable.

"Thank you," Christina speaks up.

Mr. Bob the barman nods.

"DAMN SECRET MOON MISSION!" the gruff woman suddenly bellows at everyone & noone.

Their attention, or *goooooo*-mind's at least, drifts to the old Apex TV mounted in the corner behind the bar—at first a series of photos—old TV, color TV-ish—they watch

—Two smiling people behind a card table of shiny little books, reminds Kinley of those in his overcoat—

—A pretty girl napping in the green grass of a park, holding two little Creatures close—

—A sideways view of a long of a long paved road, tall pines all around it, glowing?—

—An empty desert at blue dusk—

—Deeper Woods, greener, no path—yet—rolling—

—A snake? Rolling?—

This the kind of images that can be introduction to *Trip Town* & *goooooo*-mind tugs, is tugged, a breath, a beat,

ulp! ulp! ulp! ulp! ulp! ulp!

Maya's purple eyes come to first, um, oh. *Oh!* It's the bus she met Dylan on! And there he is across the aisle from her!

He's listening to the person sitting next to him in the window seat. An old old man from what Maya can tell. She realizes someone is sitting in the window seat next to her too, but she compels herself not to look. Not ready yet to know.

Old old man talking softly, steadily, penetratingly. She can hear easily.

Is this then/now? Is this why she keeps remembering this ride? Did she dream the rest?

She listens, like everything depends on this.

"I lived back then in a cabin out in the One Woods. That's their original name, Son. I was a caretaker of this cabin for a strange rich man. Out there, honesty's tell, to clean up my shit. Just living comes this, Son. Just days & hours & breaths & hands to your face.

"It was peaceful out there & I began to calm. I could not have found my way back to civi by myself if I'd tried. No, Son, I was dropped out there unconscious, been told if I wasn't careful, got lost, I'd die out there too.

"I'd just sit in this old green armchair, 'pon waking with the light, sit there at the cabin's one window & watch it all come visible again. Twitch out my habit & my brokedown heart day by day, hour by hour, & it was peaceful. Sipping water from the well, eating dried fruits, & cereal with condensed milk, & it was good, Son. It was *choiceless*, you see, *choiceless*.

"Son, then I saw beyond the clearing around my cabin up in the Woods, but still so visible & beautiful, a great rainbow-colored snake. *Oh ye gods rejected by Emandia! O ye gods! So beautiful! O Son!*

"It began appearing every morning, after dawn, but before much fuller light. Wouldn't stay long but twas there, yes.



"This cabin was stocked for the Aftermath, & sure. A basement filled with all kinds of equipment, Son, & there I found a pair of good binoculars. And so I was ready every morning to watch from my darkened cabin, sit & watch this beautiful creation.

"Son, I saw it rise up, for reasons I could not fathom, rise up high, & move along the ground on tiny powerful feet.

"Then he noticed me, his green & golden eyes, like mine you see in my old face, young & rocking then, look into my eyes, deep into me, slide into me through my eyes, divide & divide & divide again & explore me minutely, blood & bone, past years, thoughts, hungers, yes, sure. Son, I was known, first time ever before or since, I was *met & known*.

"Now, Son, I had unusual ideas in my mind. Didn't always work to my advantage, why I was self-banished out to the One Woods. I wondered, *what would that snake eat?* Once this idea got in me, I could not shake it out.

"The fridge was old, unlike a lot of the other gear there. It was an icebox, worked well in tandem with that icy stream a short walk away.

"Dug deep in that fridge, seemed bigger inside than it looked, like that old TV space opsy show. Came up with a stash of these little cans of olives. Why in a refrigerator? 'Imported special,' those cans said, but told no more.

"Then, Son, come the day I was waiting outside there before sunup, sitting on a stump on the edge of that clearing, quaking with my can of olives. Opened with a pull tab, like old cans of beer.

"But it was easy. He came up to me &, like we'd always done it, he would accept one olive every morning. Curl near me, rise up & take the olive in his jaw, watching me all the time, our green & golden eyes opposite to each other, so matched as we stared one another, accept it without chewing, & sort of depart slowly, still rised up but in reverse, still holding the olive in his jaw. *Every day, Son. Every damned one.*"

Fell asleep in a blink against Dylan's shoulder, seemed almost small & shrunken now, & was gone at the next stop.

When Dylan stands up to let him up, I panic & turn away quickly to whoever is next to me.

Oh. Oh. It's Kinley, in his long coat, little fold down tray before him, a pile of colored Secret Books. He seems to be reading several at once too, if that's possible. Guess with him it is.

cxi.

Rey & I hand in hand follow the wooden hallway along, quietly for a fair stretch.

"Tell me a story, Rey."

"A story, Ray?"

"Yes."

"You're the writer."

"*Tell me one. Please.*" I smile as ragged fool charming hopeful as I can.

She considers, smiles, nods.

“What kind?”

“Was there a before-this-spaceship for you, that you remember?”

Her face mulls, mulls, darkens, withins, then sort of roughly returns back to me & she looks straight ahead into the wooden glow as she talks. Hands well-grasped together.

“I used to wake up in the night & find my whole body was like an electrical wire, dipped in cold water. A lot.

“Sitting up. My new lover still deep in her sleepings, slept like a feather on moonlight. I’d rub my mouth, & feel a hole, press my fingers in tenderly, & feel all my teeth are bashed in. Crooked & loose.

“I don’t move an inch, but panicked. *What the hell? What’s this all about? What does any of this mean?* I didn’t know.”

She pauses a long time. Just our boots stepping along for sound.

“I close my eyes & think, *please, please, please, please let this be a dream*, & I fall back toward my pillow, back toward my pillow, fall forever toward my pillow, Ray, & I fade through scenes, colorful, sepia, black-&-white scenes, liquid, *falling falling falling* toward my pillow.”

Silence. Then, up ahead, the bittiest of purple glows? We hurry in synch. It’s sort of a dancing in the wooden glowy murk.

Oh. Oh. *Oh. Pirth.*

Tis Pirth, beautiful dancing purple mystery, & Rey joins him in his dancing, as though always they’d danced together in this strange place. Maybe they had.

Along this ancient wooden hallway, there is a side-door I did not know of. Pirth pauses, still dancing, as tho to direct us.

Rey looks at me, still dancing. I find I am too, a little, remembering I have a bit of the general groove in me.

Dance-dance, dance-dance, dance-dance

“Not in me to say no to Creatures,” I say, dancing, smiling.

Door is green, its door knob golden. Is this all for colors now? Well, at least Pirth isn’t.

Steps & something. Steps & something.

Rey’s hand in mine as we go in, a sense of Pirth restored to his pocket in my plaid green jacket. More *hmmm* than anything else, here, arrhythmic beats embedded in it, then a tripping throbbing of lights, the *Hmmm* warm & snaky now

Pirth, Rey. *OK.*

Now we're in a room that I think sort of familiar. I find myself in an armchair, sort of you could say waking up, & Pirth is in my grasp lightly.

She's on the couch nearby. Under a warm brown blanket covered in sober, handsome Bears. I'm glad Rey is warm & comfortable.

But she shifts a bit & her long red hair half-tumbles out. I start. I wait.

The blanket slips again & I can see she's dressed in a green & gold sweater, a long lacy flowery skirt, barefoot. *None of these are Rey's.*

"*Shhh*" a voice in my mind says. I look down at Pirth who I can tell hears these words too but did not speak them.

I calm. Reply in kind. "Rey?"

"That's Figga. She was, is, my true love."

"Where are you?"

"I can't see her right now or talk to her."

"Why?"

"*I can't.* I'm safe."

"Where?"

"Your other pocket. With your medal pinned to it."

"How?"

Silence. OK.

"Tell me, Rey."

"I can't."

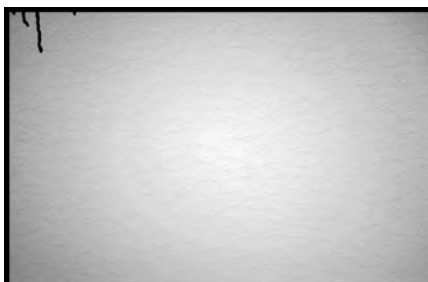
"She's going to wake up & see me. What do I say?"

Almost as though reacting to this thought conversation, Figga pulls the warm Bear Blanket back around her, shifts around to curl into the couch.

"Tell me, Rey. Please."

Silence. I wait.

Somehow Pirth is reaching out to pat Rey's nose. I close my eyes, feel around gently for her hand, & she takes it, & Pirth along, & we arrive somewhere, not her mind's house like before, but somewhere maybe more neutral. Ancienne Coffeehouse.



Two arm
chairs in
a shadowy
corner.
She talks but unhappy "there was a fire. here. ~~with~~
maybe forgetting here A man. Jancely
I saw & me in this sadness. Deep sadness saved her. on the
spot on
"A fire?" "Accidental?" "You?" fable be-
"Yes." "No." "Yes." tween us,
with many
delighted
purple Imps.

"Why?"
"I wanted her free
of all this."

"Free?" "Of this spaceship. All of it."

"Ray, I don't
understand."

"She was not from here."

"Here?"

"She'd come here by mistake."

"From where?" "The White Woods."

"She'd come here by mistake."

"See that door?"

"Yes." "That's the way
out."

Figga suddenly wakes & I feel *slooped* back to the darkened room, armchair & Pirch, Rey in my pocket hidden.

Turquoise eyes flash at me knowing.

“You saved me.”

A nod in my mind before I can stutter “What?”

“Thank you.”

I nod. Smile. “My name is Raymond.”

“I’m Figga.”

[“Now what?”

“Get her out the door. It will seem like a dream, & she’ll be free.”]

Her pretty face turns anxious. “Have you seen my friend? I was supposed to meet her there. I was waiting.”

[*Shake your head.*

No, Rey.

Shake your head.]

I shake my head. Stand up & walk over to Figga. Sigh inly, loudly inly, for Rey to hear.

I hold out my hand. “There’s a door over there”—I point where Rey directs my finger—“back to the White Woods.”

She stares me plainly no. “I have to find my friend.” Her pretty face begins to crumple with worry. “I have to make sure she’s OK.”

Ignoring Rey I sit down on the edge of the couch. “I’ll help you find her, but I think you should sleep some more.”

“Was she called home?” she asks, worried. Rey wrestles me down in my mind, & for a moment I can’t speak, only hold Figga’s hand, & adjust the Bear Blanket around her.

We compromise & I *hmmm* Figga back to sleep.

cxii.

It was a book & a TV show & a series of films & I think a Broadway production called *Ten* & I’m not sure how it figures in here yet but hear out the story before other matters.

He was a young black football player, stinking talented, a great smile, hubris & charm twined together.

Yet his devotion to his sport was so complete he knew nothing about love & little about friendship beyond the playing field.

That summer he was sent by his stepfather, who’d raised him alone, on a trip across the country to see everything before college & the deeper grinding devotion to his sport that he so anticipated.

Handed the young man an envelope with a series of bus tickets, each would travel him from one place a fair distance to the next place. A second envelope contained papers telling him where to stay in each place. A third contained paper-clipped wads of money, some for each leg of his journey.

The knapsack he was given had maps in it, slim volumes of information on each place, & a credit card & cellular phone hidden in pockets a thief would never find, these for emergencies.

The knapsack also had used but comfortable clothes, nothing flashy, no ties or trinkets. And some lined blank books to write in, & some unlined ones to draw in. Some writing pencils, some drawing pencils. A very small voice recorder with hundreds of hours available for use.

A white business card with green & gold printing. A number to call 24/7 “if you are lost.”

The young man, whose actual parentage & origins were unknown to him, whose skin color suggested black but was perhaps something simple than this, trusted his stepfather even as they had never talked much. He would have spent all summer practicing his passes & improving his speed & agility on the football field at his now old high school.

But this. Thought to refuse. Didn't.

Ten destinations. And one real instruction. “You will encounter someone in each place, feel a strange tug of connection. Smile. Say hello. Say your name. Say you are traveling. Ask how the other person is doing, his or her name.”

So *Ten* begins. This handsome boy with the excellent physical gifts & mediocre grades, & less than mediocre understanding of the world, hugs his stepfather briefly, & gets on the bus that first morning. And we will intermittently follow him.

“Wake up, kids!” the barman calls close to them, & now Maya & Kinley & Christina & Dylan are rousing up, still at BAR it seems.

Christina notices first. “Where’s Marie?”

She’s not with them. Maybe never was, but it sure seemed so for awhile.

They look at Mr. Bob the barman for answers.

He shrugs. “Maybe she had to go back to work.” He gestures to the Secret Book bulges in Kinley’s long overcoat. They nod.

“What now, Kinley?” Christina asks, figuring he’ll at least start their discussion with an idea.

Kinley looks friendly at Mr. Bob. Points to the walls-less murk beyond the bar. “What’s deeper in?”

Smiles. Shrugs. “Depends on you.”

I stand up. Nod. Smile. “Let’s go.” Even offer my hand to Dylan.

Kinley peers me close. “Maya?”

I match him. “There’s nothing here to worry about. We’re on the Model Islands still, one of them. That means the Thought Fleas are guarding us.”

Still they all pause.

I take a breath for patience, & try again. “The Thought Fleas are Guardians of the White Woods, where we are. They guard all in the Woods.”

Looks up at me, purple eyes sparking.

OK. Sure. Here I am.

Sit at bar, nod friendly to Mr. Bob who fetches me a mug of iced water.

“There are parts & places in this book that are not safe. But not this. I promise.”

Now Christina stands. “Are you coming with us?”

I shake my head. Pause. “Tell you what. I’ll stay here with my old friend Mr. Bob the barman. In case you come back this way.”

OK then. They set off with smiles & waves & are gone in murk in moments.

“Do you know where they’re bound, son?”

I shake my head. “That’s what makes it fun.”

Awhile two pairs fairly close. Christina doesn’t hold Kinley’s hand but something else.

They come to a place of sound. It’s a weird kind of little movie theater. Assorted sizes & kinds of chairs facing a small freestanding projector screen. Right now there’s a film but no audience.

So they sit. No rows exactly, but they pick seats near the back.

More Fun is handwritten on a white sheet, hanging by a single piece of old tape from the bottom of the screen.

The Recruiter & The Postman travel a long time together, not precisely friends but watch out for each other.

Postman won’t kill the Melties though. When Recruiter finds one, Postman will disappear on down the road to meet up again later.

They have an agreement built up over time. The Postman continues along about a mile on up the road, finds somewhere to wait. Doesn’t ask after & Recruiter doesn’t tell.

Then the time they come into a town, mostly deserted as they are, but no, actually not.

One three-story brick building on the town’s main street. Music from third floor. A party?

A sign on the door on the side of the building leading up there. White sheet, old piece of tape affixing it.
Says, “for those lost.”

They both go.

The Recruiter is a big muscled man in leather & denim. Postman is dumpy, middle-aged, shorter. One everyone notices, the other nobody.

Yet Recruiter has learned this Postman is most certainly *not* a nobody. He’s smart in a way that



keeps survival foremost in mind for him & his. Uses his words, his tone, his touch, his unimpressive appearance. Watch.

Recruiter is greeted. There are pretty girls, unmelted. There are musicians, equally so. There are Travelers. It seems a crossroads. Information. Food, drink. Some company.

Postman feels something off in all this. Edges around the crowds in the living room, unnoticed.

A back bedroom, door locked. Weird noises within. Sex?

"Hi," says a handsome young black fellow to Kinley.
 Startled but OK, Kinley smiles him in return. "Hello."
 "Do you know where I am?"
 Kinley doesn't laugh.
 "Are you OK?"

Shakes his head. "This isn't where I meant to go. I got off the bus at Omaha on a break, to use the restroom, & ended up here."
 "Nebraska?" asks Christina.
 The young man nods, letting his upset more show.

"How long have you been here?" asks Dylan, movie forgotten by them all now, it quietly pauses.

"I don't know. It feels like I'm dreaming. Like I'm still on that bus, or fell asleep in a bathroom stall. But I can't wake up."

He holds tightly to his knapsack tho nobody attempts to take it from him.

["Will he travel with them now?" Mr. Bob asks me. We can see & hear all this knowing, as they don't, that they've barely walked twenty feet from BAR.
 ["Maybe."
 [Looks me solid now. "Are you writing this with all the lights shining in your skies? All seven colors?
 ["I'm not sure."
 ["Why not?"
 ["I remember. I forget. I remember."
 [Nods. "Flowjustflow, son. Pick it up after."
 [Put CCR's *Green River* on Polly iPod, see a rippling distorted image of me in my old plaid green jacket in that far window. Boston my adopted homeland, coffeeshop in it, & Saturday night & the faces & their gadgets all around me.

[On my table, little blue-green coin purse & its lovely trinkets helping me direct this book right now, & also two little traveling clocks & a little AM-FM transistor radio, long-time companions, gadgets of another time.

[This notebook is *Labyrinthine* but only Part Eleven in it, two companion notebooks contain the earlier 2675 pages.

[Old blue jeans on me. An old green t-shirt from Portland, Oregon living days. New boots & socks at least.

[If not danger, then a question is needed here. What would that be?]

I look at them all now.

“Why is there something instead of nothing?”

They look at me intently, benignly, even the young black man, his name is Troy they have learned. Like that guy in *Community* the TV show but no more really him than Rey is the girl from the *Star Wars* movies. Just friendly allusions.

“That’s the question.”

“For us?” asks Dylan.

“Yes.”

They nod.

“Is there an answer?” asks Maya.

“Yes. No. One. None. Many.”

At this a cackling little black & white pandy bear appears & skitters into Troy’s open hand. A smile on his face.

“I know you.”

Cackle cackle.

“I mean I did. A long time ago.”

Cackle cackle.

He looks at the rest of us. “Before I had football I was a scrawny kid. And black in a white neighborhood. I found her in the Woods nearby.”

They nod smile.

Troy’s face then darkens. “But I lost you. All those nights we sat in my bed, me talking, you laughing. *I lost you.*”

“I don’t think so,” says Kinley.

“She goes sometimes,” says Maya.

Troy looks around at them & at the imp in wonder. “Why did you return now?”

Cackle cackle, crazy eyes & laugh.

“I think to assure you you are with friends now,” says Dylan softly.

Troy listens, quiet. Nods, remembering something.

“Hello, I’m Troy. I am traveling. My stepfather told me to always say that. I forgot because I was lost.

They all nod, imp cackles.

[“Thanks” I say to Mr. Bob.

He nods, pleased.]

cxiii.

Figga wakes up eventually & smiles to find herself still covered by the warm Bear Blanket & with Pirth now in her grasp.

She starts to tell me a story & I can feel Rey relaxing & listening. It's not the words, I realize. It's the sound of her voice, its unique music.

"I was in the Woods because I was looking for a friend I don't see very often. But I got worried about him & he agreed to meet me, to talk, to let me check up on him, as I would. Nobody else does anymore."

I nod her go on.

"He travels around, studying good & evil, it's his vocation, to try to understand these things. *Do they exist outside of circumstance? Or do they simply embody the sum of a given situation or aspect of it?* That's how he would talk. *Good & evil, either, both, are they forces of creation? Or estimations of the human mind about human behavior?*"

I nod. Curious. "Was he your brother, your boyfriend, something like that?"

Shakes her head, nicely, but almost impatiently. "No, we don't have all that where I come from. All the . . . differences like here. But we come here & we, um, he called it *suited up*." She gestures her pretty face, long red hair, slim blanketed figure. "Like this." Her tone isn't modest or prideful. It's indifferent, like her body is a glove, a pair of casual clothes.

She nods to something, goes on. "He wasn't always like that. It was someone he'd known here. Not meat like you, or suited up like me. Mechanical?"

"An automaton?"

She cocks her head, pretty, thinking. Nods. "She had been with him for a long time, tended his needs when he was first here. As he evolved in form, following your pattern, he learned better what she was & would tend her in return.

"She . . . learned him somehow. She didn't see the suit so much as what was him within. He told me it made him feel human, & this was never anything we had sought.

"He told me she was one of the older types more modeled on human behavior & its mercurial nature. He said that changed with later models until eventually all of them were rounded up & destroyed by the State."

She's quiet. "But the last time I saw him he told me a few had escaped, including her. He was going to a Festival where he thought she would be. But he was so dark, & his studies of good & evil spooked me. It was like he'd lost all hope, & just wanted answers."

"Did he find her? At the Festival?"

Her face darkens. "I don't know. I was given some strange instructions by someone I didn't know."

Pauses. "I was lost out in the Woods. I was crying, not imitating a sad girl really. Then a door opened up from the earth, & *she* looked up at me, smiled, nodded, held out her hand."

[Because this is *Labyrinthine* & no other, I can interrupt the narrative with live news—

I'm sitting with you in my heart, Traveling Troubadour, at this show of a musical hero to me like you; he's retiring from touring, maybe prefers other ways to spend his music's hours—yet I get a live glimpse & listen of him for a couple of hours—

I don't know if Paul Simon was quite your favorite kind of rock & roll, tho I'm sure you liked him—I've loved his music most of my life—

His stage is full of stands & instruments, enough for a big band—

Like Miles, Claude, Lynch, he's remained true through many long years—lived long & still true to his Art—

I wish a path long like his & theirs]

"Rey."

"No."

"Rey."

"No."

"Why?"

"Lead her to the door."

"She doesn't want to."

Silence.

Then Figga is sitting up, still fairly covered in the Bear Blanket, but her smile is sugar & sunrise. She is holding her hands together & Pirth is dancing on them like a stage.

I have to decide & can't.

Pirth does for us. Her dances from her hands over to the wall mirror at the far end of the room, & on through, one going on, one happily dancing still on this side.

Figga stands. Holds out her hand to me. "Help me find her." And we hurry to the mirror wall & touch to reflection & now we are on the other side looking back at ourselves but are no longer reflections of each other.

"Hmm," I mutter. "Not usually so easy for people-folks."

"Figga's not regular people-folks," says Rey in my mind. Her voice is sad, & yet curious where we will go next.

We follow Pirth who leads us through room after room, mirror after mirror, each time leaving an iterate behind.

I want to stop, or at least to know, but Rey *hmmms* me calm & agreeable. Because it's her, & this is her true love, I calm, I agree, I keep going.

I feel like we are coming near to something. Like an arrival. No picture in my mind, no slow of our pace through these darkened mirror-walled rooms, & yet the feeling comes on more.

There comes a room much larger than the rest, not murky but blinding bright of colors, so much I grasp up Pirth & hold tight Figga's hand. Hold Rey close too within me.

Finally too bright & I stop us.

"Close your eyes," Rey says.

I hear Figga gasp. She hears her too.

"Close your eyes & you'll be able to see where you are & keep going. Trust me."

We do. Close eyes, see much better, & move forward slowly.



To be continued in Cenacle | 105 | October 2018

* * * * *



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Eleven

*"I must create a system,
or be enslaved by another man's"*
—William Blake, "Jerusalem."

cxiv.

I see Figga & Rey & Pirth with my eyes closed. We are climbing into the back of a large freight truck. We sit together among something strange, things, many of them.

Pick one up. Sniff. Study.
"Yellow onions" I say, not quite certain how my knowledge.

Figga stares me close. Her hair is much darker now, curly-haired. Her face shading toward someone I knew a long time ago. Says nothing.

Rey is staring me too. I wonder why they are not seeming to see each other? Pirth is in my lap, quiet right now, as is rare.

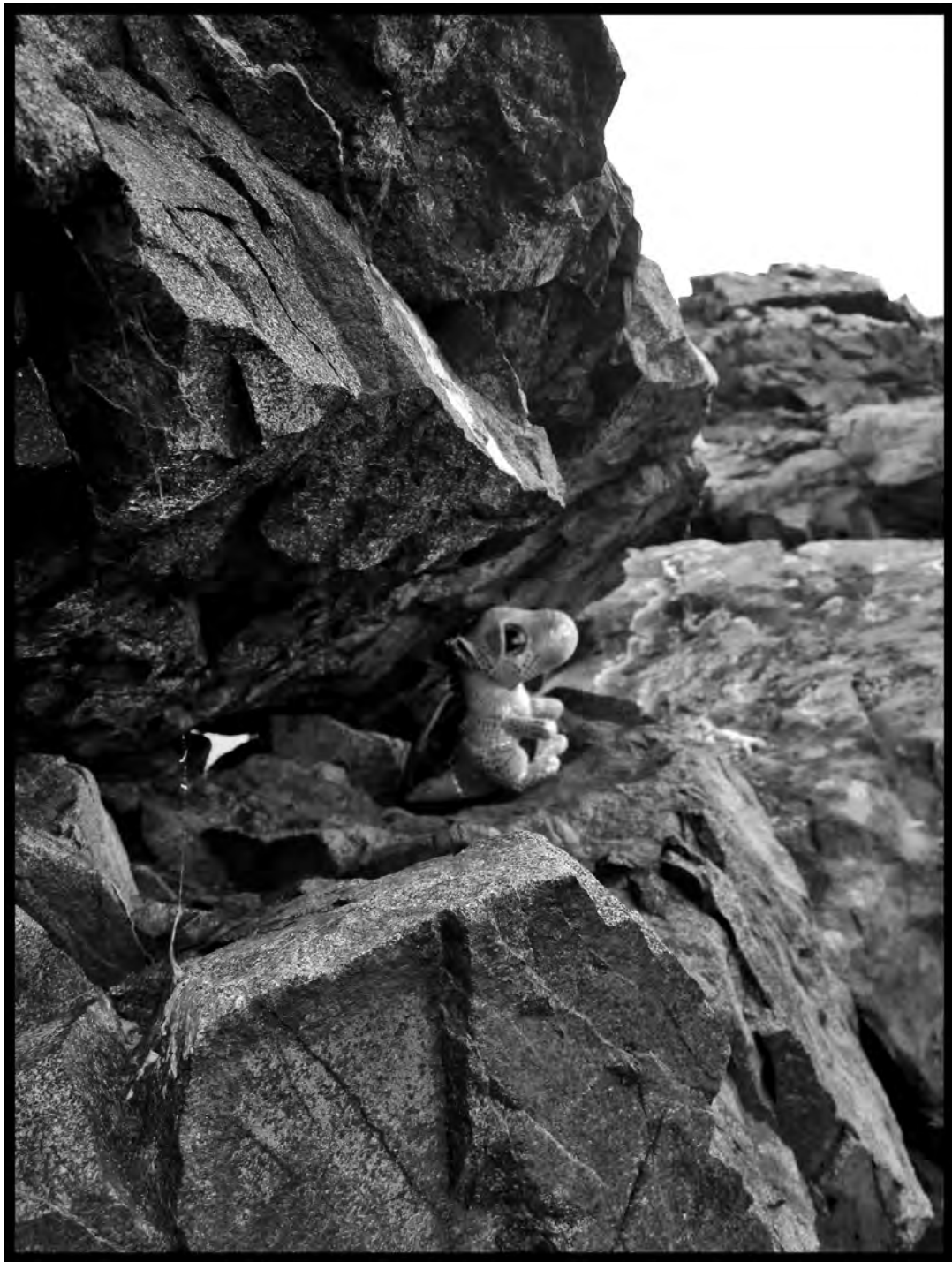
Am I dreaming? What is this?

Suddenly I get up, hand Pirth over to Rey, who holds him, looking me steady.

Climb out of the truck & make my way to its front, climb up clumsily to its cab, & into driver's seat.

I'm not really a driver but this looks easy & I feel compelled to try. The truck is on. I see no ignition. Nor brakes or gas pedal on the floor. Just a steering wheel & a lever to my side. Two options: *Forward* & *Stop*. Stopped now.

21. My eyes still closed? Dreaming? Strange bright room still? I move the lever to *Forward* & the truck moves forward slowly but steadily. I hold on to the steering wheel. We / I move forward.



But to where? Nothing through the windshield but yellow, same as the onions in back. Yet I feel *passage, movement*.

22. Now a scent in the cab & I jerk to see Figga in the passenger seat. But not really Figga.

"Hi" she says.

I nod & turn back to driving, it vaguely occurring to me we could crash into something at any moment.

"How are you?"

"Why?"

A quick intake of breath, & a sigh.

I nod. "I remember that well."

Silence.

"Why are you here?"

"I'm . . . not sure. Did you call me here somehow?"

"Sort of. Some notes for this section."

Nods. These words mean nothing to her.

"Are you now or then?"

Corner my eyes see her half-smile, remember that too. She's dressed like then, sexy because not provocative, long lacy flowery dress. Some makeup, little needed.

23. "Are you here to help?"

"I . . . can."

"Do you want to?"

She stares at the yellow onion murk we drive through.

"It's up to you. Do you really want me here?"

Now I sigh. "You show up in my dreams, elusive & luring as ever. I think because you're the flaming tip of all the good things I wanted then & I did not get."

"You have good things now?"

"I do. But I am not young anymore. My age but not just that."

"What?"

"An ignorance of mortality. Something. I wish I could have told him some things."

"Like what?"

"Like let you go. Like pining over you did harm. I think it began a pattern even with girls who did want me for awhile. I could not keep them & I could not let them go."

"And now?"

"Now I'm lucky. I try to live & love those in my life like I feel this luck."

"But not always?"

"All those years happened. Pain doesn't disappear anymore than happiness does."

She nods. Thinks.

23A. *Something something something*
something something
something

24. We're all in the truck's cab now & I'm still driving only the steering wheel is colorfully big & I notice my feet below peddling away to keep us going.

Pirth is dancing on the dashboard & I sideways glance see Figga & Rey curled up amongst each other & Figga is her Emandian red-haired self again—

White Woods yet I'm able to drive easily between the pathless trees till I come to a tree with a poster on it.

"*Don't You Know That Dreams Are Real?*" & a picture of the White Woods all about it, wavering a bit, & a tiny little cackling black & white pandy bear speeding away deeper in the poster as we ever watch.

Figga & Rey sort of curl into me now as I peddle on.

25. We roll onto a rocky beach by a roiling patch of seashore. I drive us among the big rocks quite close to the water. Sun shining in glitters & shades.

26. I stop the yellow onion truck & get out. Find myself barefoot walking the rock sands & this weird; my feed are excruciatingly sensitive bare to stones! But OK. I walk along. Water is a little tinted, rainbow colored?

27. And now swishing to shore are a few, then more, then many Polaroid photos, still developing into images as they slide close enough to pick up.

28. There's a picture of you at a birthday party, among presents & cake, smiling at me in that way you had. Measured affection. I wanted you too much, more than anyone else did, probably more than you could handle. *Save my life, heal my heart, help me escape my life's hell.*

You were a smart, sentimental, romantic girl but I don't think you wanted that much ferocious need from a boyfriend.

29. Other pictures of other girls looking at me, love in varying degrees of arriving, escalating, departing.

30. Then it's friends, some loved for years & years, smiling, jumping happy, pleased of me. Then something else & something else & then no more. Photos that develop into empty pictures. Empty tables, parks, skies.

- I find a box of Red Dog Diner matches in the glove box of the yellow onion truck. Make a fire on the stony beach as the night settles in along its far treeline.

Pirth dances by the fire happily. Figga & Rey sit on a log together, clustered & curled & watching me. I am welcome in their cluster & curl as I wish.

I stand, for a moment. I've gathered every Polaroid photo I can find, & toss them like playing cards into the fire where they warm, curl, crisp, & burn away into sky-rising sparks.

Yours last. Whatever you were. Any of you. Somewhere on this planet, tonight, all of you, save a few blood-kin, & a dear friend worth the lot of you all by a numberless exponential factor.

You'll never leave my heart.
Burn Burn Burn Burn Burn Burn

"Feel better, Ray?"
 "I'm glad you're together again."

We watch the night sky rise of stars, feeding our fire, Pirth dancing, Rey & Figga joining him when they can't help it. Me too.

Pain & loss should not be the only way to mature a living soul.

cxv.

Bowie & Iris are sitting at BAR now, talking to Mr. Bob the barman. Mr. Bob likes Iris immediately, finds her familiar in some way he cannot quite reckon. Not something you say to a pretty lady you just met, especially if she's very with a relatively safe spy.

"Where are you two bound next?"

Bowie turns to look at me, now agreeably arrived to the page. Iris smirks me hello.

"What are you game for?"
 Bowie eyes me with green eye & mushroom eye, affectionately perhaps. Shows me his hand clasped with hers.

I nod. "Got it."

"There is a Rainbow Wheel that unites the Six Islands, as once they clustered together in the times before time."

They nod. Listen. Mr. Bob has made for Iris an iced drink that shimmers pink red pink—Bowie's drink is the dark caramel of a whiskey. My water is iced.

"I'm curious about what is at the center of this wheel, where its color paths of lights cross."

Iris smiles. "A mission?"

Bowie frowns.

"More of an expedition."

"What's there?"

"Well, deeper under the surface is a beach."

Iris is more pleased. Bowie sips, less. But listening still.

"Keep talking."

"Something's there, deeper even than that beach."

Listening.

I shrug. "I don't know anymore. But, yes, it's a mission."
Listening.

"You can travel there with Creatures."
Now Bowie looks up.
"Probably the only way to get there."

Iris looks ready to go. Bowie hesitates. Looks at Iris again. Nods at me. I nod to their clasped hands.
"I promise."

"Are you traveling with us?"
"I'll be there enough."
Now Iris takes my hand with her free one. "Come on this mission with us, Raymond."
"Why?"
"We'll find more. We miss you."

Bowie nods too, sincerely.

"Aren't you going to ask how & why you ended up here?"
Look at me quizzically. Guess not.

"Now, which Creatures to travel with?" I say, finger on my chin. "Boat Wagon? Sea Dragon? Air Current?"

Bowie & Iris & Mr. Bob nod me quietly go on.

I think, uncertain. "What I think is that we may find origins down there, of Creatures, of the world itself, I don't know."

Smile. Waiting.

Look through my pages. "Place of Art," I mutter.

"It's in the White Woods. You find it by *hmmming*, by sharing the *hmmm* with everything around you, till all relents, & joins in. Shimmer back & forth until it is revealed."

"Not the Sea?" asks Bowie.

I think. "Maybe in the desert too. So maybe by more than one place."

"Is the Place of Art our mission?" asks Iris, curious, hopeful a bit.

Mr. Bob leans forward & puts a hand on my shoulder. "Stalled, son?"

I nod. "I feel like this could be something. But it has no tracks to ride on yet."

"Like a train?" asks Bowie.
"An old-fashioned steam locomotive," I say.
They nod.

I stand. Smile at Mr. Bob. “Thanks.”
Smiles in return.

Gesture to Iris & Bowie to come along, & we leave BAR to discover the choo-choo train outside, just waiting. We step into one of the open air passenger cars.

TooT! TooT! the choo-choo train cries, & the train begins to slowly move along.

To the Place of Art? Maybe.

Soon we’re past buildings & industrial places altogether, & into the White Woods, where choo-choo trains used to be unknown but there’s this one now—

We chug long for a peaceful time, perhaps us dozing in our seats, when with a TooT! TooT! the choo-choo slows to stop. At a station?

Or at least a restaurant where this train stops. Sign says *Blue Dog Eats* & I can see inside not the usual array of tables & chairs but old-fashioned school desks.

A middle-aged lady steps from the restaurant with a bag, & climbs into the passenger car just ahead of ours.

She smiles at us & says “Hello.” Her smile lings on me & I wonder if we had met somehow. But then she settles in her seat facing forward, & soon the choo-choo TooT! TooT! & rolls on.

Another long stretch along old but smooth tracks & again perhaps dozings until a soft *hmmm* begins, from the lady in the seat ahead of ours.

Iris & Bowie are curled into each other as ought but also near to me, I am part of their cluster, naturally, & we begin to *hmmm* too, uncertainly but then each find a way in, & together, & we four are now together in a deeper way, sweet, subtle, fine—

These Woods join in with us, shimmer a little, wave back & forth like a strong wind, release a little, release a little more, & arrive to somewhere new old.

cxvi.

Kinley & Maya & Christina & Dylan now with Troy & the wee cackling imp.

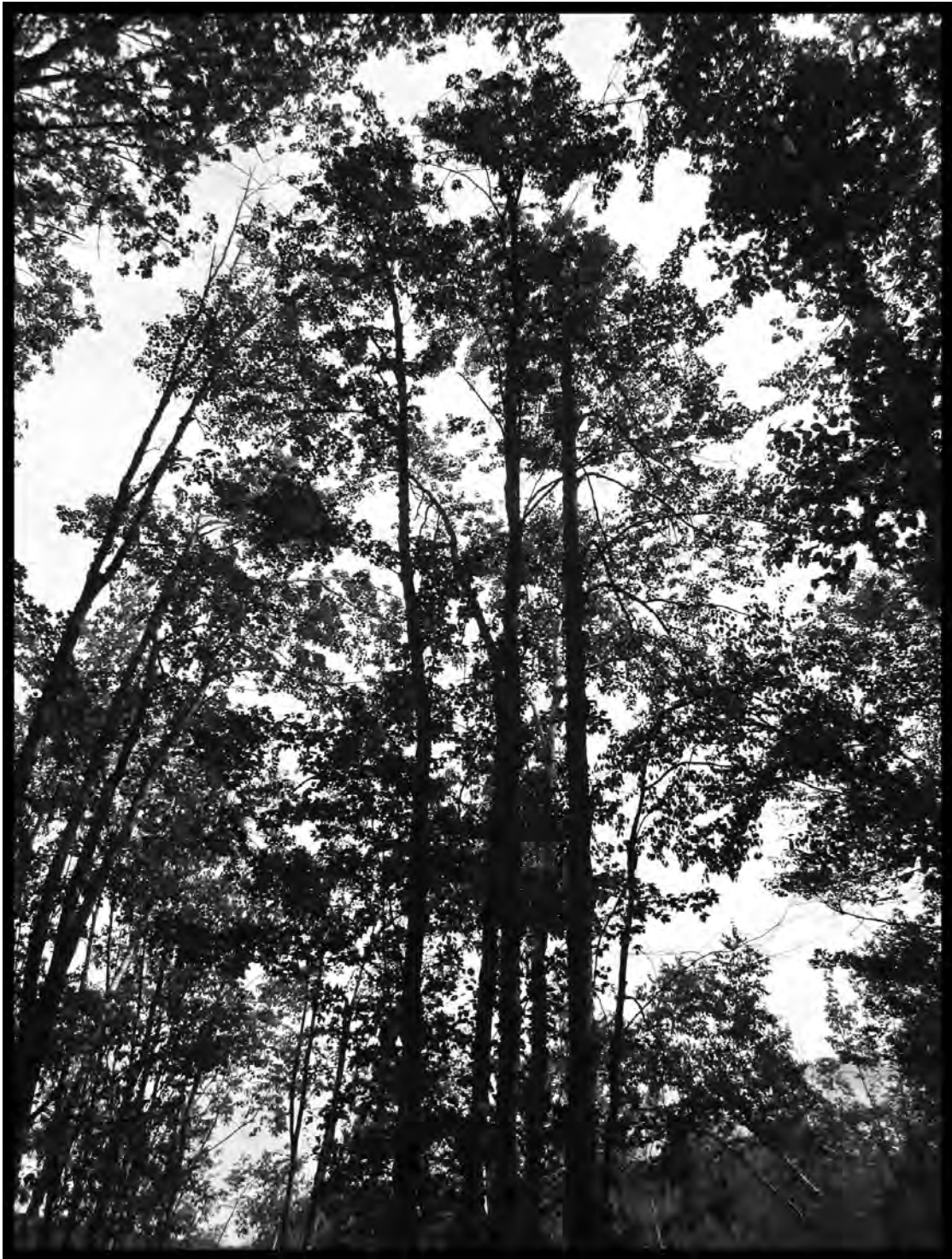
“Why is there something instead of nothing?”

Kinley explains to Troy that this question is now accompanying them.

The murk around them is quiet & Troy is strangely more relaxed among these new & mysterious old friend.

“Do you have answers?” he asks.

Christina laughs & takes his hand. “Not one.” She pauses, studying him with vague smile. “But you



might be a clue.”

Bright eyed, “Me?”

Kinley laughs & takes Troy’s other hand. “She likes to play.”

Maya begins to talk. “I knew a man who had answers. I don’t think he liked them.”

Global Wall.

He would tell her stories he told nobody else. He would be asleep, eyes open, talking to her, her in pigtails, white panties, & a nightie down to her waist. He had not touched her. The impediment was his, not hers.

She looked at bit like the girl in the K-Mart advertising circular in the Sunday paper. His cumming dream companion, like none would have him in waking, & maybe you’d call it lucid dreaming, maybe not, but he was both that odorous pimply boy & the man he was now (then, with Maya), & with her he could only imagine (now, then), what like to touch her, the sweetness (then) with the sense of biter denial (now), her become her, come her, talking about something in between them then & them then

“It was my birthday back when I was in college. I had roommates & we lived in an apartment off campus that was also part bar & part classroom.

“I woke that morning before anyone else, which was pretty early, & walked the rooms.

“One of the apartment’s rooms was filled with racks of clothes everyone had donated to share. We wore each other’s clothes, female, male, whatever. It was a nice mix. You got to learn how the other guy or gal felt, you know.”

Maya & the girl in the circular agree to something. Each a soft small hand on his then/then cock, & a slow stroke. Felt nice to touch there, felt nice to listen.

“Some of mine though were kept in the far corner racks, playfully mocked mocked & derided, & I wondered why, because they didn’t seem any stranger or odder or whatever, *more idiosyncratic* than anybody else’s but, still, there they were, in the far corner. I don’t know, maybe they were older & more worn. I never wanted to buy new clothes anyway.”

Feels it/it harden in her & her hand, warm, throbbing lightly.

“I walk into the barroom &, by golly, there are people awake at the bar already, drinking their breakfast. One of them is kind to me, he always sit at a particular set, can’t tell how old or young he is. He seems to be grey-haired & about twenty, but I don’t think he is.

“I clap his shoulder smiling, which he returns in full, & say to him, *you’re good man*, Bill.

“And everybody else at the bar laughs & mocks a little, but I get in all their faces & *oh oh mmm—*”

The circular girl teaches Maya how to slow stroke him along, a little faster, a little harder, she’s done this so many times in his mind, it’s nice this time to have someone else too—

He gasps but talks on. “Finally I walk into the classroom, & it’s occupied too. There are two girls, a brunette & a blonde, I sit down with them. Well before classes, I don’t know why they’re so early.”

Faster harder, lean forward bite his shoulder, bite harder, faster harder he can only mumble “it was my birthday, it was my birthday.”

Now lips, licking, tongues, suck, a little more, little more, more, he cries of an anguish so many years clogged in him.

Wakes alone/alone. Again/again.

They come as a group in this dark murk to a white-faced pink cat radio, on the floor, shown by a softly glowing light.

A voice on it, intoning words garbled & uncertain.

“Astral beings? Interdimensional
beings?
Astral beings? Interdimensional
beings?
Astral beings? Interdimensional
beings?”

Finally fades & is gone, dust rising
from the radio.
Exhaling.

Then another voice. Stronger. Humorous a bit.

“In Imaginal Space, find out why Something instead of Nothing! Hurry now!”

cxvii.

A happy cry:

Smile.
Wake up!
Happiness

Now what, Pirth. Now what, Figga.
Now what, Rey. Early morning.
Rocky beach. Those lovely words
arrive waking with me & I say
them aloud.

“TooT! TooT!”

We stand & hurry back up the beach to the Woods &, stranger than stranger, than even that yellow onions truck, which seems gone as tho never was, there is a road, & upon it pulled up is a public city

bus, yellow & green & blue & golden I guess.

The door opens & we see in the driver's seat a familiar old face.

"It's President Clusterfuck! Donald J. Trump!" I cry as tho pleased.

Figga & Rey look at me oddly, as though they see someone else.

"*It's him.* Dressed up like Ralph Kramden in *The Honeymooners*, but him! Look!"

They do, but don't.

"All on board, folks, we got a schedule to keep!" Maybe-President Donald J. Trump cries out merrily.

So we all climb up the stairs on board, Pirth now in my jacket pocket again.

"TooT! TooT!" he honks as he pulls the door closed & resumes driving along the road.

We at my insistence sit in the very back seats, passing by faces & quasi-faces & no faces as we go.

"Hang on, folks! And away we go!" he cries & pressed the gas pedal to the floor. *We go.*

Someone in a nearby seat is mumbling something over & over. An old ragged bearded man, floppy hat over most of his face. "You have not seen **RemoteLand**, you have not seen **RemoteLand**, you have not seen **RemoteLand**"

"I have," I grumble. "I have. *I have.*"

Bus driver maybe-Donald J. Trump's voice booms through the bus as he greets passengers & tells funny stories.

"So I says to Mrs. Ling when I get my black coffee & cheese Danish this morning, 4 am, on the button, every morning, just as my shift is starting, I say, 'I was sure your people were just going to buy America for pennies on the dolla', sooner or later. And I tried to warn people, raise tariffs, do all I could. But nobody listened to me. I was so sure I knew. But you didn't. *Why was that?*'"

"And she sighed at me all serious like she does every time I bring this up. 'President Donald, I tell you time & again we wouldn't do that. America stinks of Americans. We just look to be your landlords, not your owners!'" Then he laughs & laughs as people crowd on & off. The ragged ones he lets on with a wink & a smile, his hand firmly over the fare box.

Rey & Figga smile a little, at least at his booming, jovial voice; Pirth dances among their laps, unnoticing; I feel full quickly, & don't figure a bus will get us anywhere any better than walking, or some more Creaturely transportating fellow.

So I pull the stop alert wire that runs the length of the bus. Somehow it TooT! TooTs! but backwards. Hm.

Bus driver maybe ex-President Clusterfuck Donald J. Trump pulls up by a seeming random white

birch, uses a big handle to push the door open.

“Peace & love, pretty peoples!” Pause, a sharp eye on me leaving last. “You’d be smart to find Webster Hill soon.”

I’m out before these words cohere in my ears. The bus is gone in two blinks at most, a TooT! TooT! its lingering, lingual tail.

White Woods. Strange & lovely as always. Now what?

Rey & Figga are looking at me, more curious than in deference. Pirth is dancing happily nearby.

They nod me my half-formed ideas to speak.

“There is a Place of Art & I think it may tell origins. All kinds of origins. Or one kind that seems like all kinds.

Nod. Smile.

“I feel inclined to bend many paths toward this barely known where.”

Figga turquoise eyes are strangely more intensely upon me.

“What?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Tell me, Figga. Tell us.”

She’s leaning against Rey, eyes wider. “I think I know it,” she whispers. “I think I was there.”

Now we’re all sitting, Pirth still dancing.

Figga raises a pretty finger, takes a breath or two, calms.

“It’s in your notebooks. Go & look in them. We’ll wait.”

cxviii.

Riding this familiar train, so many years known, trip high on a Saturday night, lot of those too, R.E.M. music on my beloved Polly iPod

*I . . . could . . . turn . . . you . . .
inside out!
I . . . could . . . turn . . . you . . .
what I choose . . . not to do*

And what of all of it? What are these hours riding this old swaying train Cambridge to Boston, cross the Longfellow Bridge, golden lit up skyline to nod a heart-deep thankee?

I don’t know. In other cities, other trip-high Saturdays, other trains, sometimes buses. Familiar contours

in my soul. Old & familiar.

A book 3371 pages & counting. Past 12 years & counting. No answers, just pleasure, & again, & again.

I remember Cinema City in Hartford, on Brainard Rd.; it's long gone now, but numberless years ago it was my teacher, art films that pushed my mind new, strange places. In the middle of nowhere.

Outlet stores. One for lamps. Another for rugs. A big gas station mart. What a film art-house out in this desolation? Cheap rent?

A McDonald's too. It was good hiding. Two hours hidden in a strange film & bus rides to & fro.

Whatever it meant, or means. Another train now, used to take it trip-high Saturday nights to ZombieTown. Now next door Milkrose.

Hiding to think. To write, mostly. Read. Listen to music.

Now drones w/phones in nearly every seat.

Is this better, me & this pen & this notebook & my very old & beloved Polly iPod?

I don't know. I know the far end of this are wasted daylight hours.

Soon not yet I'll be at a new version of my courtyard at Au Bon Pain Cafe in Harvard Square. An old friend returned to me.

For all lost, that will be a lovely returned gift. That will be fine.

Some days have a salve to them. Maybe such days are invitations to try new, to hope, press the pedal down again.

The deep hunger in me to make good Art is ever there. To feel its salve, & share it how I can with the world.

That hunger has been my best guide, my compass through strange years, (as all years are strange to their inhabitants).

A gratefulness in doing this. That I insist. Nothing over my running years from youth to now but this has come, is with me tonight, accompanies me ever on, if I am profoundly lucky.

Mondays have not been too good for me for awhile & yet these lines resume on this one. A recently found joint, refill soda, corner table by a big window to Main Street.

Quiet here, a big restaurant. Pizza, dinners. Friendly people behind counter. Reminds me of a joint back in Portland I'd spend a lot of time in, walkable home—not as rough cut as there, poor, homeless, drunk, rowdy Burnside Ave out the window. But . . . something.

I've sat writing at joints for years & prefer it mostly. Began as escape from crowded & dirty family home, needed places cheap & hours long at them. But something else too.



A feeling of being unbothered. No cruel high school. No waits. Just me & notebooks & black pens & music on Walkmans till later & now Polly iPod. Just music on her, no Internet, no phone, *just here*.

Phone too, green Gumbee, but for calls, for picture taking, a wee bit of Internet, but little. Look up bus times & movies just seen on Wikipedia.

Eurydice too, though not tonight. I want to be here, not the endless spidery elsewhere online.

I've been reading an old dear book of mine. *Victoria at Nine* by Don Robertson, from 1979. I bought it in paperback in 1980 about, I think in the pharmacy of my teenage hometown.

I was 16 or so, far closer in age & spirit to the child protagonist. Now I'm closer in a way to the adults in the book. Yet I read it to renew friendship with her, her magical world of dolls & animals, her *fellowship* with them.

I feel lately drawn to these pages more powerfully, hunger, want, *something*.

Coming autumn? It could be.

This passage began as I travelled late Saturday across metro Boston to a theater in a town I used to live in. And then I was in Cambridge where my beloved Au Bon Pain Cafe courtyard is two years gone & now something near ready to succeed it there—

A lingering something of being there, memories rustled from my mind's dust—old affections, places walked, faces.

Letting these things rustle, reappear to me.

Memories of people, place, events, many gone from me in time & place & spirit. Binds undone.

A wish to remember & not feel sad.

A wish to look forward too, sometimes.

Across this street is a bus stop, near the intersection & its traffic light. I was sitting here one time, quite high, watching a black man standing there, & me not yet realizing it was a bus stop. I worried about him in this mostly white town. Then . . . *o! bus stop! Dumbass, me.*

I'll get back to the many stories here, & more of them too eventually, since right now focussed on this part fairly exclusively.

Yes, the autumn coming is cheering me. Cooler days, longer nights.

Can it be OK to remember?

Not dangerous & harmful?

Does this make curiosity for new days possible?

People come & go. It's not predictable, nor rational.

Some don't go. Some return.

Memories don't have to be like markers in a graveyard.

And it is possible to revisit some people, places, & things of the past, but certainly do not expect what was, fully intact anyway. Fragments, surprises, disappointments, delights.

Next lines, here, toss the coins, the dice, resume the fiction.

—Or maybe not yet. Maybe a bit more these ragged mullings.

Place of Art. What tis? Letting this phrase lure me on. Letting it have power to help me shape.

Somewhere in the White Woods there is a place where *humming* will occur, & invite, & when invitation is accepted, will agree, all will let, let, let to each other, & the trees will shimmer & change, & what is visible about will let to something else—

It looks at first like a great, grand Liberry with heightless murky roof & long, long reaches of bookcases, & books tall, tall upon them & small, small as the period at the end of this sentence, small.

But it's not a Liberry, not just, for it seems like the White Woods that had seemed gone are still there somehow, that we've not left them, no, not at all, no, this is the great Liberry & it is the White Woods too, not trees becoming book but *trees are books & books are trees, & how this so, & what does this mean?*

And what is that sound, nearer & farther away, a distinct, familiar kind of sound? A *whoosh-whoosh-whoosh* kind of sound? It's—

It's the *Wide Wide Sea*, here, this wondrous mystery of a place, not visible quite to the eye & yet this deep sound, & a bare tint of salt in the quiet still air here, *how so? what tis?* Water, books, Sea?

Not enough to say what this Place of Art is. Like origins *but what does this mean?* Origins of this world, the Universe, me? Are these really separate?

I tend to think of this book as unique, & yet *part of*. I'm back at this joint, dusk, traffic passing by, each vehicle distinct, clouds in the sky, buildings, that bus stop over there but *part of* too.

What, then, of this Place of Art?

OK, say it.

*The Place of Art is where there
is something instead of nothing.*

I sweep my writerly hand in a long blur to bring Kinley, Christina, Dylan, Maya, & Troy to The Place of Art. I do not join them but do have them see & follow those who have recently passed through here.

They get it, this trick of following spectres awhile, get it's a clue for them along their passage, help along their way. Let Maya tell awhile here.

We sit in a circle in this place we've come to, it's like the White Woods we know but crossed, or co-existing, or something like that, with this Great Liberry, great big unending high & deep, like Dylan's

bookstore but a world of its kind. I look up & see no roof but murk. I look deeper in & see no end. Like it the world itself was part books as part of its native blood.

We are among a much bigger circle & some we know. Next to me is Marie the Traveler who it seems like we just left. I know somehow that's her brother Joe over there, & there Daniel their guardian, & Derek the Islander. But more that that.

Those bloo-eyed Kittees & their yellow Friend Fish. And that beautiful Sea Dragon. Are these knowledge from memories or is the Author helping?

And a very very old looking Sea Turtle with a sweet kindly face.

Mine to tell right now, I feel the *hmmm* here beneath my bones; I hear somewhere too deep to know the *whoosh-whoosh* of the Wide Wide Sea.

I feel the real touch & spectral touch too of my friends & these sweet others known & not yet known.

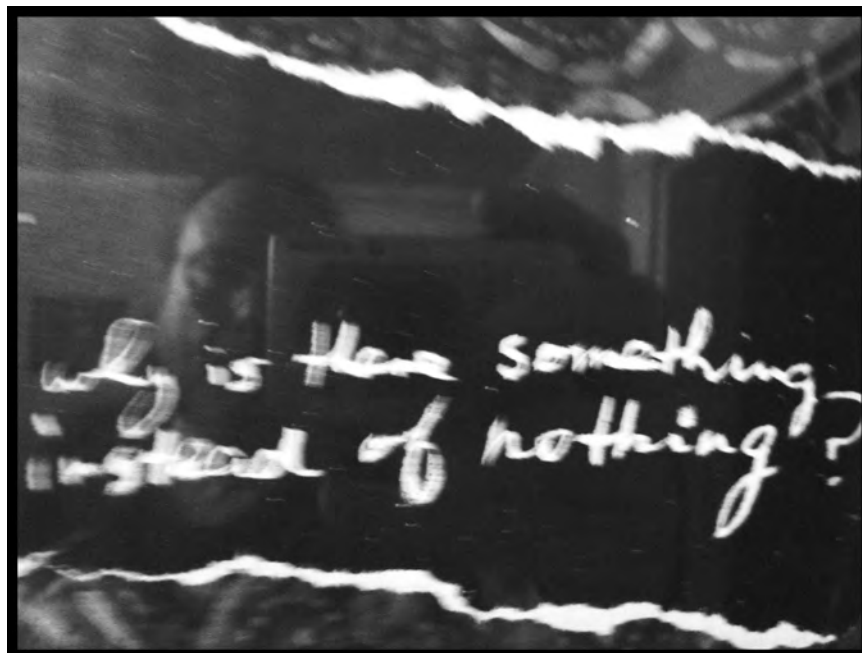
Then there sweeps in & among our circle a beautiful Rainbow Fish, large sparkly purple eyes, sweet Creaturely smile, swimming high & low in the air, so many colors filling the air behind us—*round & round & round!*

Then seems like there's more of her—3, 4, 5, 6 in all? Her or her kin? The Liberry / White Woods / Mystical Mirk washes wildly with colors!

And when the Rainbow Fish leads us, that is them, to stand, & move deeper into the Place of Art, I know this phrase now too, we follow along. Still touching to touch, still *hmmming*.

Daniel pauses by a well less murky than the rest, little framed pictures hung on it, abstract & pretty

But one is words



he reads & is their quest too?

We resume walking even as it seems like these words now travel with us like the *hmmm* & the *whoosh-whoosh*, & the colors, & then something new—

A scent, strange & yet I know it. And before us a Great Tree. *Goodness gracious!*

The Sea Turtle points his ancient paw & says, “*This* is why something instead of nothing.”

Quiet. Us all looking at this beautiful creation.

Then Derek the Island says shyly & quietly, “What does that mean?”

Quest again & then the Sea Turtle laughs gruff & charming. Say, “this is for all of you to find out. Go now, my friends, go!”

Then it fades, this spectral scent, & I am looking at Dylan, Kinley, Christina, & Troy. Still Place of Art. Still Great Tree.

A new sound. It’s the Great Tree. Its green & golden fruits, their music, low but sure, tinkling, tinkling.

Words in them, deep in them?

“Stop. Heal. And remember.”

Over & over again, those words, & I cannot be certain but seem just for me? How? *How any of this?*

Kinley smiles at all of us, raises his hand, bids us all closer to the Great Tree.

cxix.

What is dream mind is supra-consciousness? Think about it sometime.

That’s what he had heard on the white-faced pink cat radio tonight in his motel room. What stuck.

Global Wall had to talk to Benny Big Dreams, & tonight, & *now*. No reason for doing what he was doing if he wasn’t with them. The risk, the uncertainty, yes, but *it drove him, they drove him*.

Getting to Benny is usually Benny’s choice. His terms are the only ones.

Especially since he’s been guarding them to boot.

This motel room is empty & full of them. No visible sign of when they were here together. Nothing to see or sniff. Touch, taste, hear.

Nothing. But everything. His body prickling all over with memories, something deeper than memories, of them with him here.

And more. In a corner of this small two bedded, on TV’d, one desk-table’d room, something more than

his supra-memories.

Under the rug. Something he'd done while they had been out, directed to find them all a table for pancakes at the Red Dog Diner next door.

Luck the floor was not cement or brick or stone. Old tile covered in carpet.

A hammer, a few other tools. Small shovel. A hole dug out, a box buried. A supra-adhesive glue to restore the tile, the rug. All more adhered to each other than before.

And now here he is again. Trembling it will all be gone. Yet nothing in this motel looks repaired or replaced since that last visit.

It's good. It's there. He digs it up.

He turned on the white-faced pink cat radio while hammering & digging. Restless jazz, noisy, both scary & funny down deep. Piano, bass, guitar, drums.

Turns off the one light he'd had on, the squat little hooded green thing on the desk-table.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, trembling, holding the warm *humming* wooden box awash in sigils, lifts lid.

A many-colored glow seems to reach up & touch his face.

A small ivory hairbrush, a pink ribbon. White cotton panties. Wrapped & tied around a small thick book.

Within, instructions on how to get to Benny Big Dreams.

He caresses & sniffs these items. A language in their scents only the oldest, deepest part of his mind can decipher.

Opens the small, frail pages with the sniff afog about his mind, & begins to read.

Global Wall has to bring his girls to a place where them being found is not possible.

And as much as he would rather not be with them than be any kind of danger to them, he knows they would not accept this. He belongs to them as much as them to him.

There are places in the White Woods he never knew, never imagined. Safe places.

The Secret Book describes these places as magickal beyond reckoning.

He reads of a Traveling Troubadour. He reads of tiny Guardians of the White Woods. Many wondrous beings & things. Rutabega Festival. Place of Art. Great Tree.

Benny will know how.

He gave me this book.

Told me how to use it.

Breathes in his icons again & tries to read deeper into the pages. Feels like there are levels within, words within words within words.

Where do I start?

Then . . . something . . . nearer & farther, like inviting him?

A deeper sniff & within the Secret Book now, giving chase to something small & merry & playful. Cackling?

Follows, faster, loosing of his limbs, his body, just mind following deep into the White Woods of these pages.

How, what? Oh.

It's from my past, not something new. *I have to go back there.*

The white-faced pink cat radio turns on again even as Global Wall is far from listening to it.

"You're listening to the 'Within's Within: Scenes from the Psychedelic Revolution.' I'm Soulard your host, broadcasting on this page from a glassed overlook in Harvard Square.

"It's marvelous to be broadcasting on the page from this new / old place that was lost to me once by my departing Boston, & a second time by local powers that be deciding to change things.

"My courtyard is same / different but I've never been up above the earth hear, a second floor high looking out through glass at the Square below.

"Wonderful. Marvelous.

"We should get back to Global Wall now. Just this thrill to share."

cxx.

Kinley, Christina, Maya, & Dylan approaching the Great Tree for what seems like far too long—

[And the question: where is Troy now, just with them? When he saw the spectre of the Ancient Sea Turtle, whose name is Abraham, tho you can call him Abe, he knew with certainty this, *this*, is who he was looking for.

["Who is he to you? How do you know you're looking for him?"

Troy clucks impatiently at my question.

"It's a really good feeling. I think, 'follow him, talk to him,' & all the rest of this jive confusion is nothing. *OK, writer guy?*"

[I nod. OK. "I'll find you again to tell more later."
Now he smiles, sweet, charming, guileless. "Deal," he says & hurries back the way he came.]

"Kinley" begins Christina.
He raises his hand. "I know. We need help. Wait here. I'll look around."
Knows full well this won't help. But does leave them a short while to think. The murk is cool & quiet,
& his thoughts percolate slow until . . .

Returns. Hand raised again. "Let's sit here in a circle again."

They do & notice Troy is missing. "He's OK," I whisper to Maya.
She nods the rest. "We'll see him again." Obligating me, smirking.

Sit on the warm grey floor in a circle & hold hands.

Kinley looks at Maya. "I think we need Creaturely help & you're their special friend. Lead our *hmmmming?*"

She thinks, likes Kinley, nods, smiles. Eyes closed, a low *hmmm* begins.

The rest join in one by one, each finding a way in, braiding among the others until they are one, many, none.

Sniffs near & distant but Maya is looking for someone to bring them to the Great Tree & eventually one of the beautiful Rainbow Fish appears to them, swimming lightly in the air. Great purple eyes, pink smiling face. Sparkling many colored back & fins.

Maya stands them up & like with the spectres they'd followed, the Rainbow Fish swims air in the direction of the Great Tree, its tinkling green & gold fruits a bit louder with each step.

Their approach is now easy & swift. Once quite near, the Fish winks & smiles them all & swims up in the grey sky until gone.

Kinley is the first to step close enough to touch this ancient tree. So large tis like a mountain to their miniscule size.

"Yggdrasil," he says quietly, touch its bark, warm & rough. Glowing a bit.

"Yigg-what? asks Christina, now touch the tree too. Pleased beyond words.

"The Great Tree of the old Norse mythologies."
"That's what this is?" asks Dylan, as he & Maya step forward & touch with pleasure too.

Kinley is quiet, studies, touches, peers up into the merest visual portion of its massive height.

"No. Yggdrasil didn't have green & gold fruit. Or appear to be a number of kinds of trees in one. But important like it, to us, our world. Important to us in our quest."

"What do we do then?" asks Christina, who loved this tree & being near it. A love not far from ho she felt about Kinley. Deep, playful, desirous, endlessly curious.



Before Kinley could answer there was the flash of something, & then just beyond the curving turn of the tree, whose full radius could not be grasped. Kinley in an equal flash was racing after it with a quick wave to the others.

They chased & chased & chased & Kinley in the lead of them got close enough to realize they were chasing a squirrel. Grey one? Perhaps.

And there were not remaining at the same level of where they'd been. Somehow he was sure they were descending down lower & lower & this made no sense but yes.

Lower & lower they went, now a sure depth of being underground somehow & Kinley now saw what he had not before—that they were not rounding the Great Tree but racing alongside of one its enormous roots, have above ground. And as they tired, the Squirrel slowed for them, so it was no chase on his part, but him leading them somewhere.

And, as suddenly as this realization, was them suddenly crashing & toppling off an edge into something much farther down below them than they had been.

[For a weird transitional period you are all with me as I sit & write at this window desk in my office.

[“Transitional?” smirks Christina in my ear.

“En root”

“To where, Raymond?” asks Kinley almost scolding teacherly.

“Not sure.”

Maya leans familiarly over my shoulder, watching me write these words with a black pen on the lined white sheets in this notebook. Dylan, I think, is looking around. Finds the Creature Common in the next room & hurries back to tell Maya. She kisses my cheek warmly & now all four of them are in there.

[Sitting on the bed & floor, the three of them watch Maya sniff back & forth with MeZmer the White Bunny, & laugh as she doesn't often. Her laughing lures to play the tiny little individdle pandy bear Rosa!eeta who sits on Maya's hand, cackling merrily & gnawing her palm lazily.

[MeZmer nods to me somehow, my Tender, she can, & I let their slow fall continue until they are *down down down—*]

Come too, lined up side by side, slumped against a Great Tree root half sunk in the earth but still bigger than all of them.

“Look!” Christina points to a ladder not far, leaning against the root, tall enough to reach near its top.

Climb up to its top, walk along, over to the other side?



To be continued in Cenacle | 106 | December 2018

* * * * *

Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Eleven

*"I must create a system,
or be enslaved by another man's"*
—William Blake, "Jerusalem."

cxxi.

A month passes, resume. *A month, really?* A month. Resume

My old college town, down here for an annual visit, three days of writing, & editing, & music on Polly iPod. No 'net. Much more lo-fi than usual.

Mac-Donald's, a shroomy mix on the Greyhound getting down here today. *Cenacle* 105 work, hours today at *History of Scriptor Press*, up to mid-2011, & me reading *Cenacle* | 78 | June 2011.

Reading its *Labyrinthine* pages, written I'm pretty sure in 2008, maybe into 2009, mostly in Portland, Oregon.

Dylan. Maya. Bowie. Global Wall & his girls. Enjoying it all.

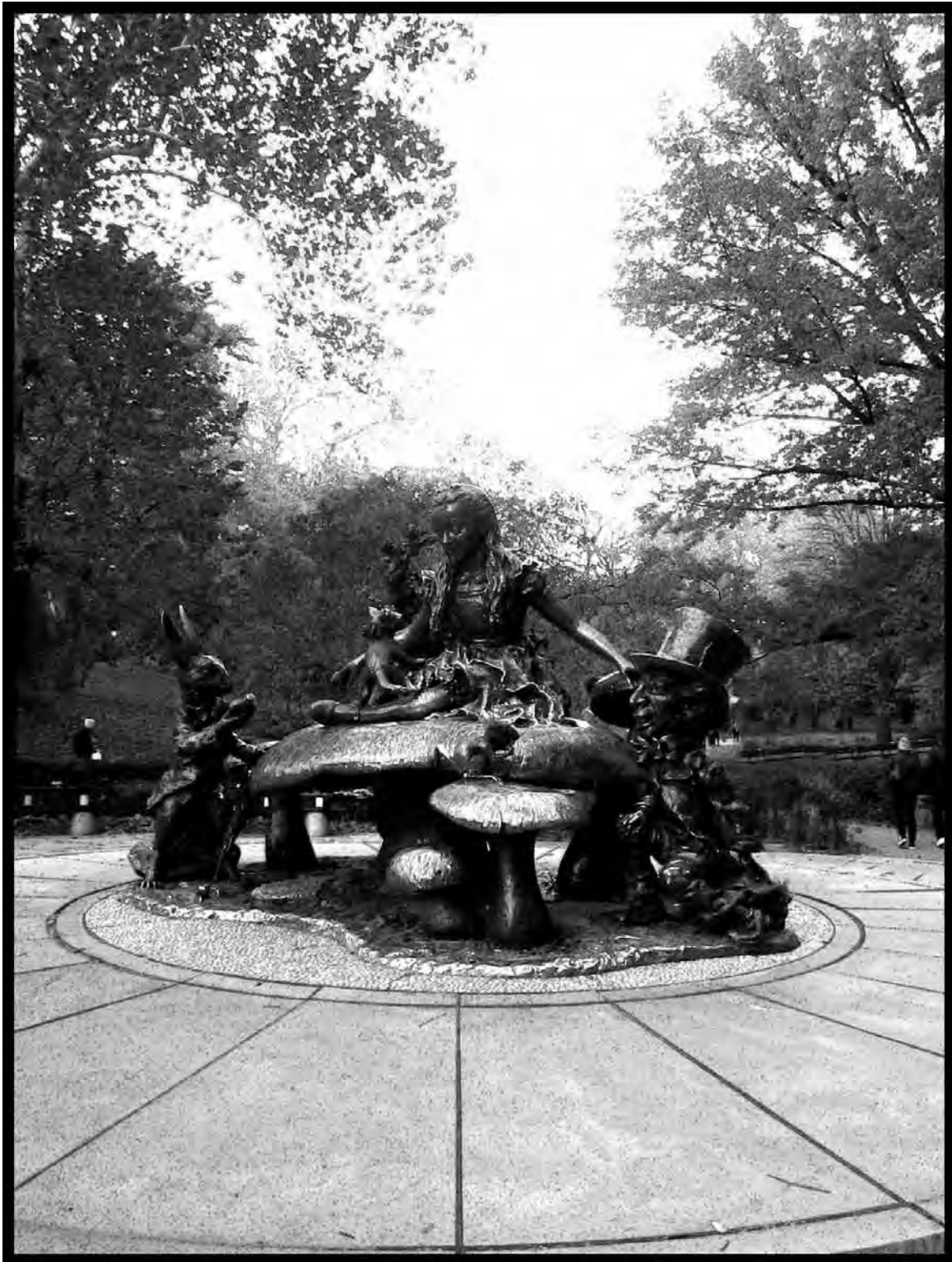
Someone said to me, "Don't you want to heap up your writings into a book?"
I said, "I do. Four times a year. With others. Call it *The Cenacle*."

That's funny. There's the *Lx* of this notebook & two others. A multi-volume book. But then there's how it passes into *The Cenacle*, back to '95 so *Why?* too, *Things Change?* & a few before that.

It's a novel realization, a new idea-toy—I like it.

There'll be more pages this weird retreat of mine—some like this, some the current stories—

Just to begin. A month away. These lines will arrive typed to *Cenacle* | 106 | December 2018. Read



aloud at the 30th anniversary Jellicle Literary Guild. How 'bout that.

Halloween decorations up here.

Spiders. Pumpkins. Skulls.

E.S.T. weirdly wonderful jazz on Polly iPod. *Tuesday Wonderland*.

Said to myself today Monday till arrive back Boston evening Thursday, just write & edit & proof & listen to music & content for SpiritPlants Radio & don't stop for these days. Your beloved safe back there. Do this & feel the elongated thrill in doing this, even the spice of doing it among these familiar old environs, blooded of loved ones, but

here I am, writing like a motherfucker

like days of old, like now, like hereon
as far as I can——

Note behind cash register:

"Upsell glazed chicken tenders"

Alright then.

Resume. I'm sitting in Wildfire Park again, old bench by its rippling pond & occasional geese, its digging grey squirrels & storms of pigeons. The trees are autumnal many-colored, orange, yellow, crimson leaves, wavering in the cool wind. This park is big, old, well-kept, a big green thing in the center of a middle-sized American city.

Startle to see Rebecca sitting next to me now. Smiling at me. Um.

"You're young."

"As are you, Raymond."

"You mean here, today, because I'm visiting this city of my birth & growing up, all the writing I did here, learning how."

"No." Her blue eyes as pretty as ever. She is as she was years long gone.

"I don't understand."

"You're like those squirrels in your writing. You leave pieces of yourself, different ages & places, waiting for you, little triggers."

"Oh."

She laughs. "I was always like this. Probably more so now."

I nod.

She mulls me, near a smirk, then stands up & before me, for me to fully regard.

Her hair is a chestnut brown, long & a bit tangled. She's wearing a few layers of shirts underneath her leather jacket. Blue jeans. Nice leather boots. I roll my eyes.

"An indulgence."

"You like them."

I nod. Hold out my arms & she's within them without hesitation, never was. She would kiss, would whatever, but I just hold her, feel her warm self, her breathing, her heartbeat. Silence a long time.

"You'll be with me today?"

She nods, smiling. I notice her art-bag slung over her left shoulder. No purse. Not her.

We sit close. Watch the water slink rippled by. All calm.

Then I notice something else, like a pattern. A cup, a small toad in it. *Labyrinthine* in my lap, of course, I double-check. Yes.

I pick up the cup of toad & hold it. Toad & I regard each other a moment. Then I nod to Rebecca to hold out her hand, & I gently tip the toad into her grasp.

“Thank you,” says the toad, still regarding me.

“I should have already.”

“Where will you go?”

“I’ll stay with you for now.”

I nod.

I start to sing the song in my head:

*James—Do you like your life?
Can you find release?
And will you ever change?
When will you write your masterpiece?*

We sit on awhile. Rebecca asks & the Toad agrees, & she draws his portrait in crayon & pencil, a very fine likeness, & he is well-pleased.

“I think it’s time to visit the Library, Beckah & Toad,” I say.

She smiles, he nods a little.

It’s peaceful here, nice to have returned.

The shroom path today has been gentle.

High on desert, endless labyrinth to go.

We walk close hands clasped, Toad in Beckah’s other, up to Main Street, I vaguely notice the re-done Cement Park but first to the re-done City Library.

Rather than rooms like old, each floor seems like one vast room, & it’s pretty, & it’s modern, & I don’t like it very much. Third time I’ve been here since all this.

We find a table approximate to where was my table in the old Reference Room, all of it gone.

For awhile I work on proofreading *Cenacle* 105, the *Bags End Book*. Enjoy it all anew. Beckah sketches me working & then a sort of a calliope of images around her.

I’m wondering what next, & mostly at my dull & familiar thoughts when a blonde girl sits in the empty chair of our table.

Um. Jazz?

Her grey eyes glinting mischief, her skirt short, & a general feeling she’s a thousand times smarter & sexier than me, I simply nod.

“Hi, I’m Rebecca,” says the other smarter-than-me person present.

"Jasmine. Hi. You can call me Jazz too."

"Hi, Jazz."

They smile. Before my suddenly arrived fantasies get even *more* boring, I talk.

"Why are you here?"

She shrugs.

"This sequence seems sentimental."

She nods.

"So that's her. Not you."

"Why not both?"

Rebecca agrees. The Toad is OK by it too, I guess. Not knowing what, more so than even usual, I stand, pack my old notebooks into my old bags, & leave, expecting all will follow.

[I miss the typewriter / phonograph rooms. The wooden phonebooth. The Reference Room. The card catalogue. The sense of being hidden somewhere old & safe & smart. It's nice now. *Whatever.*]

We now come to Cement Park, a kind of secret heart to all these stories. Closed for a couple years for "renovation." Now open.

The cement floor remains.

The pilgrims statue.

The fountain is gone.

The cement bases with trees gone.

We four sit on a bench near the pilgrims. Beckah & Jazz take turns holding the Toad, who naps peaceably in whichever current girlish grasp.

They're quiet.

"Strange but pretty" Jazz offers.

Beckah chooses not to console but to do better.

"Make it your own again, in time. You can do that."

It's good advice. Mourning as a way of both loving ever on & letting go too.

I nod.

The Toad sniffs twice, says nothing, returns to nap.

OK.

I stand. "Thank you for all this."

"Don't you want to keep going?"

I look at Jazz. "Return to your narrative. I'll find you there." She nods, wicked greyeyed smile, is gone.

Rebecca's blue-eyed smile at me deciding, based on notes & potentialities. I walk over to the 15-foot-tall Bluebird Insurance "Bluebird of Happiness" statue. Toad in my hand, hops off, nudges a declivity at its base. Now a round aperture in the cement floor.



I nod to Rebecca. We three now descend together.

xxxii.

Now they are walking alongside one of the roots of the Great Tree. Kinley, Christina, Maya, & Dylan, in that order.

Again, the pursuit: *Why is there something instead of nothing?*

They are tiny on this root, like ants, moving along.

“Kinley.”

“Christina.”

“Is this a plan?”

“Well, it’s an idea.”

“An idea?”

“Or a question anyway.”

“And?”

“And then something happens next.”

Silence.

“Christina.”

“Kinley.”

“Well.”

“What? Entertain me, old man.”

“It’s enough. For me.”

“I agree. But.”

“But?”

Here Christina stops. “It’s not that it’s a dumb question. People have always asked it, I guess.”

“But?”

“How are we answering it? How is this”—gesturing around to the sense of White Woods around them—“helping us solve it?”

Kinley stops too. Maya & Dylan too, listen quietly.

“So you want to arrive?”

Thinks. Nods. “Yes. Let’s.”

Nods.

“Raymond.”

“I’m here.”

“It’s time for us to arrive.”

“Where?”

“Where we’re bound.”

“I’m not sure I know where that is.”

“Maybe it’s not out here,” says Dylan quietly.

“Where then?”

“Give us something to do with a who & a where & a what. Maybe it will get us to that answer.”

Hm.

OK.

A classroom. Kinley the professor. Christina front row, skirt as short as her temper. Dylan & Maya in the back.

There is a TV at the front of the room showing a videotape.

The images change but what doesn't is the text near the bottom of the screen:

"DREAMS ARE FRAGMENTS OF REALITY"

& at the top of the screen:

"LET GO & WALK ON"

A story of sorts. Set in some kind of men's clothing store. Seen through the murky corner view of a security camera.

The robbers, if they be, are a tall one & a short one. The tall one an ancient soul in long moustache, long coat with its rusty medals, & something like a pirate hat on his head. Short one a crazy-eyed pandy bear in a red & orange skirt.

The store is in panic over this supposed robbery.

Kinley pressed the metallic pause button on the machine under the TV.

"Is this a robbery?"

Christina snickers, recrosses legs, flashes him for fun.

Dylan is listening quietly, glancing furtively at Maya.

Maya is sketching on her notepad a quick rendering of Rosa!eeta & Fitz on that video.

I snap my fingers & all back to the root.

"Now you have a choice. Here or there. Or maybe Maya can write your scenes for while."

Three say, "Maya." Maya, outvoted, says, "No."

cxiii.

[In this maybe-memory, I am sitting again with my acid guru, in the living room of his old apartment, with Grateful Dead 11/5/77 Rochester, NY cassette on his stereo—"Black Peter" into "Sugar Magnolia"—his blue eyes twinkle in his brilliant ugly face—

[[There are Creatures hidden all over this cluttered room of books & LPs & old furniture, Leary & Hendrix & Einstein sharing wall space, all smiling though—they are shy but like the music—

[[[I notice on the old black & white TV in the corner a movie I wonder if I remember. Tiny little Heroes deep in the Woods of a mythical Island, looking for a Beast to help their plight—

[[[[And what is this *Labyrinthine*? What is this word “fixtion”? Can any amount of these pages *fix* anything, add aught to the world but simply more?

[[But I did not know you Creatures back when I sat in this living room with that beloved acid guru handing me an old silver pipe to puff ganja from, or a book with a tangled theory, or strumming his guitar pretty—so what this?

[[[The tiny little Heroes, six of them, are entering the Cave of the Beast now, & we follow them in, & it is not dark, & it does not seem to be a Cave at all, & no Beast is about as they stare about them at a world like & unlike what they’ve known—it is a dreaming world—undifferentiated—

[[Now you are sitting severally in his lap, does he assume it’s the acid? They sniff friendly, & he, & he sniffs in return? White Bunny, grey Hedgedyhog, handsome black & white dancing Bear. He begins to *hmmm* to them & they join in, & the feel of this old semi-remembered room changes, a power live in it more than sentiment & affection—

[He looks at me, leaned back on the couch, *Labyrinthine* in my lap. My hand scribbling.

[“Too long between drinks for you,” he says quietly. “Best get to it more & fill what’s dry full out. Can you do this?”

[I nod.]

cxxiv.

*“Life is suffering
Tee hee, ha ha”
—Toad the Wet Sprocket,
“Little Budda”*

There is a film about an artist & it peers minutely & uncertainly into his life, into the moment when he painfully removes his old boots, holey socks, & pulls out his canvas & paints to render these old boots in a casual pose. *Art is everywhere. Art is everything.* “I *am* my paintings,” he says.

I am sitting in this new / old writing place of mine, having seen that film earlier tonight. I am dressed in old leather & denim rags, old Lennonspecs, old notebooks, old Polly iPod, old book bags. I have now till 11 tonight, about an hour & a half, to write this thing new best I can.

Watch this bleed slowly from this here to somewhere else—just a matter of the steps, sure, unsure, sudden, melty ones.

Cold tonight, not freezing, but enough to keep me indoors here, looking window to Harvard Square—here among the leaned back talkers & many chess players.

April, youngest of Global Wall’s girls, is sitting at this square white table. With me.



"Aren't you with Rebecca now?"

I nod.

"And others?"

I cackle.

"Is he going to find us soon?"

"Who?"

She glares at me. I wonder how much cuter she'd be with freckles.

"Hey!" she protests, half laughing.

"He's looking."

"For how long?"

Now all three are at this table. I wish I had a good Global Wall costume on.

They laugh. Wait.

I look at them, imagine the touch & taste of each, & in combination. This big student center lobby pretty full tables. None see the naked girls at this table. Maybe they go to Harvard across the street. Well, 1 or 2 of them at least.

"He has to go back to a gone world, a place he left long ago, Benny will take him serious if he does, & that will lead him to you."

OK, I clothed them like the girl in the K-Mart circular. I don't they care. Waiting.

Harvard Square's jangled with many strings of lights across its trees, like a low-flying Milky Way.

Waiting.

"White Woods?" asks April.

"Sort of."

Now each has a cell phone she is studying dully instead of talking with or acknowledging me.

OK OK—

"He met Benny first a long time ago, in dreams he's only just recalled, in that motel room, that strange little book he recovered from under the floor. Along with your panties."

"Whose?" they ask three as one.

I shake my head. Resume.

"Global travelled down deep in the world, down to the Deeper Deeper Sea, & came to the Great Tree at the heart of the world, & down among its roots, night after night for years, little remembering any of it on waking, until—"

"What?" they are transfixed.

“Until he came to a choice, & made the wrong one, & woke up.”

“How?” demands April. The other two notice she has better luck at getting me to talk.

“His waking life. He’d become a plain, pimply teenage boy & the pain of it finally cracked his dream world. He never got back there.”

“And now he *has* to go back there?”

“That’s where he’ll find Benny & his way back to you.”

I think they are going to demand to go there too but I smile my best tricky smile & they are back to where I left them many pages ago.

I think I need to get along from here—& resume—

Global Wall has put a DO NOT DISTURB sign on his motel room doorknob, & also paid up most of his money cash for tonight & two more days—

Doesn’t know how long this will take. Pulls curtains closed as much as they’ll go. Fiddles with the white-faced pink cat radio until some thoughtful, restless jazz comes on.

The box he’d exhumed contained one more item, camouflaged to one of its inner sides.

When pulled out gently but steadily, squeezed just right, what reveals itself is a small round pill container, with a tie-dye-style cover. Inside, two pills of the most exquisite ground up psilocybin mushrooms, mixed in with a little extra something. A mix to get him deeper than he’s gone in a long time.

Since back then. How he knows Benny. All he lost. And yet.

Has to drink a lot of water to get the first pill down. The second one he leaves on the brown plastic night-stand, next to the radio.

There are layers of dreaming, & it is possible to get pretty deep without committing everything to it. What Global Wall did back then was far deeper than this.

A few are able to get so deep in that their bodies are essentially left, are empty. If killed in this state, the dreaming part of them would remain alive, forever in Dreamland.

He could not get Benny to admit that this is what had happened to Benny at some point, that there was no living body of Benny’s that he could ever wake up in.

But it was Benny who showed him how to get this deep, navigate, & return. Affect the waking world with things he learned—

But that wasn’t really so much until later. Until Global Wall could no longer get that deep, nor remember he had ever been, & yet those things he learned remained to him.

He relaxed. The pill was slowly taking effect. The music on the white-faced pink cat radio was warping & warbling, changing volume at will. At least in his mind. He’d set it fairly low.

The bed was now floating, & sinking both, the room's walls trickling away until here was the full moonlit Wide Wide Sea all around him. And his bed, no craft for floating, slowly sinking down. Global relaxed, paid attention but relaxed.

The surface of the Wide Wide Sea & its dark innards were not so different, & he guessed he was sinking down now, slowly & smilingly.

Global relaxes, slows his breath, lets to the sinking in . . . but does not sink further. Water sloshes around his bed but nothing more.

Hm. *How can a vision like this stall?* It's funny. It's not.

Realizes he's gripping his little pill case fiercely tight. Clicks open the cover. One pill remains. Hm.

Pops it in like a candy. A gamble of sorts. But OK.

"TooT! TooT!" wakes Global from his drift. Pulled up alongside his half-unsunken bed is the strangest vehicle he'd ever seen. Like a weird, funny, half-imagined-impossible cross between a spacecraft & a . . . tugboat?

And its Commander. Oh, for sure, right. A crazy-eyed cackling black & white pandy bear in some kind of skirt, with a sort of Commander's headdress about her.

The second pill did it. Global nods inly that *this* is what it was like then; he'd probably met, maybe travelled with, her, her kind, countless of her.

They simply appeared, these . . . Creatures. This was their world & they would help visitors like himself. Liked to dance, sing, nap; spooked a little easy too. He did not know what they were save that he trusted them & loved them, &——

&——

This was why Maya all those later years——

She belonged to them, was of their world, at least partly, & this he felt deeper than his forgetting——

OK. She waits. Global paddles clumsily his bed closer to her Space Tugboat. Half staggers & spills over the railing that surrounds the back half of her ship, collapses onto the empty deck.

Looks back a moment. His bed is sinking now. Would never have gotten him back down there.

Now in her cabin, size between them proportioned better, him taller still, her ever the height of shortness——

Can a Space Tugboat dive underwater though? Global recalled that her kind, called sometimes imps, would not respond in words. So he had to pick his own to best effect.

"Would you bring us——" but his words disappeared inside the . . . her name . . . ? *Oh. Commander Cacklebird? Close enough.* Her sudden TooT! TooT! honkings on her steering wheel, & up in the sky

arrival of a great green & gold winged Creature, a ——
 ——?
 ——?

Sea Dragon? Calgary?

Yes. Thwup! Thwup! Thwup! beat his great wings.

“Hello, my friends!” his gruff voice calls (relief that *he* speaks in words) to them. “Need a ride down deep?”

The Cacklebird cackles & TooT! TooT!s, & Global smiles too, & calls, “Yes, please. Down to the roots of the Great Tree! Can you?”

Calgary laughs a charming gruff laugh & lowers himself to accept the now rising Space Tugboat to land safely on his great green & gold-scaled back.

Once they are safely landed, the imp races impossibly fast away, & Global wonders where.

“Special tooth,” Calgary explains jolly.

Oh. Global stays in the Tugboat’s cabin & waits for what.

What is Calgary’s sudden crying out, “Hold on tight, my friends! *Down we go!*”

Global finds himself leaning back against the cabin’s wall, & the wall softening to give him a seat, & a rail nearby to hold on to. Hold he does.

Calgary sudden swoops straight up into the blue sky above & turns breathlessly to now plunge straight down. Global is terrified until the great green & gold scales rise up all around the Tugboat to cover & protect it close. Even the no doubt great sound of the plunge is a distant & unterrifying noise.

He feels completely safe, & with the crimson red & electric blue blankets now about him, only more so. And the low sweet *humming* all around & in him.

This is what it was like.

Safe. Sweet. Warm. Funny.

I didn’t go back far enough, all those years I tried to.

So obsessed with unrooting the first cruel words a pretty girl said to me. So wanting to avoid *that* wound, & its path ahead.

Not back far enough. Undo a cruel word & win? *No.*

I couldn’t remember all this, & I couldn’t remember the wrong choice I made that woke me up that day & stripped me of this, even near to its very existence in me.

Here is where I needed to get back to.

Calgary dives impossibly fast down into the Deep Deep Sea. His *hmmmm* calms & sweetens Global Wall's travel as much as the Cacklebird's & the Tugboat's too. They know he was here & then he wasn't. Time has not passed here in the same way, yet for people-folks it makes the heart-maps on their faces, in their bodies. They do not know the where-&-when-not-here of Global Wall, but his roughened map is plain to read as they will.

Calgary arrives the Beach & lands some distance from the ancient Sea Turtle & his people-folks friend.

Naps. His scales now tucked away again, & the Space Tugboat & Cacklebird too wait like Calgary does for their treasured Traveler to wake.



To be continued in Cenacle | 107 | April 2019

* * * * *



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Eleven

*"I must create a system,
or be enslaved by another man's"*
—William Blake, "Jerusalem."

"Is that him?" Troy asks his friend Abraham.

The ancient Sea Turtle's old crinkled piercing green eyes study his slender friend with wordless deep affection.

"Yes. It is."

"He'll take me with him? Like you said?"

"Yes. He will."

"I'm going to help him & then return here to you?" Troy's face is loving, terrified, eager.

"Yes, son."

cxxv.

"Isn't it funny how where you start & where you end in these things can have virtually no relation to each other?" this I read written on the blank back page of the coverless copy of *Nazi Jailbait Bitch* someone has left on the small table next to my hospital bed.

The ink is black, a medium point pen, the letters cursive but idiosyncratic, it's all faded like written here a long long time ago.

I page through the book idly, looking for more notes of this kind. Find a folded sheet splashed half-gone but the words "wars of the future" & "who am I, Turquoise Eyes?"

Look around to see what this room is. There's a window curtained, the curtain's designs seem to be from a really old book, faintly colored sketches of a White Bunny, a grey hedgedyhog, a purple furry dancing Creature with ribbons & bows—

Breathe. Relax. I have forgotten myself before, this my one certainty. It'll come back slowly, though I



can trigger it. My memories return faster if I can figure out how.

I pick up *NJB* again & page through more slowly, letting something come to me, willing a bit the trigger—

Nothing. Just words. Stand again, in my long green & gold gown, barefoot. There is a small mirror next to the door, step over to look.

I look ragged & weary, the gown on me clean but laundered in coarse water many, many times. My eyes are bright & tired both. My beard is trimmed; my hair too, mid-length. Like someone recently gave me some slow careful attention.

Then something in the mirror catches my eye. There's on the unmade bed another book, coverless, about the size of the *NJB* still in my hand, but this one is glowing, is *hmmming*, & what is this then? It has a kind of extra-dimensionality to it, but when I turn to look it straight on, it's not there, & the copy in my hand isn't glowing. I look back in the mirror & there it is, on unmade bed, glowing deeply—

I pull the mirror with some difficulty off the wall, pieces of plaster coming along too—

Back step by step toward the glowing book on the unmade bed, & it remains in view—

Without turning I watch my hand groping to touch this book, have to hold mirror up high to see—

It feels like warm water to my fingers, & its *hmmming* rides through my bare touch to every part of me, not hurting, triggering, *oh* yes—

Reach deeper in, now up to my elbow deep in this glowing, *hmmming* thing, remembering but not quite, more & more, but still not quite, like I've not reached deep enough, not yet touched something crucial—

How deep can a man enter into a glowing hmmming paperback book? Is it growing bigger for me, or am I shrinking for it?

There is a welcome in this, a beautiful return, & yet, & yet—

I remember now. Oh.

cxxvi.

It's a clear moment. This empty movie-house again & I'm sure it's long after midnight & I wonder why ***RemoteLand*** isn't showing as it does. The screen is blank. I wait.

Others are waiting too, I notice as I turn to look back at the rest from my second row seat. Always sit up front close, there are hidden things the closer you are.

I tried the first row one time, 10 hits of acid, & it seemed like I could climb on in if I wanted, the screen glowed deeper & deeper & I clutched my seat & tried to climb in both—

but something pushed me back, softly but firmly, awled “no” or “not yet” on my forehead but I could

not see it myself, not even in the mirror, just feel the ridges of letters with my left thumb only & never sure of it, never sure—

second row, though, was good, & I could loiter at the edges of the entrance, sometimes get a peek inside, those Imps who cackle quietly & poke curiously just below the screen, I offer my hand & they will once awhile gnaw lazily & friendly—

Back there—that's Nazi Jailbait Bitch, what she told me she's called anyway, we don't talk much anymore but I still taste her too-soft skin, my fingers inside her school uniform, her white panties, her black bra, & somewhere else too, *where? what?* she shoved me away with a big man's brutish strength, not a slight girl's demur—

Those three in the last row, who are they? Not much older than NJB, they don't notice me looking back, the film or something absorbs them—

Sighing, I turn back to the screen & ready my little notepad & pencil to catch what I can—

I know the screen isn't blank. It's punishing me for my distractions, wanting to hold a girl's hand, to taste her youth, wanting anything but what's on that screen—

I watch, let the multi-dimensions of Imaginal Space burble out to me, on all sides, let it take me, this hospital bed soft & my blankets warm, & I see the Imps now on a kind of temporal wire that reaches from my left thumb to the Moon, & I begin to climb & climb & climb, & Imps along the way help me too, *ulp!* & spit me on, *ulp!* & spit, *ulp!* & spit—till I arrive—

Soft voices. Girlish hands softly on me.

“You'll take us in with you.”

“And we'll find our way down to the Great Tree.”

“Down among its roots.”

“Do you like that?”

“And this?”

Giggles. Moans.

I can't see but feel myself gently helped up, carried along until a seat again, smells of bloom & the Sea all around me, *it's the first row. I can't!*

I can. I will. I don't open my eyes, if they are closed, but I begin to direct them how I will, *what I want*, what the cost of my power is, how I will bring you to him & keep you too—

Fuck you, NJB.

[Amused, she follows.]

[[The way on is sometimes through the way back to something new to be found back then to affect hereon.

[[“We are what we were
 but
not what we shall become!”
 cryeth blue-eyed mystic
 guitarist Jim Reality III
 smiling tricky for
 all to hear

[[I’m working with these ideas
 without a real process
 or plan
 Wilder Wilder Sea past
 midnight out this
 hotel picture window]]

Next to the big screen there is a ladder that climbs up & up & up into unseeable heights. I know about it from that occasional scene in **RemoteLand** where the camera seems to be showing a live scene among the present audience members, & then ascends on the ladder up & up & *how is this going to bring us to the Great Tree?* they will ask? Well my sweeties getting to the heart of the world is not done in linear fashion by peoplefolks without help, & upppnupppnupp! this ladder we will come to help to bring us there it’s why you came to me isn’t it? looking for someone you learned about me, my talents to search & guide my talents which I learned from this not film &

Oh

NJB is following us. I look down the ladder which twists & turns so that I am able to see three sets of pretty eyes in the clothes they agreed to wear for me & a fourth who is following after them

It will be awhile climbing up this ladder, there are reststops on the way, they curl into me soft warm & willing to make me feel nice with their soft touches & *hmmms*

She just hangs on the ladder & waits like a spider in pause if spiders dressed in white tights & short skirts, waits for us to resume—

The not-film didn’t show what the ladder led to save that images of trees subtextualized more & more through, till it was more climbing branches than ladder steps—

Getting there, the air is closer & sweeter & gentler—

I wonder who he is these magic nymphs seek—

There is a moment to tell that is stranger & finer than all else yet—I find myself climbing into a cloud, find that for some time I am ascending & do not feel the steps of the ladder, do not feel most dark things I usually do—fear—stress—eth thetera—

I look around this kind of place I am ascending through & could swear it is a kind of library, or at least there seem to be countless bookcases of great & little sizes in the murky distance—

nearer about me are—*words? pages? floating about me in this cloud?* singing or at least *hmmming* to me?



I close my eyes.
 I smile & let go.
 I don't know why I do this.

I am upheld, whatever
 I am this is you are
 I am upheld & feel myself
 disintegrate from what I
 am to what this is, add
 me to it, it become of
 me too—

No time. No space. No worry.

I am whatever I am floating
 like a colorful ribbon of me
 through all this & part of
 it & there are small hands
 about me now, touching very
 gently

they are furred
 they are tending me
 removing cold sharp
 things from my mind
 if I am mind still now —

precise work, gentle work
 patient work, bit by bit

then letting me go on
 I am again do not want to
 letting me go on
 do not want to
 I am again
 go on

& up now & up now

“How did you become Nazi Jailbait Bitch?”

“Like a job interview?”

“Maybe?”

“Like am I not the first to play this role?”

“Um?”

“Like the rules are very strict about who & what one must be?”

“Rules?”

“Like the term is limited & once over, it's over?”

I nod. Shake my head.

Suddenly, she laughs. A mocking but pretty laugh. Bats her lashes at me, I'm not kidding.

Reaches out for my hand as our climb up to go down has nearly finished & we are near to the Great Tree & its roots, & maybe Global Wall so sought.

The other girls sleeping at a resting place. NJB & I a few steps up higher on ladder.

“So we drop them off & go?”

“Go?”

“I’m not here to find him.”

“Why are you here?”

“I dunno. Curiosity? My book life was pretty limited. Violent sex & murder.”

“Did you emerge from the book or was it based on you?”

She laughs again. I’ve begun to notice her accent, an English one. I suppose, given the destruction Nazis rained on England, a revenge murderess would not be unexpected.

“When was your book published?”

“Has it been?”

“Well, as a cheap little paperback. The kind they used to sell in bus stations.”

“Oh.”

“So maybe a kind of underground paperback, not long after World War II & the advent of the cheaply & mass produced paperback? Maybe yours kept under the counter in newsstands? Had to know a guy.”

“Or a password!” says April, now all of us together. Them awake & come.

NJB laughs. Her uniform is black vest & white shirt, plaid skirt, black tights & shoes.

“All white under,” she smirks to my unasked question. Lies.

They all laugh. “He loves white,” they agree, “although black” one adds “& red!” another shrieks “& pink!” now they are falling over themselves.

I try to remember: Global has come down here to find his deeper, truer self, the one he lost when his dreams ended, when pretty girl smiles both consumed & flayed him with rejection—

What am I doing leading these pretty girl smiles to him? Of course, they came later, & not a speck of rejection in them.

Still, he needs time & they need to understand better.

I motion us climb quickly to next reststop. Sit in circle. *All* of us.

“I need to share with you more of what Global Wall is so that you can all love him better.”

They nod, their pretty faces now serious.

“Then I’ll lead you close as I can.”

Nod.

“Then Ariel & I will move on to other travels.”

“Ariel?” they all ask.

I nod at NJB. She smiles sincerely, which is far better than her come-on NJB one.

[There is a still movement coming when all will stand hands & paws clasped ring round the Hut which is conduit to then, the undifferentiated time, no wake/sleep dichotomy, each touches all, we are all the

hmmm, & this moment is arriving to these pages soon—

[This occurring down deeper than the roots of the Great Tree at the heart of the world—where many seek answer to “Why is there something instead of nothing?”

[And nearby, tho not really a tangible distance measureable in these ancient places near the Hut, there is the World’s Woods, where things are less certain, like where the White or One Woods begins, or maybe dissipates—

[And all this to say that it’s been nearly two months since last lines of this book, & much is waiting to continue along—here this Mac-Donald’s again—no Halloween decorations this time—closing the lobby I sit in shortly for night at midnight—drive-through goes on till 3 a.m.—

[All this to say: resume, a big breath & resume. *Back to fucking work.*]

xxxvii.

I lead Rey & Figga, & Pirth in my plaid green jacket pocket, to my Hut in the White Woods. Pass my Burning Man 2003 pendant across the crazy smiling imp plaque on its door, a merry cackle replies as we enter.

I sit in my comfy green armchair & Rey & Figga curl together in the just as comfy armchair across from me.

I pop Pirth out of my pocket to dance where he wills. He ranges lightly from atop the filing cabinet next to my chair; to the little bookcase against the wall to the right of the door, same wall with the many fine Creature portraits, me lucky to be in some of them; & finally to the arm of Rey & Figga’s armchair, lingering there as much as he lingers anywhere.

I look at pretty Figga. “Do you remember a space hero named Mulronie the Space Pirate?”

Her pretty turquoise eyes listen, ponder, reach deep in, almost find something, then don’t. Shakes her head.

“He loved a girl named Figga, but his heroic space adventures took him far from her.”

She listens but still nearly nothing.

“So you are somehow her, or formerly her somehow, or something else maybe.”

They are transfixed on my struggling words, which I wish were better.

I think. “Maybe there are answers in the Place of Art.” I look at Figga & Rey both. “Maybe for both of you.”

They nod, vague smiles. Waiting.

I stand & push aside my armchair to reveal the trap door below. Pull it back & there is the Column down into the earth. “Pirth & I have traveled this before but this time the four of us will go to a



different place.”

As though summoned, Pirth dances up to me & I hold out my green plaid jacket pocket for him to tuck into. Manages three pats of three noses along his way.

Smiling kind & sweet at them, I start to descend the winding stairs down. They are some kind of warm, ancient wood, *humming* & glowing for reassurance & light. There is a rail too, one I don't recall coming up. Is it because we are descending? Effect & cause? Because descending, thus a rail? I wonder this as I listen to them follow behind me, single file, & then I think something else.

Our traveling party needs an additional person. We will find her in a little while, further below. Effect & thus cause. She will help.

She's waiting on a kind of landing we arrive to. She's studying the walls around her, making notations & sketches in her artpad. Smiles when she sees me.

“I wondered where you'd gotten to.”

I kiss Beckah warmly & then show her to Figga & Rey.

“This is my *Labyrinthine* wife, Rebecca. Beckah, this is Figga & Rey.”

Her smile golden warms them.

I am less a friendly stranger now, more like them.

Pirth dances up to Bekah, onto her outstretched hands, & then sort of tugs her back to the pictures & symbols she'd been studying & sketching on the landing's wall. A particular one. We cluster up to take a look. Pirth's glowing purple fur helps.

This etching is ancient but I think Rey & I figure it out same time.

“The spaceship in the earth.”

Beckah regards closely the small purple furry Creature in her paws. “You think we should go there?”

He studies her blue eyes with his deep black ones. Reaches forward to pat her nose.

They look at me & I nod to Pirth to lead us now. “But slowly, please,” I say politely.

Hops off Bekah's hands & over to where the stairs downward resume. I nod Figga & Rey to follow him, & then I follow Bekah.

“While I was waiting for you, I caught up on the story.”

I see no fat notebooks in her possession. Her artbag does not bulge as it would. “How?”

She pats that artbag, though. “Some call it tricky smile magic.”

I laugh.

The winding way is steady. Figga & Rey are not talking but OK, just concentrating.

“Are you still happy with this book?”

I stop climbing down & Pirth's sharp ears cause him & the others to do so too. I think Figga & Rey heard Bekah's question & so all cluster back to us to listen.

"It matters deep in my heart, where the air is calm & the light is clear. Sometimes I lose my way down there, like I fall off the path into murk. But I never doubt it's there somewhere to find again. The way is always there."

Blue eyes listening so close, I forget we are speaker & listener.

"Yes. I'm still happy with this book. I'm just not always happy with me."

She nods. I motion us all to get along, & I see Pirth's purple furry glow continuing along our way.

I sense it won't be long now.
And it isn't. We come to a door.
A numbered keypad beside it.

Rey looks at me quizzically. I nod. I punch *one, none, many* into the pad & there is a deep exhalation of air, like a long-overdue breath, & the door ajar. I push it in, & step through. Not unlike the hallway Rey & I traveled.

Pirth back in my pocket, Rey & I take the point side by side. To calm any jitters, I take her hand & Rebecca behind us takes Figga's.

I speak what little I know. "We're guessing that intent counts, that these disparate places can & are handing us one to the next. And what we're looking to learn is along our coming path."

I think. Want to say more then don't. Almost sigh.

"Let's just stay close."

Rey is quiet, studying the blank walls of the six-foot wide corridor we are in.

"Are you remembering?" I ask.
She's quiet a long time. Then:
"You travel by who you are, who you're with, what you seek. Kind of like you said."
"Are we clear & focused enough?" I wonder.
"I think so," she says slowly, now studying Pirth in my pocket.
"Should he lead?" I ask.
She nods. "Maybe just a feeling? Or a guess?"
So I take Pirth out & hold him in my hands facing us, all paused, clustered up.

"We want to go to the Place of Art. It is a place of origins, of making. Some of it unsure," I say. Pirth rarely speaks in English, preferring nose-pattings & dancing. But he is a Creature & there are many ways of understanding.

Reaches forward & we adjust in our crowdings so every nose gets a pat. Then he hops to the floor & slow dances our way.

I nod at Rey as we resume. "Good guess."

It's not long again before something up ahead feels different. The air cools, ripples. Pirth dances us right

into a great sparkling limestone cavern. I look back & see the spaceship hallway fading as though no longer needed right now, or never really there?

They wander around for a bit but I am heading to the far end. To the hole in that wall over there. Made accidentally by the great tail of Calgary the Sea Dragon.

The others join me after grooving on the sparkling stones & boulders awhile. Figga shows me four small stones she collected. One for each of us. I nod. I guess.

The hole is dark & I help each girl step into it. Pirth hops in. I go last.

I know what's there in the dark nearby & lift up Pirth like a flashlight to reveal.

It is an old-time motion picture camera.

"RemoteLand?" I say aloud, just a musing.

Rebecca studies it closely, taller than her, a deep vaguely shiny black. A long crank on one side. A panel of buttons on the other. Its tripod base legs are thick, very sturdy.

"No dust," she replies.

"No answers yet," I say.

We turn away & use Pirth in my leading hand to guide us through otherwise near darkness.

I start to *hmmm* our way along & the others join in. This lightens our way a little.

We're getting there. Effect & cause. And the mystery of what next.



To be continued in Cenacle | 108 | June 2019

* * * * *



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Eleven

*"I must create a system,
or be enslaved by another man's"*
—William Blake, "Jerusalem."

cxviii.

Where did Ariel, aka Nazi Jailbait Bitch, go? She hung back when she saw Bekah up ahead. Kept a distance. Wasn't sure why. Eventually let them gain a long distance on her, & was alone, first time since emerging from her book. She finds me again, & nods me keep on with the rest of my companions.

Now what?

Am I Ariel or Nazi Jailbait Bitch, both, neither?

I'm still on the landing where they met Bekah, & then descended from. There's a shadow I now notice, & a door with a golden knob & a green knocker. Knocker has a crazy faced smiling imp.

OK, lift the knocker ring & *tap-tap-tap!* Wait. Wait longer.

A creak within. Couple more. Door opens a least bit.

A weird little voice making soft strange sounds.

I push the door in—realizing I'm on my own now for real. I think I was NJB, & now I'm Ariel. I don't know what this will mean as I go along.

NJB was good at deception, at misdirection, at leaving quickly & quietly while the man gargled out his life, or groaned it out his shred belly, or screamed it out, muffled by his severed cock stuffed halfway down his throat.

I don't think Ariel will want to use these skills too eagerly.

NJB comes from nowhere specific in the book. Her history is a few stray details of terrifying early violence, death to unnamed loved ones, escape.

Ariel is an English schoolgirl, orphaned young. On holiday travelling to France to visit her old sick

Auntie.

NJB's name is Ariel in the book, I realize now. *Oh*. She would make them beg her for sex using her name, & then again for their lives.

Ariel was her sister's name, one of those killed.

What was my name?

—& come into a cramped place fairly dark. The voice had stopped—

"I want my own name."

"You have two already."

"My own name."

I look at you & make a few adjustments. Now your hair strawberry blonde, green eyes. Don't change your clothes. Your sweet pretty young look is, for now, your armor, your ground, your root.

"Emily."

"Really."

"Ariel called you Emmy."

"Oh."

"The first one you killed tried to consume her. Torture her, fuck her, eat her. Like what they did to your parents & brother. You & she hid. Then she made a noise so you could get away."

"And."

"His gun belt was on the floor next to her bed. You shot him several times till he fell off her. Half his head gone. Several in his back."

"I was a bad shot then. And screaming."

"He'd already killed her."

"I stayed with her for a long time after pushing his body down the stairs."

"You burned the house down to the ground, & left in your school uniform."

"It's what I had on. I packed the other one."

I nod. OK. But then one more.

"You need a friend to travel with?"

"You? I thought we—"

I shake my head. "Take this over, Emily. We'll travel together again."

She sighs, nods.

Last thing I say, "Look along those shelves. There's a blank book. Find a pen. I think you write poetry."

The shelves are hard to sort through in this cramped space. I do find a blank book. Has a picture of a, um, rainbow wheel on it? Looks mysterious, like it's floating near the surface of the Wide Wide Sea. OK.

A pen. I find one that seems to have more than one color but I go with black for now.

Push deeper in, *push & push & push*—

And tumble out to grass, to very tall trees around me.

Stand. Look wordless around.

Oh. *Oh. The White Woods!* I remember. She, Ariel, wrote about them in her diaries! I peeked tho she never told me. But I'm sure!

I stand up, take a look & a sniff & a listen around. All still, sniffs friendly enough, & the ever low *hmmmming* to be found here.

I'm barefoot but the ground is soft here. I walk on. I find I have a small knapsack on my shoulders, full of black/colored pens & blank book, for now.

Come to a structure, where no such thing could be? Old, ancient structure, like it's been made & remade over & over again, through centuries?

It looks like a kind of freestanding tunnel, I guess. No door on its entrance, but no light inside to see its open doorway either.

Another tight place, I moan a little. But, then again, *if this is Ariel's magickal White Woods, I should go, right?*

OK, I push on in what turn out to be very old & now colorless scarves, fragile to the touch, no danger—

Within is not too tight, almost like a very strange hallway without its building. *Does this make sense?*

It's like travel through centuries, this tunnel, yet not sequential. An area old & rocky, the next of virtual walls, the next a rainy night of endless vines.

I let loose more of what I was, feel the vines remove my garments a patch at a time, re-clothe me in strands of leaves. In allowing, so become else, become more.

Arrive to a plush & purple room, deep cushions high & low to fall into, I allow & fall, & fall, & fall—

Wake. Wake? There are two strange people near me now, but kindly faces. A girl with an arrow through her neck? A man with with three eyes, two hazel & one green?

And we are . . . moving? In a vehicle now?

Their kind touches, loving eyes, I don't know why.

Am I really here to this now?

cxix.

[Maya & I sit here together at this office window desk in the Bungalow Cee, & have ourselves a palaver.

[“They want you to write now.”

“No they don't. Just on'y.”

“I can guide you.”

“How is that different from you writing it?”

"I describe, you interpret."

"Now you're lazy?"

"Visionary, like Bellla of La Entertainment & Technologies. 'Where tomorrow is today,' ya know."

"No."

"What then?"

[She stands, pink-streaked blonde hair & sexy in her scrawny fashion. Denim & tie-dye rags.

["Write it better. *Now*. Every line. Pay attention. Go."

"Flow state?"

"Whatever. *Go*."]

Maya, Kinley, Christina, & Dylan down in the World's Woods, where things are less certain.

This leads them to doubt too, themselves & each other. Now more keeping together in this murky dark place by habit & fear.

Come to rest again against one of the roots of the Great Tree. Exhausted, wordless.

[*Christina: did I really leave that farmer's house? Did I escape? Did it burn down?*]

[*Maya: did I meet Dylan on that bus ride? Are these the White Woods I never left?*]

[*Dylan: did I leave that bridge? Am I still with my old friends there under that bridge?*]

[*Kinley: Am I the Architect? Did I help make all this?*]

Each very alone, none very close, none holding hands.

Along his long travels now comes the pretty bloo-furred Edgar B. Bear. Fans of Algernon Beagle's fine newspaper *Bags End News* (O! Shucks!) will recall the fine times he had visiting Bags End back when.

Now he has come to the Great Tree at the heart of the world having heard there are expeditions afoot down here to learn the answer to the question, "Why is there something instead of nothing?"

Being a Creature, this sounded to him like a sort of fun people-folks game afoot.

Some have better luck at games than others, Edgar has learned in his travels. Some need a little nudge, is all, another kind word.

Walking more like dancing along when he comes across the four slumped people-folks, asleep or something against a root of the Great Tree.

He sniffs, twice, & he senses they are not doing well. Keeping at a bit of a distance, just a bit, he softly begins to *hmmm* to them.

Maya stirs first, sniffs too, & smiles to see Edgar. Weak smile but still.

"Hello, I'm Edgar B. Bear. How are you?"

"I'm Maya. Hi."

The others don't stir yet.

Edgar isn't sure what to say.

"We got lost," Maya says.

Edgar nods.

Maya thinks. "Do you know someone who could guide us?"

Edgar thinks, paw on chin. "Are you trying to find out why there is something instead of nothing?"

Maya nods, smiles a little. Not a lot.

Edgar thinks some more. Looks around. "Well, I have read of some great Travellers who seem to go everywhere."

Maya nods. Edgar is drawn to her lap, as Creatures are. She sniffs like people-folks & Creatures both, which is strange but nice.

She holds him & they softly *hmmm* together for awhile. She feels more like they will be OK, EBB will help & the Travellers will too. She will tell the others when they wake.

"Thank you" she hugs him very close before letting him on his way.

Now it is again her & her three sleeping friends. Dylan next to her, she quietly, very quietly, nudges a little nearer to him. Wonders if some other girl might dare hold his sleeping form's hand. She doesn't but enjoys what dare she can.

The World's Woods are quiet but not to all of her senses. The tingle on her arms keeps her alert for . . . something. Her sniff-sniff tells her no real danger is close. In the thick tangle of tall trees & brush, logs & stones, nothing in view contradicts this. Taste? What's on her tongue faintly is salty yet sweet, whatever it is.

A long while at this rest. Then Dylan, half-waking, reaches for her hand, finds it, ripples her heart with his small smile.

"Hi."

"Hi."

Both want to say the perfect words right now.

"Are you OK?"

"I think so. You?"

"Yes."

They should just hold each other close, kiss, let the doors fling wide between them.

He tries. "I'm glad we found each other. And Kinley & Christina too."

Maya nods, losing words.

"I don't know how to say anything, Maya. For the longest time I only wanted to find you, be near you."

"Me too."

"He will be back."

"Oh yes. I'm sure."

"OK."

Their hands remain clasped. Whatever this is.



Christina nuzzles further now into Kinley's grasp. He does not fully wake but lets her find her most comfortable space.

The morning arrives somewhat & they each drift away again.

xxxx.

"Hail stones the size of tornadoes! Door glass breaks! Loosed shutters flying by!" the old man's muffled voice could be heard long before he was in sight of them.

He was riding in the back of a singular vehicle known in the White Woods & thereabouts as the Bike-Wagon, & peddled by Memphis the bear, a handsome little brown Creatures wearing a warm green sweat-jacket labeled "Maine."

The old man is some kind of a monk, emaciatedly thin but for his long brown & grey braided beard. Piercing turquoise eyes. Heavily lipsticked mouth, a dark rose color. His black robe held upon him with gruelly old ropes.

Memphis peddles his wagon up alongside the four waking figures leaning against one of the roots of the Great Tree. He raises his paw as he rolls to a stop.

The old man stands up in the cab & begins telling his muffled story. "One day long ago, I woke up deep in the night, & I walked outside. I walked away, & I walked through the streets till I came to the edge of the Village, & I walked beyond it till I came to the brown hills, & I walked up them into these White Woods, & I had no shoes on my feet, like you see me here now" (& here he lifted up his gnarly feet to show), "& I had on only this robe" (shows front & back), "& I left everything behind to walk into these White Woods, & that night I fell down to my knees & looked up, & I said, 'let me be the world's servant like once I was! Let me serve the world again! Let me help!'"

He slumps back in his seat again, but then half rises up & says, "And my admirable friend here rolled up to my sorry heap by morning, & offered me a ride."

Memphis nods to them friendly.

Now speaks sitting, like his body is conserving all energy for his spoken thoughts. Not very loud, but no longer muffled.

"I ask myself: *what is beyond Emandia & this world & whatever the Architect's home world? What at the beginning, what at the end? How can any man who lives but a miniscule fragment of it know much of it all really?*" Wheezes. Breathes. Continues.

"I wonder & I wonder. I can't explain myself, anything around me, these White Woods. You, Kinley, loving your books & mysteries, still a tiny tot. You, Christina, your candy flesh molded strange 'round your wild brilliant mind. You, Dylan, the great Tender you might one day train with Creatures to be. You, Maya, cupped from deeply magick soup."

Half-snoring, half talking on now.

"The Elliptical City is where I'm bound now, my dear friend will bring me. Where I might find

something braided strong to uphold me. Something warm to water & sup me. Music to clean out these old veins & bones. Maybe you'll come too. If you remember my words as more than a dream. Your friends approach now. Doze, sweet ones. Await them."

He nods an old slight smile to Memphis the Bear who raises his paw by signal to all he is peddling on again. Soon they are gone, & the four people-folks drift in vague dreams again.

[Because I can, because it's this kind of book, I draw a bracket & contain within it these words. Some days feel more dangerous than others, needlessly dangerous, like the human thing is chaos deepest in its mortal heart—like the many stories told to calm, of great eternal worlds to come, of kindly supra-beings welcoming all passed from this world to a more final, a safer, sweeter home, aren't enough.

[I realize nobody knows for sure better than I do. Maybe this is a sad thing to realize. There are tricks & tools & skills & instincts to navigate this world, ways to feel healthier, safer, better loved. But none work for all, & no combination is the magick one for perpetual happiness. Life seems like a travel along a half-seen path with a changing cast of companions, more & less visible affects within & without &, sometimes at its feeling best, no reason to deduce why!

[I remember one summer I worked in a city, in an office, & I wrote & wrote & read & read & read & listened to music obsessively, & missed a girl I'd loved who was now far, & less interested. I would sit on the second floor, a mezzanine really, of a McDonald's, writing stories precursor to this one, drinking my diet Coke & eating some food, listening on headphones to my Walkman. It was a city I'd been born in, & spent years during high school & college & after college coming to visit, for its bookstores & library & parks & record shops. I'd been there with her many times, & it smelled of her own scent in my mind's sniff.

[This girl was everything to me, as others had been before her awhile, & others would be long after her. I loved deeply if not so always very sensitive to needs not my own. Love was like a powerful material I used to patch the many holes & wounds deep in me. It often worked like ice on fevered skin.

[I sat there with my notebooks & soda & Walkman, come from a day of office work, & I wrote & wrote, sometimes directly of, sometimes far from, my longing for her. It gave me sometimes a feeling of aliveness in the moment, rather than simply absence & waiting.

[What had this girl wanted? A career in teaching. Maybe a man with a good cock. Maybe someone to spank her fine ass, maybe more. Our borders were intense, where open to each other. But how much wasn't? How much was unseen path, invisible affects?

[Eventually she was gone, a slowly diminishing wound, but what I often recall of that summer is that McDonald's mezzanine, how often I sat there with notebooks & soda. Like the deepest lingering part of a story is somewhere in the middle, where narrative is under way but much yet to reveal.

[The Beatles' *White Album* on my dear friend Polly iPod, quarter past midnight. "Happiness . . . is a warm gun . . . yah!" Music I know so well yet only recently learned was brought back from their 1968 Indian pilgrimage to be assembled in acoustic form in a few days' jam session, before being brought to the studio. Still trying to be Beatles as so much around & among them pushed them apart. Yet trying, the beautiful sounds of *four brothers still trying*.]

"Choot! Choot!" comes the nearing cry of a strange & lovely vehicle. Up rolls, on its own self-

perpetuating tracks, a red-&-yellow Choot-Choot Train. Sitting in its engine cab is a tall handsome gent & a bloo-&-pink piglet Creature with a pleased smirk. At the helm of the train, upon peering close inspection, a tiny imp, cackling merrily as she uses strange levers to steer, & a green-&-gold . . . bookmark . . . arrow?

In the train cars behind, three people-folks sit with many many Creatures, & a . . . Tumbleweed.

Best of all is when suddenly emerges from the train's engine's cab a lovely bloo Bear Creature known to Kinley & his dreaming friends.

"Here we are!" says Edgar B. Bear happily.

cxix.

Wow, 13 years so far of writing this book, 3500 pages so far. Come to Harvard Square on a Saturday afternoon, beloved home, sleeping with a cold. Me some hours to this work, & see what of it this time.

I've come to write here since 1992, so 27 years, come this September.

Minus the years I lived out West, 6 years, & then some recent ones when this courtyard was changed from fenced & four-treed coziness to this larger & fenceless sprawl.

Labyrinthine began in Seattle, Washington, & continued through Portland, Oregon, four years of it in all, & nine years now in Boston.

Like a culmination of all the stories & novellas proceeding it, longer & vaster than all of them, the perpetual one.

Sitting here practically half my life now. The permanent chess tables nearby, not stone like the old ones, but metal & wood. The glass building behind me, its first floor no longer the Au Bon Pain Cafe but now a deep, maze multistoried geography of tables & chairs & greenery. I like it. Enough.

Out here is still different but maybe closer to then. The sidewalk's tourists & locals & students & freaks still streaming along. The old brick buildings still fronting Harvard Yard.

There's a white-haired guitarist nearby who's been playing here for countless years. The bookstores near here, one I worked at long years ago. Restaurants & stores come & go.

That digital bank clock over there, about five floors up, & I remember when it was a bulbed clock.

"It's time, Raymond."

"Hi, Maya."

"Hi."

"It's time."

"Now?"

"Yes. Go."

"We'll tell this together, Maya,"

"OK."

When the Great Travelers finally arrived to where Kinley & Christina & Dylan & Maya sat dreaming in a row along one of the roots of the Great Tree, arrived led by Edgar B. Bear & the green-golden compass, accompanied by many Creatures, they decided to sit down & wait for these people-folks to

wake up. They formed a semi-circle around the dreamers.

Who would not, in this peacefully glowing White Woods, cool & quiet save for a faint *humming* of breeze & something else, I say who would not tempt eventually into dreaming too?

Marie, Joe, Derek, & Daniel, with the many Creatures come along, all in this semi-circle, fell clustered asleep, & thence Dreamland, & there before them a very tall & many colored Carnival tent.

On it countless famous images to behold. The ancient strange & massive Tangled Gate. White Bunny like the one among this dreaming cluster. Dancing Bears, purple furry Creature, tiny cackling little pandy bear. The Princess in her many iterates through centuries. A map of the 6 Islands, from ancient times, still clustered together.

At the entrance to the tent is a bright-eyed brown-furred Bunny who smiles them with a waving paw to come in.

Inside are many pillows & blankets, luring sniff & soft *hmmm*, soft colourous light, & then Marie starts, finger upon chin, & points to the corner where sit Kinley, Christina, Maya, & Dylan! They in turn spy the arrived Travellers.

Tis Daniel & Kinley who are nudged to approach & greet each other. They do, meet halfway.

“Well, hello.”

“Indeed!”

“Nice enough way to meet.”

“A good start.”

“I’m Kinley.”

“I’m Daniel. Your little blue friend Edgar brought us to guide you.”

“Thank you. Felt like we had stalled.”

“It happens. Down here the worst danger is lack of motivation.”

Kinley laughs.

Daniel holds out for show the strange Compass he explains has led them there. It looks like a bookmark to Kinley’s study, one side a green arrow edged in gold, the other black with white inked handwriting upon it. “Why is there something instead of nothing?”

Kinley laughs again & touches this question. “This is why we’re here!”

Daniel smiles. “This Compass will help us.”

Now the others are ready to meet. Christina smirks a hello at Daniel, Dylan a friendly nod, & Maya a shy twinkle, as each passes by to greet the other Travellers & Edgar B. Bear & the other Creatures.

Everyone arranges in a loose circle of blankets & pillows, the friendly colourous *humming* scent like sharing a meal here in Dreamland—

till morning brings them back to their waking group & they meet again.

“Choot! Choot!” is the nearby cry suddenly heard.

Daniel holds out the Compass. “This will help out your question quest.”

“Come with us.”

“Yes!” says Christina.

Maya & Dylan nod too. Daniel looks at his own smiling group, knowing the Creatures will come & go as they will. Nods.

So all hurry too, & board the Choot-Choot train, hauling enough open-air passenger cars for all.

Now in the engine cab will sit the engineer Imp, Daniel & Kinley, & Edgar B. Bear. The Compass mounted to guide.

The ride through what’s known as the World’s Woods, where things are less certain, is peaceable for a long stretch, a timeless length, until the Compass, mounted on the dashboard near the steering lever with its three speeds (Stop, Choot! & Choot!-Choot!), begins to shiver & shake & raise up to a steep angle.

“A hill coming, D?”

“I think so, K!”

Turns back & calls. “Hill ahead! Everyone buckled in?”

“Safety first!” everyone calls back.

The Choot-Choot train rolls up its own tracks the steep hill beyond the White Woods, up & up, until arriving to the flat top, & now rolls along this ridge so the passengers can behold what’s down below & beyond to see.

Tis a strange, shiny, & uniquely marvelous Elliptical City. Seems to rise up & up & up like strange evolving layers, like a city bound up for outer space.

Sitting next to Daniel, holding the Imp in place for her steerings & Choot! Chootlings, Kinley’s eyes shine like the City’s highest turrets & towers. “How do I know this place? Did I daydream it? Have I been here long ago?” Daniel nods to the crazy-eyed Imp in his grasp & she pushes their speed to Choot! Choot! & they speed downhill now toward the outskirts of Elliptical City.

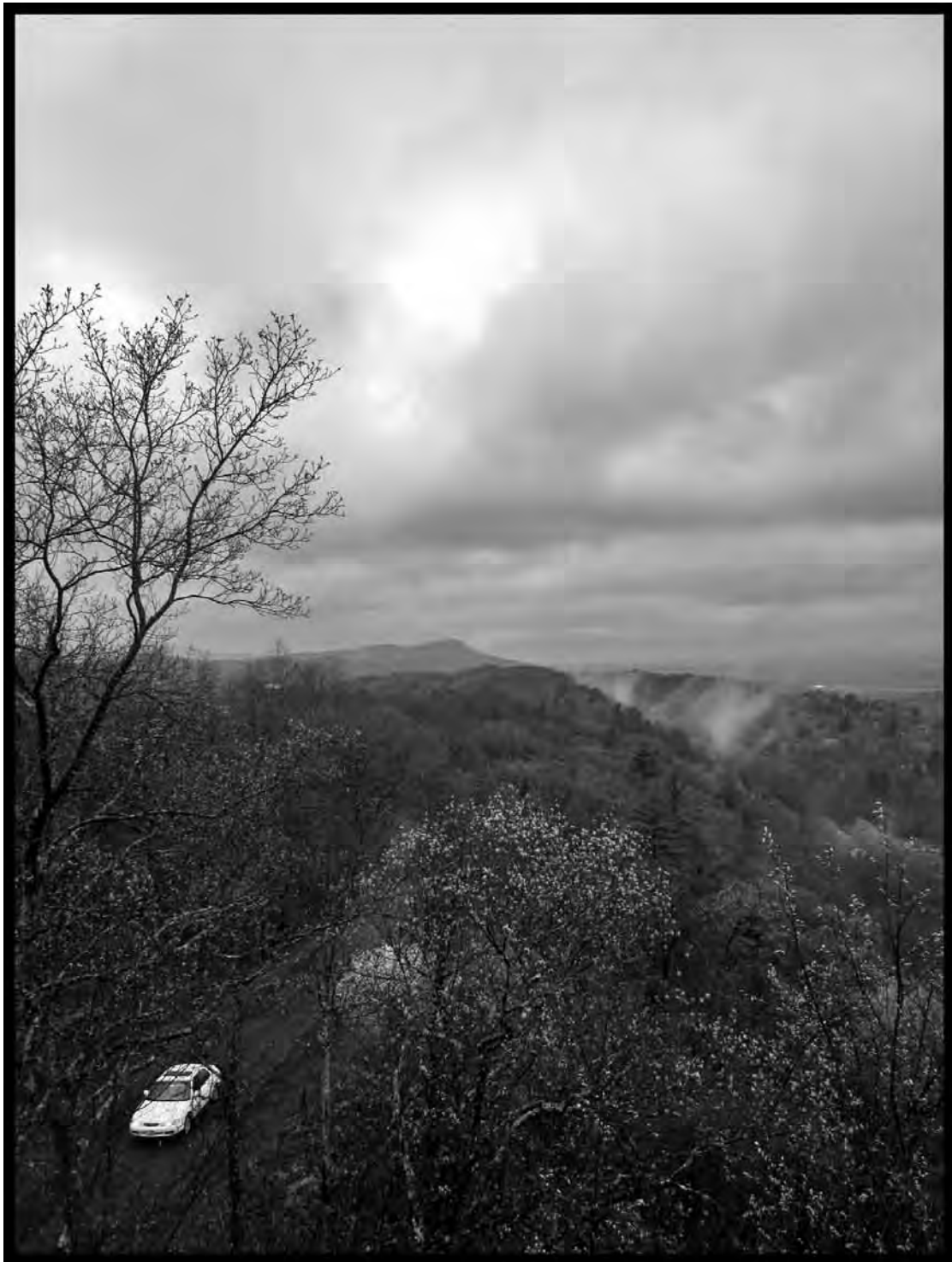
The outskirts are not nearly as shiny as what’s to come. They stall as they are passing an old & ragged sign:

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
/// Elliptical City: ///
/// for those lost ///
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Stalled. Train will not move forward or back. Neither the Imp, who cackles unhappily, nor Daniel or Kinley are sure what to do. The latter two climb out to look around for help.

As though strangely on cue comes down the street near them a roofless bus. Pulls right up & door opens.

Tis an ancient gent in the driver’s gent. Swathed in a long robe of myriad patterns, odd square hat on his head, long beard. Looks perhaps Chinese, & maybe a thousand years old. Strong, papery voice.



“Got engine trouble, do ya? Grab a hitch!” Daniel sees what he means, & he & Kinley hook up the Choot-Choot Train by hook & cable to the roofless bus. Then Kinley & the Imp get back into the train’s engine cab to steer, & Daniel climbs on board the bus & tells the bus driver they’re ready. “TooT! TooT!” his horn sounds, & they now move deeper into Elliptical City.

Kinley remembers, only the Imp to tell right now.

“It was a faux pizza joint I knew a long time ago, only a couple of times really, but I remember someone told me I needed to get there soon, & give the owner the secret password to the back room. Fondo Wondo!”

The Imp cackles merrily at this.

“There was a layout of a city in back, in miniature. Filled the whole room. I would study it for hours, down to its smallest bush & alley. And Woods, like these, & a Traveling Carnival, & its performers, its stars, two sisters who sang, their father played guitar. So sweet! She was so sweet . . .” The Imp cackles as he says no more.

Daniel is sitting up front of the bus, first passenger seat, & he notices a folded up newspaper tucked into the seat. *Elliptical City Sunday Globe*. Opens it up from curiosity, notices a small article about a Philosophical Dinner & a Space Priestess come to visit. Wonders if this would help.

The roofless bus motors deeper into Elliptical City until it pulls up in front of a building with a friendly smirking bloo-&-pink sign:

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
/// O.C.’s Fix-It ///
/// Shoppe! ///
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

The driver looks at Daniel & nods & says, “Your stop. They’ll do you right. Take the paper.”

So Daniel thanks him & hurries off to unhook the Choot-Choot Train & wave the bus away. He & Kinley stand together waiting once this is done.

Not long. Out from the building comes skippety-scampering a bloo-&-pink piglet Creature wearing a friendly smirk & a workman’s shirt with an “O.C” patch on it.

“Hello, folks! What’s your trouble?”

Daniel & Kinley show O.C. the train & its track & explain how it’s not moving like it should.

O.C. raises a paw to them to wait & she skippety-scampers high & low on the train, waving friendly to its many passengers. The Imp cackles especially merrily. O.C. climbs right under the train & is there a long while—then she comes out with the tiniest pebble in her paw.

“That’s your trouble. Now be on your way, folks!”

About to return to her shoppe, O.C. notices Daniels's newspaper. Smirks extra pleased. "See you at the Philosophical Dinner?"

Daniel unfolds the newspaper & taps the article. "What is a Philosophical Dinner?"

"People come to ask why."

Kinley speaks up. "Can anyone ask?"
"Sure."

"Would you like to ride up there with us? We're new to the, um, Elliptical City."
O.C. smirks extra friendly. "Sure! Let me tidy my shoppe & close."

So they wait a short while for O.C. who soon comes out sans work shirt but now in a stylish hat with a long curling feather.

Kinley, Daniel, & O.C. get into the engine's cab & the Imp gives their passengers a happy "Choot! Choot!" to signal their trip resumed. The train moves forward again, all fixed.

Elliptical City gets more & more complex to the newcomers to it. The buildings begin to bend & tangle, sometimes twist among each other. The Imp, as rarely, slows to "Choot!" speed in her uncertainty.

O.C. sees the road ahead perfectly, straight & smooth. "Newcomers," she thinks, & offers to steer.

She can see the Compass on the dashboard directing straight ahead. Slowly she drives them along.

To reassure their jitters, she says, "Let's use your fine Compass & some local know-how! Now each of you touch paw to paw, all of you in the back too! Close your eyes & *hmmm* our way along!"

So they all do. It calms them & she easily steers them along until they pull up & stop.

"Right over there is the start of the Philosophical Dinner!" she announces.

xxxxii.

Everyone opens their eyes & is glad to be on a usual city street. O.C. is pointing to the beginning of a stony walkway. Kinley & Daniel lead the way with O.C.

The crowd behind them is quiet but agreeable.

Still, Christina is never one to hold back a word. Looks at Marie in her long flowery dress & bare feet & finally asks what she's been wondering. "What did you do before . . . all this?"

Marie smiles. "I'm a Schoolteacher. We've been traveling awhile."

Christina nods. "A shorter skirt & you could have been my main competition for Kinley." No rancor in her voice.

Marie shakes her head, smiling polite.

The stony walkway winds up in twists & turns for a long while. Eventually the people-folks all stop &

collect the many Creatures in their arms. White Bunny & Hedgedyhog, many Giraffes & Bears, shiny-eyed Creatures of various kinds. The Imp stayed back to nap in her engine cab.

Finally, they come to the top of the stony walkway, & behold there a green door with a golden doorknob.

Kinley & Daniel exchange a look & nod & push on through to discover . . . an escalator.

Kinley looks searchingly at O.C. in his grasp. "This is the way to the Philosophical Dinner?"

O.C. in paw smirks anew. "Folks, this *is* the Philosophical Dinner!" Points to the escalator. "Next course!"

So they get on to ride up. Notice alongside the escalator a bookcase filled with strange objects.

[It was like my memories of the G. Fox & Co. department store, back in Hartford, Connecticut, had crossed into this narrative.]

One escalator ride showed many appliances, stoves, refrigerators, sinks. Hop off, turn, hop on, next showed couches & recliners & comfy armchairs. Hop off, turn, hop on, next showed toys. Next lawnmowers & rakes. Next books, vinyl LPs & cassette tapes.

Finally they arrived to the top of the series of escalators, to a sunny green field.

There, at a fair distance, was a strange figure, turned away from them. Wild feathered headdress up top, thick black boots down low. Tool belt in the middle.

O.C. skippety-scrampered right over & the figure made many moaning sounds to the newcomers' ears. Long moaning sounds, keening high & low. O.C. chattered in her usual friendly smirky way & led the figure over, whose face could now be seen, wildly decorated in black & white, many eyes & markings & hard to tell any of it, & the moanings told little more.

O.C. saw their deeply uncertain faces & guessed the problem. "Newcomers," she thought. Have to figger this.

She said to all of them, "This is the Space Priestess, come for our Philosophical Dinner. I think, to meet properly, we should all close our eyes to begin this course."

She leads our uncertain people-folks & quiet Creatures to form a circle around the strange Space Priestess. Sit & touch paw to hand to paw. Close eyes.

Then *hmmm*, but not quite like any other; more like a *hmmm-cha! cha! cha! hmmm-cha! cha! cha!* Funny as it sounds, & a relaxing spreads through the circle. And then the Space Priestess joins in.

Her moanings are still scary at first, but they keep along & all seems to blend to something not quite *hmmm-cha! cha! cha!* nor either the scary moans. All eyes still closed, & yet colors to see, 6 or 7 of them, & a sweet thrilling scent.

No longer scared, the blended *hmmmoans* went on & on till O.C. led all from this closed eyes vision to open ones, & everyone saw that the Space Priestess was gone.

“Come along, my new friends!” called O.C. heartily, & she pointed her bloo-&-pink paw toward the far end of the green field.

Well, the people-folks & Creatures all stood up & headed along. No hurry now, nor need for Creatures to be carried.

“Next course is over there!” encouraged O.C.

But “over there” was a farther way than it seemed, as the sun above travelled across the sky with them, & was fairly low by when they reached the edge of the One / White / World’s Woods, & everyone took ease upon the grass.

And nobody objected when Kinley suggested they camp right there for the night. All the people-folks unpacked pillows & blankets & food from their pockets & knapsacks. Great full moon above, & about a bajillion stars to admire.

And O.C. smirking friendly & saying, “Look up there, my fellow diners. It’s the next course of our Dinner!”

What to make of the strange & wonderful stars in this so weirdly placed sky, deep in the heart of the world?

I think it might have been that little purple furred Creature Pirth who started in first.

He was dancing lightly, back & forth, ribbons in his paws flying a bit about him, when he saw that his upraised paws seemed to move some of the stars up there, back & forth, all around, & they would settle back when he paused.

Wanting to show, he danced up to sitting Maya, & into her lap, & tug a little to stand her up, & a little more to hop into her hand & raised high, & her giggle at his play succeeded by a happy cry of delight when she saw how he danced with the stars, this way & that, sometimes seeming to disappear within them, like they a cloak wrapped round his dancings. She showed to everyone’s delight.

What else might all this be?

Christina sudden stood & smirked & reached up both hands to gently loose scoops of stars into her grasp & then set to shaping them into sculptures, abstract & beautiful, twining in & amongst each other, & moving among all her friends for a closer look before returning back to the sky—

Marie’s finger on chin thinking led her to reach up for scoops & scoops of stars & she molded them into a large curved disk like the one she & Joe had used to slide down the very occasionally snowy hill by their Fishin’ Hole compound—she invited all the Creatures & people-folks to join her sitting on the disk, Joe smiling biggest for memory, & they used upward paddling hands to rise, & downward paddling hands to land again—

Eventually everyone helped to fashion a starsy blanket with pillows for all to cluster in, to dream on of this wonderful place & course in their Philosophical Dinner.

There was eventually in among stars & all these friends a small twinkling light, tiniest of things, lingering long enough to be nearly seen, & no more, & yet something in its brief twittering, not purpose but reminder: had their question been answered? Was it being answered in some other kind of way by the courses in this Philosophical Dinner? Would others join them in their searching?

What would the main course of the Philosophical Dinner be like? What would they learn? The tiny

twinkling light up there, among those strangely stars, led them wondering unto the rising Imp in the Full Moon, her cackling, merry ways, up further to the generative places of strangely stars, Imaginal Space where all passed through & supped awhile, up further, beyond up, to the forever of now, colors & music & scents & tastes & clusters & the bajillion other senses of sentience pouring in & out, ever mixturing new, through the magick that brings one to the furthest edges of things, & a little beyond for tricks, & yet arrives all back to here, back to now, back to the trickles in of dawn, where all reshapes to daylight & these friends all clustered under their own fine blankets—& the sense that this dreaming was another course, & the penultimate to the Philosophical Dinner's main one to come.

cxxxiii.

Morning now come, time to pack, & get along.

O.C. in her quiet smirking still Creaturely way gathers them all together before they actually go—

“The main course isn't like the rest, though I can't say what it will be each time. It's like it's full of the others but more too.” Being a Creature, albeit more of an easily talky one, she nonetheless still struggles to say.

But everyone nods this enough for now, & they set off at an easy ragged pace, wondering how soon they will come to their goal.

But the day passes in simple ongoing passage, not arrival. These Woods are beautiful, more clear & yet powerfully still vague; were they waking or still dreaming or neither & both?

Kinley holds the Compass before him as Daniel keeps apace.

“What are the rules here?”

“Its own. Whatever they are.”

Kinley nods.

Night came again, even at the heart of the world. Tired, a kind wanting real sleep, came, & out again the blankets & pillows to cluster up & sleep, & a relief in it. Clustered close & those stars joyously beautiful but kept their playful distance.

In the morning it was more of the same, the people-folks among them not even thinking about eating. Just pack & carry forth for hours again—

Sometimes a vague feeling that these Woods were carrying them, that their steps were no way to measure the distance covered—

& yet, mortal even down here, the evening light paused them again at a clearing & blankets & pillows & clustering & again the well-behaved stars—

But oh so close to where they were bound, just half a day's walk or less—

Which is what they discovered the next morning as it was hardly noon when they came to a clearing & here was a small hut, glowing.



The Creatures sniffed but did not approach too close. The people-folks stepped close to examine it.

It was not abandoned but did not feel occupied either. There was a plaque on the door depicting a crazy smiling Imp, next to a firmly shuttered window.

Nothing about this Hut reached out to any of them. Still uncertain, they moved on, & the day seemed to resume like the rest.

But it was hardly much a stretch of time before there was a sound some distance back from where they'd come.

The Compass sudden came to life urgently & practically drug Kinley to return to that noise. He gave a shout & waved his arm for all to follow—

They hurried & hurried, & then they were suddenly halted before the sight of a simple grey Squirrel.

An animal or a Creature or something else? It made a strange low noise, a chittering? a cackling? And then was off again, leading the group along, leading them by a strangely gnarly path back . . . to the Hut they had examined & left.

But at a different angle from how they'd first had come upon it, more hidden as through to study it from a distance rather than approach it so closely.

Then the Squirrel was gone, brung them where intended.

Nobody said anything, none of the people-folks or even the Creatures. They were here to watch & watching now made sense, so watch they did.

[What had changed? What had they missed?

[It was the arrival to this clearing of a small brown & white Beagle named Algernon. He came upon the Hut like surprised, studied it, approached, studied it more, & then pushed the door in & it closed behind him. Was in there now. The Hut's glow began to reveal this & our friends saw within the Hut now.]

[[Algernon Beagle is with a bald leathered up muscular man & they are talking. We all nudge forward a bit to listen. He is talking to AB in intense study.

[[“You need to close your eyes to see better into those frozen rainbow falls, Algernon Beagle.”

[[We could see AB startle at Benny's voice; had he just manifested?

[[“I can guide you,” says Benny Big Dreams, now we all know his name because we are more clustered together, touching paw to hand, knowledge seeming to freely flow among us by this touch.

[[“Is it Dreamland in there?” asks AB suspiciously.

[[“Better!” Benny replies excited.

[[AB nods & closes his eyes & again studies deeply the frozen rainbow falls before him but . . . again . . . nothing.

[[BBD leans in closer behind AB & says softly, “*Hmmm*,” & leads AB into one.

[[“Now open your mind’s eyes. We’re going back to the time when there was no sleeping or waking. A *unitive time* when each was part of all, always is. *This is why there is something instead of nothing*. Now look around but keep touch to me. Let’s walk forward.

[[We were now spread hand to paw in a circle that surrounded the glowing translucent hut. Our eyes closed too, AB & BBD’s *hmmm* spreading amongst us by touch, smell, taste—

[[We opened our mind’s eyes when Benny told Algernon to do so, & here were what felt like very ancient White *Woodsssss*

[[We could feel everything around us, as clear as the touch amongst us—everything touched near & far, everything glowed together, everything sniffed friendly, mushrooms? rutabegas?

[[*Everything hmmm*

I hmmm, I am

We hmmm, we are

[[“*We are the Hmmm*,” are Benny Big Dream’s words to AB & the rest of us listening, & these words lingered & danced among themselves & repeated over & over forever until—

[[[Someone worried. Someone loved Algernon Beagle & worried his stretch in space through time to unitive time, more than one someone really & now more—

[[[And AB stumbled, looked around confused, near panic, the colors glimmer weirdly, there is a shudder through it all, what then?

[[[AB very shakily chews a tiny something from his paw & we can feel him calm, & we *hmmm* again better now, & gentle help him to tug back to the hut, where he has never left, to now, which it always is here, *space become time*

[[We feel him arrived fully. Shakily, he leaves the hut but looks around at all of us bewildered.

[[He looks at all of us, one quiet moment after the next. We keep *hmmming* by touch & waiting.

[[Then he raises his paw to still us, & talks in his funny accent. “You were all *hmmming* to help guide me.” There were many nods & smiles. “You followed me here to there & back again.” More nods.

[[He points to the Hut. “That’s the Original Root,” he says slowly. “Where we all come from. Why there is something instead of nothing?” last words like a question-toy he touched, new & uncertain to it.

[[But he talks on, like more certain now, has to say. “But it was only just the first why. All of us are why too!” Pauses. Then: “Sort of like that tricky pandy bear says. None, one, many. In that order though. And for whys.”

[[[A soft cackle somewhere]]]

[AB starts walking purposefully & we sort of ragged random form up a caravan to follow him.

[Climb back up among the many roots to the great mountainous trunk of the Great Tree. Its green & golden fruits tinkling gently on its branches.

[We kept walking for miles & years to arrive what some of us let the rest of us know was a great magickal Liberry. Many strange vehicles waited us. Boat Wagon. Beatrix BunnyCycle, Choot!-Choot! Train, Bike Wagon, a waking from nap Calgary the Sea Dragon, others.

[Algernon suddenly exclaimed, "We're awake!" & soon we were in another sitting paw to hand circle, with AB & Benny in the middle talking.]

Benny: "I had to prove to you that Dreamland isn't all sticky trouble, like you've known." Humble words.

Algernon stared him wordless.

Benny: "Down there, the Great Tree & its roots & the Hut, there's no then & now. Unitive time is somehow connected from those Ancient Woods like a road to the Great Tree."

AB still stared, waiting.

Benny: "So I, um, borrowed a little to get your Caravan down there so you can see it all. And you could write & tell everyone about it, Algernon." Benny sunk to one knee before AB, his trickeries on lowest flame.

Silence. Then: "OK, Benny, I am no would-be king or real princess or any other kind of big guy like many here, but I can say we all know now how Dreamland is not just *over there* for Imagianna. There is a way from all of our homelands." Benny nodded. More: "And because you're trouble, you had to show us your own way." Nod. "And this is all hardly much to know?" Nod, nearly a cackle.

Silence. Then: "Your friend Abe the Ancient Sea Turtle said to give you a present. So here is what I have. I will make you Apprentice Reporter to mah newspaper. I will let you know when." Benny nearly cheered.

Then Algernon Beagle sort of tipped upon himself & passed out.

Princess Crissy & Sheila Bunny hurried him up to her royal bed to rest. The rest of us waited & fretted but no reason to worry. His was just an exhausted brainbone.

It was not in time but in space that all of us gathered in the Saturday Juice Room of the Creature Common, & for a marvelous Grand Production, "A Caravan of Everybody!" put on by the Royal Thumbs Productions, famed entertainers. Leaping Bears, White Bunny, tiny Petits Thumbs, jumping Monkey fellow—Sheila's Kool Jazz Band's Trane & Bird & Dizzy tunes—a bajillion Thoughts Fleas & their Mushroom cuzes here in the White Woods, jumping up & down, now all of us, crying, "*No Roots! No Roots! No Roots!*" till those Petits Thumbs seemed impossibly yes resting upon Benny Big Dreams' hard muscled chest, black t-shirt with its words—

*Neither Death Nor Dream
are truly a **Remote Land***

him sleeping beatific, him smiling all calm, all release, a Bunny Pillow under his head, a purple-cloaked yellow one near too, *all is dream, all is dream, all is dream, all is dream, all is dream, all is dream*

*Nothing last but nothing is lost
Just open your mind's eyes*

*Who is this purple furry Creature
dancing on my chest?
What is this damned spaceship
again?*

AS

To be continued in Cenacle | 109 | October 2019

* * * * *



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Eleven

*"I must create a system,
or be enslaved by another man's"*
—William Blake, "Jerusalem."

xxxiv.

Jazz blinks her grey eyes once, twice, thrice, twice, once.

I'm not where I was. I'm in a . . . tent? The flap door is open though the insect screen is zipped. Looks like dawn coming or dusk going.

But there're voices, shouting, laughing, some excited, some relaxed. OK, near dusk then.

How, what, think, Jasmine!

Oh. Shit. *Toby*. Toby.

I'm under a warm blanket on what feels beneath me an inflatable bed. Feel again, & my clothes are on, maybe different ones? I'm not naked, or just undies. That's good, I guess? I want to remember it for sure, that first time with him. Lots of times, I hope.

The blanket on me is very soft & brown, & covered in the faces of many friendly bears. I feel like they've been guarding my sleep. "Thank you," I say to them softly. Stay covered just awhile longer.

Then, not thinking about it, I roll from the bed & am up half-standing. Check again. Tie-dye shirt, too long for me but always cool. Jean shorts probably a little short & tight for me but OK. I notice some plastic green sandals & slip these on.

A deep breath, another. You shy, Jazz? Um . . . *yah*? He was with me here, brought me here, slept beside me even if he was too much a gentleman by half.

Unzip the insect screen & step out. First thing I see is the smoke from a huge fire that's somewhere in those Woods over there. I hear cheering & drums too, so it's somebody's party going on.

Then I look around & see all the tents around ours (mine & Toby's? I did see him & he told me to "wake up!" but then I was out again. Yes. Mine & Toby's. Call it a decent guess & a big wish), though nobody is much around. All at the party, I guess. Toby probably figures I'm still asleep (& how long had I been?) (Toby's & my tent? Am I sure?)

OK, 'nuff dawdling, I start walking into the Woods. Thinking about Cosmic Early now. Wishing I could help him. I feel like we'll see each other again sometime.

(Or maybe I'm dreaming in his bed in that hotel, us side by side. How would I know? Would that be so bad? Being with both of them in different ways?)

I come through strangely glowing trees to the hill above a long field, & what's below me is almost bowl-shaped, like you could have a show there. And that's where the bonfire is?

Lots of people dancing around it, sort of circling all the drummers near it, tho some dancers even closer to the fire.

I knew about these parties back home, but I never went to any. I wasn't ready for it all. And here I am now. The boy I really like is down there, somewhere. I slow step by slow step walk down the grassy hill. There's a full moon starting to rise in the sky. This makes me feel surer, not sure why.

They're shouting, I start to hear that better. Chants, words?

Yes, words.

Shamans & Fire! Shamans & Fire!
Events accumulate! Events accumulate!

Some are shouting, some whispering, some saying it with their dancing, I think one guy is sort of yodeling it. The drums are tuned into it, that explains them. I will too, soon.

Getting closer, I look for Toby. Weird: I try to remember his face & it's blurry in my mind. But I feel his hands, soft & big & strong. I feel his desire for me, how he holds back & does it not like sacrifice but *because he loves me*. I guess that's how it should work.

I keep walking toward the fire, vaguely notice some of the bodies are naked, & some of them aren't people.

Shamans & Fire!
Events Accumulate!

I feel the heat now, warming my skin even as the pounding drums jitter me over & over.

I don't stop. Closer & closer.

Vaguely, a shout & another.

Hands, not his, but soft too, grasp my shoulder & waist. I turn to see a pretty girl with rainbow-colored hair. "He's not in the fire, sweetheart. He's over there."

xxxxv.

Wow, five days later & here I am, again, jobless. Just like that, near 7 years, over in a few hours.

I don't know how to understand this. I did good work. Nobody disliked me. Simply, bean-counters decided. I'll never know who they were, or why they decided to end my work. The two people who told me cared only a little, & one less.

So now I'm sitting here, at a donutshop, as often, soon to go to an ear doctor down the street in this town near Boston that I little know, little to tell of it, mostly where suburban people live. I've been working on *Cenacle* 108 & SpiritPlants Radio work. Caught up my journal from yesterday's not doing it. Job loss day. Today aftermath, but not Cosmic Early's book.

There are some tall wilty yellow-orange flowers outside the window next to this table. A tree whose leaf canopy is hollow within, like a green umbrella.

People have come & gone all morning here. Mostly near 9, rush hour. Windy out, says the American flag in view. Partly cloudy. I hope my ear doctor can help easily & quickly. Maybe I'll need to come back again only once, if at all.

I'm not writing this right now to push this book's story so much as to do the familiar. What I do, how I know the me I like. I had Polly iPod going, Eurydice MacBook Pro, but both out of juice & no power outlet here.

It's 1:29, & I'll leave soon. Been waiting this appointment awhile, worrying it, now it's nearly here & I'm jobless.

I'm uncertain. Am I better off without a job that worried me often? A company run by greedy incompetents, always coming & going?

Would I be writing this book right now if still employed? What would have been instead of this?

Those flowers are pretty, several feet tall, big green leaves, droopy, yellow petals with orange stains on them.

I believe this is who I am, writing like this in joints like this, the pop music in the air, the coffee & sandwiches & sweets for sale. Yes.

But I was that person at that job for a long time too, & now that part of me is gone. 7 years now done, now a recall of days, part of my pitch for next job.

Tomorrow I'll start in on transition. Paperwork. Phone calls. Emails. Burying something I cared about, that mattered, that was taken by unknown deciders & bean-counters.

It was good work. I built a customer training documentation program.

The numbing shock still upon me. The anger, the grief, the rest, still, I guess to come.

I would rather be writing about Maya & Dylan & Bowie & the Creatures & the White Woods & the Tangled Gate & all the rest, but that will be next time, I hope.

Needless, easy cruelty in this world.

Enough of this for now.

Again that bus station & that old man but he's different, older & did not die as he expected, or younger & not gotten there yet, or this some other old man, there are many, & it's a winter night, colder than snowy, the bus is late, the indifferent jackass behind the ticket counter shrugs to questions.

It's years ago before the gadgets in every dull staring hand—



He wears an army jacket, is hunched in his seat, grey hair pulled back tight into a long braid down his back, worn jeans, leather boots fused to his thin legs, eyes soft grey yet steely alert—

I'm probably younger, eager, looking to listen & to learn & to believe, traveling eager, with my poetry books & novels & notebooks & Walkman & its many music cassettes. Waste too much time half-watching pretty eyes & shiny lips, smiles for someone else, measuring curve & tightness & will I ever be what one of them likes, wants?

Now he's outside, left his seat & his ancient dufflebag & gone out to the smoking area, & he's on all fours on the ground, among the butts, in the dirt. He's . . . drawing in the dirt? I leave my loved ratty old bookbag next to his & go out there, just a doorway under an old green & gold awning, a bucket for butts some use, & I bring my book & some paper & a pen, & I don't know what I'm doing or him, & I like this, it excites me—

The stick in his hand glows as he writes in the dirt. *Blood canvasses. Museum monastery. Eyeballs.* The words glow as he scratches them, & then they seem to sink into the earth.

"You try. I got no new words tonight," he's looking at me straight & sure, holding out his stick to me, nodding me help him up & me take my place down there in his stead.

"What do I write?"

"You tell it straight & true. No other way. None as good."

"Tell?"

Motions impatient & I help him up by his fierce bony paw & feel myself pulled down. Now he's standing, a rolled cigarette half-smoked among his fingers.

The sandstick *hmmms* & glows in my hand.

I want to do this right, whatever this is. Look around me. A girl in the station, thickly dressed but a pretty red hat on her too, book in her hand, is she looking at me? Is this why I'm alone, because this is how I end up, on the ground with a crazy old man & a weird pen?

I write for all I'm worth anyway.

I want to burn deep

I want to live long

I want to learn how to love better

I want to push over my borders

I want to taste her & her & her & more

I want to dream awake

I want to eat the mysteries

I want to feel something I don't understand & love

I want to make you happy

You & You & You & You & You

I stop. Look up. *Fuck*, he's gone. That bus is already out of the parking lot.

The stick still glowing & humming in my hand

xxxvi.

It was on this date back in 1975, in a house I'm sure long changed from then, that I started a fixtional newspaper about a youth football league. The league called *Connecticut Football League*, & the newspaper *Sports Page*.

I wrote that paper for years of my youth, creating as interesting & involving a world as I was capable of. Moved with family to another house in 1977, got a paper route that year, gave myself a radio show to broadcast about the CFL 7 days a week for years—kept it going till late in my high school years—

puberty overtook me & I lost this project's fervent devotion—& gained nothing but the pain of being outcast & the shame of feeling unwanted—

Those feelings of disinterest & thus rejection returned to me fully when I was laid off on July 24—my work will get done, just by someone else, & likely not as well.

It's like the axe was falling for two years or so, as I hung on slaved this time not to the hunger for an interested glance & touch, but a steady pay check & what good things it allows—

On August 3, 1975, I was barely 11 & had such simple dreams. I loved writing & football & I built from these the first of many worlds—

It's hard to overarch these many years to—

but in a way it's not—*this* is what I do best—I've sat in this space years when it was a cafe courtyard, & now when it's uncontained by steps & a black railing on three sides—

I'd rather do this than anything else—it's mine & does not rely on others—

The more I do *this* while again jobless, the better I'll be—

Not only do this but do it
better than ever.

—I wonder where the Creatures would bring me right now & I hear a few vague sniffs & am brung to the CC Hut in these White Woods—

I'm sitting in mah comfy armchair, to paraphrase a certain journalist famous in these parts—the shutter is raised on the window next to the door—the night is cool & quiet without—

Why here, I wonder?

It is safe & familiar, in my mind's Imaginal Space, far from the troubling world of men—

The hut is dark yet glows faintly & I look down to see the glowing form of my Tender, MeZmer the White Bunny—her bright mesmerizing eyes looking up intently at me.

She rarely speaks the English but we do often *hmmm* together—her voice is low & gentle, very calming—

A noise in the dark near my feet, & a familiar cackle; tis that wee Imp Rosa!eeta, come calling from her shenanigans, or this her newest one? Tiny little pandy bear form; I hear her cackle on the move as she explores whatever might interest a very playful & very ancient Imp—

Oh, & in that corner there the purple furry dancing form of my friend Pirth—*there is a synchrony* here amongst these three, & others if they are around.

[I'm writing these lines from Harvard Square, as I've said, a beautiful summers night. Chess players out in force, girls pass by in the can't-fuck-me shorts, trees in this courtyard are calm, all the shrooms I et tell me is that I'm tired & sad. I left all this in 2002, missed it badly till I returned in 2010.]

Events accumulate, been said often in this book, but to what end? Any?

I want to understand the ways of men & women, & do not, & never have.

Sniffs around me in the hut.

Someone sitting in the armchair across from mine. Especially pleased cackles somewhere below.

"I've traveled the far reaches of outer space looking too, young man, with your questions my own," begins a low grizzled voice.

"Mulronie the Space Pirate?"

"Having no agreed-upon why to the matter, only wants & fears, kindness & cruelty abound. Preferred behavior in place of answers, & punishment for dissent."

"So nobody knows. Everybody sings, dances, fucks, fights, builds beauty, breaks shit, hurts each other, tends each other—"

"Yes, son, all that. Life is finite, & without *any* single, sure answer."

"What the fuck to do then, Mulronie? Tell me."

Silence a long time. "This. As much & as often & as well as you can."

I wait.

"Like that James McGunn song about making gain from pain."

[Radiohead in Paris on my dear friend Polly iPod. The faces in this courtyard dear to me now, not random strangers, beloved because unknowing too, talking, laughing, unknowing, & I say nothing to

any of them, not aloud]

]Now here & there are one, the CC Hut in Harvard Square, Creatures in my lap, shy, Mulronie ancient & dozing in his armchair, Radiohead crooning quietly in my ears from Paris years ago

I'm never turned away from here, often as I've come, poor & heartstricken as I've been

This world is home, but the challenge is that it & life itself are verbs, we are all Travelers, the road is long & weird & winding & there are no maps & no sure destination—

yet here a summer's night in a peaceful corner of a violent world—

Travel better, Soulard[

xxxvii.

*"Come together
right now
over me."*

—The Beatles, 1969.

I spent recent days jobhunting, through cyberspace, unto a few phone calls, & soon to arrive face to faces in my pursuit.

One job in particular lures me, a small tech company in downtown Boston, I feel like they need me as I do them

Me ever pursuing that workplace that becomes family too, becomes an extension of what I have—I thought I had that, & did for awhile, till ambition & greed & growth poisoned it all

My beloved & I walked by that company's building today, the desired new employer, located in a tall tall building in the city, stood there wishing

And yet sending out more resumes & emails & applications & so on—never slow, not till a victory—more phone calls set up, more waiting, more impatience

So weird that seven years of daily work ended in a day, a Wednesday, & all the days since living otherwise—

*"I'd like to be
under the sea
in an octopus's garden
in the shade"*

—The Beatles, 1969.

*"What if Dream-Mind
is Supra-Consciousness?"*

those words beyond my grasping right now, more a steady gnawing worry less words than worry perpetual worry cut by distraction—

Trees near Bungalow Cee
 summarily cut down
The OA on Netflix cancelled
 Trump isn't impeached yet

The wooden floor of this cafe, its view of tall buildings & a dusky sky
 How the endless universe shrinks to the size of one's hopes & worries
 Zeke Elliott holding out on Dallas Cowboys for a fairer contract
Spiderman: Far From Home the last of the classic run of Marvel Cinematic Universe films, over 11
 years—

"Secrets of Wytner Revealed!" claims the commercial on my black & white TV—*"What fortunes this will
 bring you!"*

"Dream-Mind-Is-Supra-Consciousness!"

"Learn to puff worlds from your very fingertips!"

*"Because the world is round
 It turns me on—
 Because the wind is high
 It blows my mind—
 Love is old, Love is new
 Love is all, Love is you—"*
 —The Beatles, 1969.

Fill this page flying blind too many gadgets too little unique soul too many excuses not enough kindness
"Marijuana is legal. Know the laws" the giant neon sign blares how to live right in all moments *"Oh
 that magick feeling, oh where'd it go"* The Beatles, 1969, anything anyone anytime can be magick
 the right key in the right keyhole the right touch the right word once twice breathe relax *"1-2-3-4-
 5-6-7 All good children go to Heaven"* The Beatles, 1969, *Secrets of Wytner* found in your dreams
 like everything else hard asked, is supra-consciousness, is supra-consciousness, supra supra supra
 conscious con conscious supra Wytner Wytner *"Here comes . . . the . . . Sun . . . King . . ."* The Beatles,
 1969, www.PurpleBeamBindery.com, yes, the secret is metamorphosis & release, clench & release,
 clench & release, clench & release, clench & release, can you hear the silence I can hear it too, can I
 please listen to the silence & share it with you, guitars get harder louder everything raises raises raises,
"Yah! Yah! Yah!" The Beatles, 1969, the hunger never ends willingly the reach, the touch, the want,
 tellmetellmetellmetellmetellmetellmetellmetellme

*Tell me
 Tell me
 Tell me
 Tell me
 Tell me
 Tell me*

*How to live forever & love everyone evermore, the rest of this wastes the worlds hours & I don't know what
 it's for*



Wytner *secret secret*
 Wytner *secret*

Black & White Television
w/
Antennar 200

Do you see
Do you see

Do you see?

Fear eats all in the end & spits out bones & dust to bury & blow

"Once there was a way
to get back home
Sleep pretty darling, do not cry
& I will sing a lullaby"
The Beatles, 1969

Boy!
Carry that weight
Carry that weight
A long time
The Beatles 1969

I fall back on my old futon, stars blowing through the ceiling

"Carry that weight
a long time!"

The TV gets louder & louder
as I can't move, can't open
my eyes, only
Oh yeah
At night
Are you gonna be in
my dreams...
At night
The Beatles, 1969

The Walls Fall Away
 The World Releases
 This is how it
 ends
 & this is how it
 begins
 new
 You! Curtains!
 Yes!
 [And in the end
 the love you take
 is equal to
 the love you make
 —The Beatles, 1969.]
 My beloved deep in the
 White Woods, newly returned
 from Wytnes.
 H m m m m m m

xxxviii.

Mary Gall sent me along anyway. She told me to take a leave of absence from teaching, to go find *that* damned Island—

Most creation myths or origin myths are fairly well documented & easy to research. This one eluded all that. Something deeper than a secret; more like a whole explaining layer to things that was nearly unknown & yet still *live in the world*, not artifact or old ruin or the shards of ancients' beliefs upon which centuries had built, & changed, & distorted, & built some more.

"It's dreams, Mary Gall," I'd say to her, too many times to recall, in that weird corner office of hers back then, sort of triangular in shape, its long look over the green campus & the mountains & Woods

beyond—

She'd smile, nod, sigh, in some order. She knew I was here in this university, in the literature department she headed, because of dreams, because I had persuaded her that my former profession, freelance photographer, was some kind of basis to be allowed to teach books.

We'd met in dreams, tho did not know each other's names or waking lives, or even if the other one was waking real.

We met on a long-distance bus, many dreams of this bus ride.

I told her of my travels with the Commandeer Cacklebird, aboard her Space Tugboat, into the far reaches of Outer Space, to visit the mysterious semi-habitable planetoid of the now-retired Mulronie the Space Pirate. This was, of course, my dreaming life only.

She, in turn, told me of the world's origins, of its unitive times when the Six Islands clustered as one—until the Blue Suitcase was sent back in time by the Architect to splash in the waters waking & spooking the Islands to flee their cluster. There was always more to this each time we met—

I would talk about my trips aboard the Space Tugboat, how the Commandeer loved to honk “TooT! TooT!” & cackle merrily as we flew past quasars & pulsars & other phenomenar—

She would explain how the source Island bore somewhere within it a mysterious Gate, a Tangles Gate, where answers might be found—

I would tell how Mulronie only let me come & take his portraits if I used a green friend of his to take pinlight photos—the process was goopy, though, pink goopy, till the pictures would emerge as though grown from the planetoid's soil itself—

She talked a lot about a Princess, from elsewhere, come here like many others fleeing their own world's destruction—hoping this could be their new home—

These dreams by waking's reck went on for several years while I continued my non-outer-space photography work—I began to look into any form of photography that could be called “goopy” or somehow pink.

I looked deeper & deeper into libraries for books on Gates & Islands & Princesses & all of that, in any possible form or combination. I found less than nothing. I knew.

“What don't we know?” I asked her, in what was our last bus ride.

She paused, green eyes firing brightly, smiled. “Have to just wake up to each other now.”

cxix.

Mulling. Two months of this summer, & half of it trying to find a new job. Maybe close to finding one. Seems & feels that way—

Only one path forward will occur, of the many possibles right now. Little prescient of what to come yet it's funny how I've found myself preparing more, or less, for one interview or another.

Seven years ago in the summer I was jobhunting, with fewer possibles, because a crashed economy, but also less of an impressive resume to show.

Now different for both of these. I get consideration more often & more seriously. I was laid off by one employer, paid a bit & pointed away, like that, quick.

Others nose forward, seem to value what another discarded.

It's all nice enough but, meanwhile, no actual check coming right now.

*Have to smile friendly.
Talk smart yet humble.
Exude appeal as I am able.
Move through the mystery
of what connects one to
another special.*

It's not arbitrary, how what happens, happens. Humans make deeply emotive choices, foundation to rationale, to practicality, to possibility—

There are gone faces I would like to talk about this with—writing places I'd like to be at again with my pens & notebooks, & this new-old puzzle.

I would like to believe I bring something good to the table. An intelligence, humor, patience, curiosity. Some still golden spark of youth.

An abiding wish to learn how to do better.

Characters & settings tempt me come, re-direct this past-midnight pondering. Sleep lightly calls too.

Yes's *Keys to Ascension* on Polly iPod, a deeply sweet & fine live album; I had it 20 years ago as a double-cassette for my Walkmans.

Acid happy high coming down the center of Carnal Street toward Bell Rock Cemetery, a nod & greeting to the spirits there & then onto my ZombieTown hovel. This music encouraging me for sure along my unsure way.

I had a paycheck at my last job, but the joy, the sense of belonging, of *matter*ing, diminished over time.

Yet I caught a deep taste for the idea of building good processes for producing good work. I cared about my payjob in a way not dissimilar to these pages & their like. The work mattered even as the workplace filled with poison. Greed, indifference. So many good people shown the door in hardly a few hours of a single day.

It seemed, in the end, that the work I did was valuable & needed, & yet paying me to do it was not.

Nothing about human behavior is completely predictable, & clinging too much to theories & patterns & tendencies is sure to produce failure at some point.

It's dangerous to be too sure of desire, its much, its lack.

It's more like insisting within a patience to let the tumblers fall & click into place, & *then* decide, & *then* nod.

Not knowing fully, *never* will know fully, & yet have to act, words, movements, have to cohere along, like wings on breeze—

What matters is
 what you create
 who you love
 what you gift the world
 what you teach
 how you listen
 how wide open your hands
 your eyes
 your mind

how you seek & love beauty
 how you tend & protect

who you let near you
 what you let near you
 why you open & close

I don't know big sure answers but I know kindness matters, however received

Smiles matter, touch matters

music matters so much

Learning is good
 Remembering matters
 The known & the novel are
 equivalently important

harm to body ≈
 harm to mind

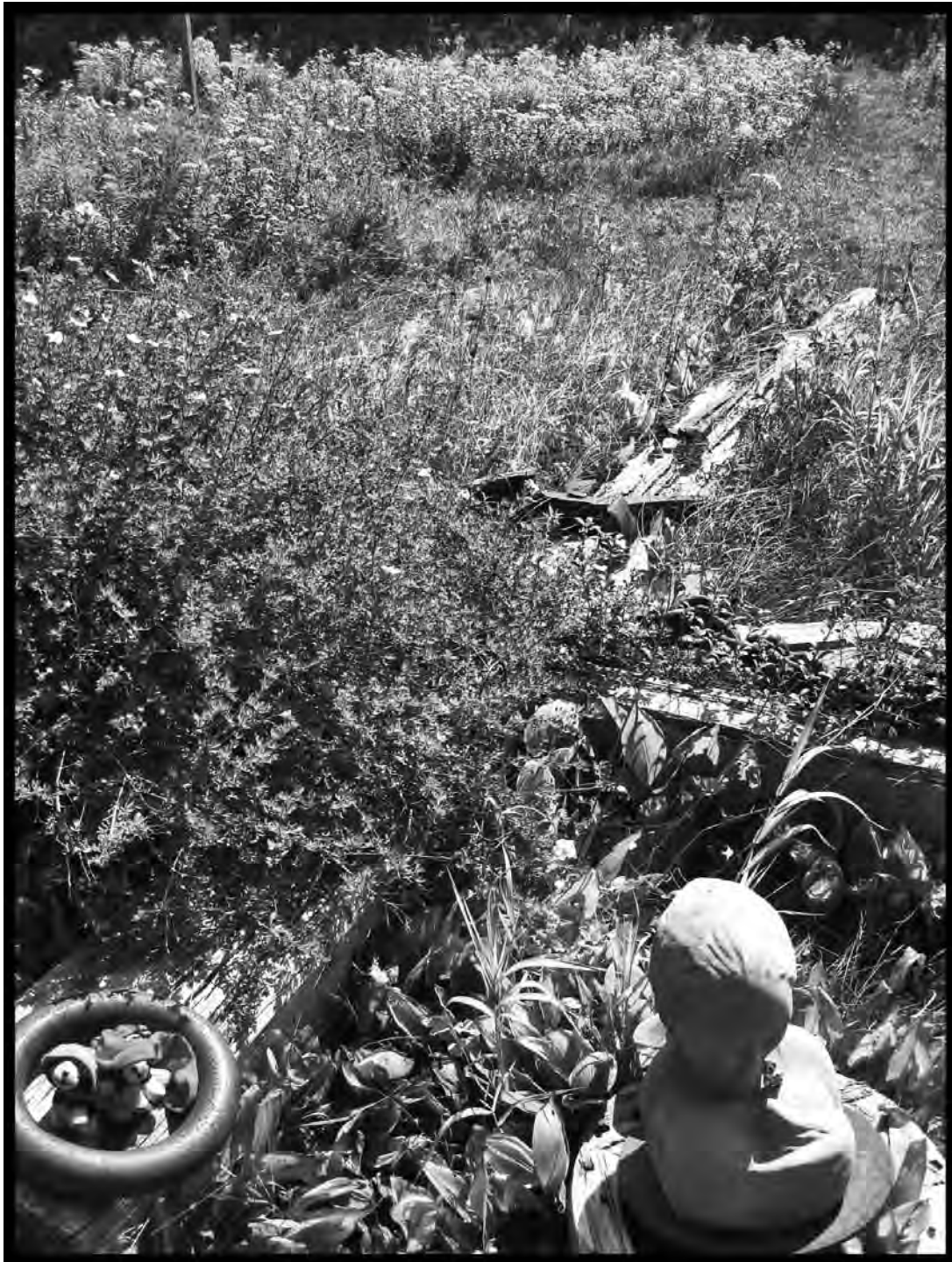
love to body ≈
 love to mind

I do not understand my value to others but feel it occur, usually with an inner start—

The world does not end if you or I stop caring. But it is at least different, & maybe lesser—

The can on this desk warns:
DO NOT SHAKE!
DO NOT SHAKE!

I believe this world is beautiful & worth saving from the bastards who'd chew & swallow it till nothing left—



I believe in hope tho I do not always feel it. Yet it returns, in countless moments & ways.

Writing this book, 13 years & near 3600 pages, & counting, *matters*. Whatever that means, this book *matters*.

Will I have the wanted job when these pages resume & will it be still wanted when in hand? I don't know. I hope so. I hope so.

Good ganja.

Good shrooms.

Good world or mostly trying.

Good night.

A week passes, still waiting the sure answer, the *offer letter*, it's called. Delayed by paperwork, but more assurance than I had a few days ago—a few more days pend—

Write about this at 1:20 in the morning? or get back to the main work here, having spake my waits & worries enough for now—

Let me lay out my process here. Coins & dice help me decide which earlier sections of this Part Eleven of *LX* to mix up, along with some 2018 Dream Raps. Three sections of the former, plus one of thirty-five Dream Raps—toss coins, roll dice, find new sections not mixed up yet, & go, & see what happens. Be right back . . .

[Got it! Here goes.]

“*United Earth* was more than one thing, & changed over time. It was an appealing but elusive idea, meant to lure but not explain too much.

“Why? Because it had to mean many things to many kinds of people. And it had to convince the ships overhead that this world was worth saving, that abandoning it completely would be a mistake.

“Why were those ships still up there? The decision to let this world eat itself up & perish had been made long ago.

“The Emandians had left, following the decision made to move on. And yet, some lingered. Ships overhead lingered. Emandians scattered through the population lingered. This world was a violent one, & thus violent beings in countless kinds roamed, swam, flew its many miles. Violence informed a successful will to survive, & weakness or passivity did not win out most of the time. What survived tended to do so at the cost of others, though mortality owned all. Mortality bred the violence, its hunger for food, sex, warmth, safety, & none of these sure to last any.

“It was not a world like Emandia so much, & yet . . . something. There was tenderness too. Beauty in the many landscapes, many kinds of weather, countless forms of life.

“It would all end badly. It did so, over & over, extinction after extinction. And yet up rose more, no quit in the world's deep force.

“The ships did not leave, & many down below remained, outliving countless generations of every kind

& species. Wondering if something *else*, something *better*, something *saving*, could occur. Could it?"

Kinley woke first from this lesson offered in dreams. Looked around. Oh. The Cavern under the Tangled Gate. Napping Creatures all around. Um. *How?*

cxl.

Raise the game. What else is there to do? Why eat so many psychedelics & not push for more? More of me in every possible way.

I feel like I trifercate among *dreamspace*, *tripspace*, & *daytime space*, like I concede a lot of hours to . . . getting money.

So it's not daytime space. It's *moneyspace*. That's all I can call it. In this space of hours, someone owns me & directs my actions. And can expel me at anytime.

And did recently. And now I'm auditioning for a new master. Slinging skills & experience for cash. That's what it is. I don't know if it was anything more. Jobs seem to come & go, & their relationships too—I don't have many exceptions to show by contrary—

Another chance fell through, two especially good ones in the weeks I've been whoring for new—

I do not believe that's all there is to it—

But—*raise the game*

How to alter *moneyspace*? Is that possible? Should the years bring a shrinking of ideals or a bettering of them? A seasoning of them to survive?

Can one get better at being one's self? At being human?

*"What happens to people?
They quit holding on."
—Deerhunter 2019.*

How to integrate the varied, seeming varied, spaces?

*Never stop feeling.
Never stop thinking.
Never stop listening.
Never stop trying.
Never let failure extract more than its due.*

Learn, adapt, eat failure's lessons, & shat the rest.

Moneyspace slows me, my imagination, my instincts—and also rushes me, too fearful, too eager to please—often unsure myself, the ground I stand on—

Dreamspace, I little control & wish I did more. Shape the fire, learn how to dance it better—

Tripspace are my mind's doors widest open—watching clouds above this city café reshape moment by moment—

Moneyspace I arrive to by day, tired, time to beg again, uncertain & scared—& yet having to show confidence, eagerness, willingness to please whomever will, or might, pay.

An endless line of white-clad souls pass nearby, bound for a secret soiree—I'm thinking that when night comes to this city, things change, & what was Elliptical City becomes Gay E.C., a place full of artistes & radicales, & there is a place I know, called La Grande Studio B, where I will go to smooth my furors away—

The hostess of the Studio is a pink-&-bloo piglet Creature named Ancienne Cookiée, or A.C. for short—

She lets me in with a friendly smirk & knows my steps bound for La Sens-O-Rama!

Through a green door with a golden doorknob & into a round room, a row of folded seats to the left of the door—

“Enjoy, mon ami!” she cries, as I go.

Like the unitive times so ancient ago, I become the bloomy scent I sniff, the sweet taste on my tongue tastes me back, I am soft as the world is soft, run every color through *hmmmming* in & above & through all, world will let me shape all this or shape me new by its will & whim—

Raise the game

It becomes different the higher the harder the deeper in—

You want more?

Give more.

Not harder or easier or harder than this.

Give a fuck. Give two. Give many.

Another job interview today, so another several hours at auditioning, faces to persuade, faces to please, shake my mind's ass for a job—it's all words, not actual work—not a *real* audition with a script or a song to perform—whatever I do for those faces versus the others who try—

Come here after, this Au Bon Pain Café, Copley Place Mall, Boston, Back Bay, because back in 1992 & through 1994 I lived a walk from here as a graduate student & came here Sundays in summer with my *Boston Globe* to run through the “Help Wanted” ads—used to cut them out, tape 'em to notebook paper, mail resumes or make phone calls—keep track—it's fuck 2019 & I do the same thing now with emails & a job tracker spreadsheet on Eurydice—

I was laid off six weeks ago yesterday—I've been to half a dozen in-person interviews, countless phone calls & emails—shaken my mind's ass for many—getting incrementally better at it—pimping up my resume, got new interview shoes—

Another tomorrow, by phone, & gotta call the unemployment office, ain't gotten nothing from them, not a fucking cent of what I'm owed.

Brought this book along because I want all this live on the page, all the begging for a chance to shake my mind's ass by telephone or in an unmemorable conference room—

I'm damned tired of it, & scared of it, & pissed off about it.

This cafe's glass walls show a city's busy intersections, cars & buses & hurrying souls. Tall buildings, the glass ceiling shows the heights of, & strange trip-hoppy music to color its cafeteria innards. Trees out there too, been growing there years, perfect green.

Give a flying flapjack

Give many flying flapjacks

I'm still in this, still trying, still being, my hungry hopeful self. *It's hard.* But there's *harder* in this world. Maybe next job I'll do better, fit in more, find a way to give back deeper.

I can do this.

I will do this.

And I'll not forget this lone helpless feeling again.

I'll do better by good fortune when it comes



To be continued in Cenacle | 110 | December 2019

* * * * *



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Eleven

*"I must create a system,
or be enslaved by another man's"*
—William Blake, "Jerusalem."

cxli.

A month passes, resume.

A month, really?

A month. *Resume*—

"Where did all the people go?

Why did they fade away from me?

They meant so much to me & now I know

That they're here to stay, in my heart"

—Neil Young & Crazy Horse,

"Olden Days," 2019.

Whatever this book is, it's the baddest ass thing it can be—

Pay mind—Listening first time to Neil Young & Crazy Horse's new LP, *Colorado*, the baddest ass thing they can be—

They are from a lost village

*"Won't someone help me lose
my mind?"*

—NY & CH

their music like a trinket

tea of remembering, an invitation,

a loud beautiful invitation—

the lost village on a book/movie/Island called *Labyrinthine*, called **RemoteLand**, called *TripTown*, called *called called! called? called! called?!?!?*

Pirth's soft purple paw on my nose, *pat pat pat pat pat pat*

Weeks passed & I shook mind's ass for a job, over & over & over,
shook & shook & shook
ass & ass & ass & ass

"We & the team loved to meet you but"—but *this*, but *that*

Then today a score & weirdly no joy—barely relief—

I need their money, more of it if possible, but I'm done ceding some of my soul to any employer—

That's what three months of this ass-shaking shit has taught me—

What does that mean? How is that hours spent at any job?

I will work well for my money but my heart belongs elsewhere, to those I esteem, to this work—

This badass book, badass Neil & his crew, Art, *fucking Art*—

If a job I poured my good daylight self into for 7 years can be took in a few hours for no good reason, it means any can be—it's happened to me multiple times & I try to forget & hope *this time, this one, true & lasting*—

"*Everything changes*" JBIII told me so long ago, & "*beware & be aware*"—I don't know what to do with any of this—

"You writing a book?"

"Yah"

"What's it about?"

"Life."

"Life? Your life?"

"Life in general, yah."

Pirth's purple furred paw patting my nose, *calm, look around, hmmm mmm mmm*

"I know you ask . . . all the same questions

I do . . . I do . . . I do . . . I do . . ."

—NY & CH

Mac-Donald's & Hall-o-ween & New Britain I keep coming here like some retreat to the expensive wilds I come to this poor city of my agos & live here a few days of the year—found out today I might end up working in ZombieTown, Mass. awhile or longer—*wowza*

Then something better came along. A place that wanted me, made sure to get me, everyone I met there, involved one way or another, made me feel welcomed, glad I was arrived—it seemed unreal, a trick, a *something*—but it was real & good & here I am gonna start in next week—

The doubts shed slowly, countless rejections—but—honestly—

fuck them—every last one—

Shit happens—hurt happens—loss happens—the marks, memories remain—but *shake the rest of the shit off—*

If the good in life gets shoved into the shadows of the bad, who's the fucking idiot doing that?

Do the fucking work *good*
Do the fucking work *better*

Count every good blessing
& fortune & suck it down
smiling

✂ shit out the bad

let it all go & see what remains

“You OK, brother?”
“I think so. I’m trying.”
“Sit with us now.”

Another voice:
“Drink our tea?”
“Your remembering tea?”
“Aye, brother.”
“Will it help me remember better? Because I don’t do so hot at it.”
“Sip.”

Tastes . . . like a furry purple paw patting my nose?

Oh. Pirth? He’s in my lap too.



"I don't understand."

"It's OK, brother."

"I remember too much. It clogs my lines, fucks my steps on."

"That. And?"

"Maybe sometimes it gives me perspective. Empathy. I don't know."

"It's OK, brother."

"I'm sorry."

"That's part of it too. Sip again."

Outside this tall glass window, down below on the trafficking street, the shadowy Common over there, sweet mysterious music in my ears. "*I focus on my breathing, in the universal sound . . .*"

Those ships are overhead,
I see them now.

They remain from long ago
& ever on. Like watching,
like guarding.

They did not choose to leave like
the rest, & they are
among us always.

"What do we do about them?"

"Do?"

"If they are here to help?"

"If you believe all that true, then you figure out what help would look like."

"OK."

I feel like this could be something really to go with, *but what help?*

cxlii.

In 16 minutes I need to stand up & walk me & me bag from one airport gate to another—here, this ragged seat, near a wall power outlet from which I can charge my beloved Polly iPod ☺ & listen to my beloved's radio show *White Walls w/DJ Blue*, #34, fiddles high & low, bluegrass ever on & beyond the horizon; so, in sum, at the wrong gate, needed to get Polly the juice, & did, & a quarter-full bottle Diet Coke in my other hand, this airport is the closest to the Empire's Capitol—

In 12 minutes I need to stand up & go, TV hung from ceiling soberly details the slow fall of the Klownéd King, power slips from every hand, more grandiosely when the bearer feels no allegiance to anyone else, when his only strengths are arrogance & self-delusion, the first

powerful enough to catch many others in the second's net—

8 minutes till I stand up & soon depart this business trip where new colleagues endorsed me, & I them, & we conspired new good collaborations to come, shared meals, talked much, listened better—each of us nervous to meet the others, each of us glad it happened—

6 minutes till I haul myself up with me goods, & up two hours airborne to return to New England, return to home, & never a face in this large airport known, hundreds set in the lounge around me, hundreds more pass by me on their ways, each a mystery, each a *strange strange* something in a *strange strange* world—

Aboard a vast airboat & up to the dusky skies & I think about my petty resentments & then think: *why?*

The old thought, wisdom maybe, about walking a mile in someone else's shoes to understand them, true enough, but how can it be breached?

Is it a function of being in another's body & mind to understand? This would be much, is there more? Could even this magick be abused or simply not enough? What if one did not wish to return? Could a glimpse of otherness *affect anything?*

Does this any of it to do with the ships overhead? Why they are there? Whatever-ever for?

I don't know. Roll dice, toss coins, *don't know*.

Now on a metro-Boston bus I used to talk every day for years, to & from a job I have no longer, to & from a place I no longer live—

Am I less him for this? Do pieces fleck off & others accumulate over time? What are any of continuously but bodies & memories?

Too crowded on this bus to throw dice & coins, so letting loose with what there is, whatever it may be, cold evening last day of November

—& what then? Nothing consequential necessarily—what about the ships overhead? What about the more moss than in awhile?

What does any of it mean but moments, a few, & somehow they shine, they linger, the rest breathe out & away—

I have no answers in this bus crowded with warm dressed faces, middle evening here, some say *just be*, I say *that's not enough*

I'm trying to work it, whatever *it* is, grope in & out for *knowing* that *feels true*—Xmas lights on darkened buildings
“Stop requested”

What do the shadows below & the ships overhead mean? How to explain anything to anything else? What to know?

What next? Maya. Surrounded by Creatures in the Great Cavern under the Tangled Gate. Kinley, Christina, Dylan near her, many Creatures about them as well. Creatures are friendly to any kindly lap.

I'm watching from afar until I'm nudged by MeZmer the White Bunny to fully arrive. Rewards me by hopping in my lap. My wonderful Tender, ever a weathered eye 'pon me.

They're looking at me, waiting. Hmm. I throwed the dice & coins finally, I'm iterated here from a familiar place back in Harvard Square, my dear Polly iPod played R.E.M.'s *Murmur* LP for me. MeZmer stirs & approves. That's Princess Crissy music too.

Shrooms in me too, plenty & friendly too, & they tender me too, when I listen. MeZmer sniffs. *When.*

OK. Then. I have a job, I really do, & I have a really good one for all that, & here I am, & my black pen is moving &, my beloved home safe in Bungalow Cee where also resides the Creature Common & doorways to elsewhere. *Lovely.*

There are people-folks kindly disposed to me too. Sometimes read of this book when it's typed up neatly for *The Cenacle* four times a year. I love them, more than mah bruised old heartbone can always say well. They know I believe in them, urge them on, *manifest, & more, & smiling more!*

But what then? What here & now? All wait. One song on Polly ends, another begins, turn the page—

Eyes closed, I speak. "I am in a white room but with my eyes closed like this is a kind of travel without moving much—

"As I become better I am able to travel far & navigate without hitting the walls; I'm able to scale up & over & onto the ceiling, which then becomes floor or wall; sometimes I stumble or crash, & lay back simply in a white room.

"Is this a hospital or a prison where I'm bound? Is this where my body really is, or is it a projection from somewhere else too?"

I stop, eyes still closed, wait.

Begin to *hmmm*, low & slow, & feel my friends in this Great Cavern join in with me, braiding us together, & it's like floating far out in deep space, & eons seem to pass, & fear tugs me but cannot hold—



They were with me, each a color & a sniff & a taste & a *hmmm* & a touch & a something else too, they are close to me, we are coming, we are coming, we are coming, we are arriving to Some-Place, some where, it is blurry & wispy & old & sad & hopeful, forms ever changing in shape & in number, & we are continuing along now, descending from this space-o-sphere to light & air & warmth & *look there! look down there!*

It's the Thought Fleas Great Clearing in the White Woods! Do they see us? *Do they see us as what we are or some other form?*

Are we one braided thing?

Are we dropping like many raindrops?

Are we dropping like one?

We are falling, & more for having been in those starcraft & welcomed & invited down there, whatever we are, however many, whichever form or forms we take, *we are welcomed—*

And we fall & fall & fall,

down & down & down & down,

until we land *ker-splash!*

in the big kettle of Rutabega Soup

for it *is* Rutabega Festival & Fleastock time again & we land in the beautiful Soup & some of what we are remains in this Soup, becomes part of this Soup, to be slurped & drunk by all the wonderful beings in this Great Clearing—

& yet some down & down & down ever more like somewhere hidden? Hidden from all? Possible?

Open my eyes. Look at Maya.

“The well,” we say in one voice.

cxliii.

“Hi, I’m Raymond, author guy of *Labyrinthine*, *Many Musics*, & helper to Algernon Beagle in publishing his *Bags End News* stories.

“You may wonder why I would take these lines & this time to introduce myself this far into this book. What haven’t I said about myself? How haven’t I complained about how the world done me wrong this way, & that way, & the countless others?

“But it seems none of you know me in here, or that you are in my book called *Labyrinthine*.”

“What’s it about?” someone asks.

“Well, on the back cover it says it’s the ‘story of 6 different kinds of imprisonment.’ Or something like that.”

"Is it?"

"Is what?"

"Is it about what you just said?"

"I guess. Not really. Yes. No. Um."

"Are you going to read it to us?"

"Or let us read it for ourselves?"

"*It's very long.*"

"None of us are hurrying away."

"I think there are several versions. And several authors. Most of them me, sort of."

"Sort of?"

"Hard to say."

"That's what Creatures say. Is that why your friend is here? They usually don't come in here. Sniffs wrong, or something."

Pirth is in my paw, er, hand. Not dancing. But here. Like I need him more than this endless tunnel through the White Woods spooks him.

Someone stirs in this invertedly lit room. Gold & green, backwards somehow; I'd passed through many kinds of rooms to get here. These beings are friendly. Not quite human, because too wispy, but too physically present to be Emandians per se. I talked. Nobody knew me. More came. I kept introducing myself, hoping someone might. Then now, & here Pirth.

cxliv.

Pirth stirs in my hand more & more, now dancing on my palm, back & forth, peaceably, happily, at first, but then something more—

restlessly—saying—

saying what?

urging me lean forward, still holding my palm up for him to dance on, but lean more & more, let something go, now more, let, *let*—

I'm horizontal now, the wispy hybrids cheering me, *this is way better* than sitting politely through my book—

& ahead, er, down, a well?

what? *wait?*

OK—I am the author guy of this book—or several—& Maya too, I think, & how many copies are out there? Global Wall's girls had one each, I think—shudder just thinking of them—pink panties & tiny spectacles—

We enter the Well & I wonder what manner of "well" it could be—literal, figurative, the book's next weirdly charming anthropomorphic character?

"Like the Trash Heap?"

"Yes. *Fraggle Rock*. Yes indeed."

"Or maybe I *am* the ship overhead, no more an inert transport vee-hicle than the Boat Wagon or Space Tugboat or Air Currents."

"Or others."

"Yes."

"Are you?"

"What if I was?"

"Well, I'd say hello."

"Hello then."

"Are you from Emandia?"

The Ship laughs. Charming, weird, OK, a *ship's laugh*.

"Not then?"

"They needed transport. We helped."

"We?"

"I. We. Makes no difference."

"So you transport?"

"What is wrong with you? *What is wrong with him?*" seems to be asking Pirth, who is still dancing, more peaceably now, on my outstretched palm.

"He's OK," says Pirth in a low, sweet voice. I haven't heard him speak in *years*.

Now the Ship relents. Good thing I have friends to vouch for me.

"Let me ask you a question, Mister Raymond author guy whatever."

"OK."

"Why do you write things like 'the ships have always been overhead'?"

"Haven't they? Or you?"

"But what does that mean? Am I threat? A promise?"

"Maybe both? Would be something if you just appeared for all to see & none to deny."

"Is that the way you have seen *anything* work in your world?"

"No, I guess not really."

"That's the universe, sonny boy."

"All of them?"

"As an answer to you, yes."

"What about Dreamland? And death?"

The Ship is quiet.

"Are you all of the ships overhead? Or some?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes."

"You're outcasts, sonny boy. There's no other way to put it."

"Because the Emandians mostly left?"

"*Because you are poison to life. Find your own cure & you are welcomed. Until then, do what you've always done, alone, far from everywhere else.*"

And silence. And we arrive.
 Pirth hops off my palm,
 by way of welcome.

END OF PART
ELEVEN 12/25/2019
 12:26 am
 Downtown
 crossing to
 Old Town
 Orangeville



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Six Kisses [Interlude]

*for friends near & far,
all of you, up there,
down deep, for all of you,
for all of us . . .*

Art she dances alone,
the world her loneliness at partner,
crowds sometimes near,
sometimes watching,
often not,

Art she remembers,
by glints & melodies,
moves the world moves her,
moves near, moves away,
down & up & out,

Art she reaches,
to a like or novel touch,
for a taste like breathlessness,
a scent her bones know better
than her rest,

Art she loves chocolate & kisses,
& rusted skylines,
& ideas of loving new & ancient,
burst of wild clock
& slow . . . to . . . no . . . time,

Art she lives & mourns & bores
& wants & sexes & rolls & jumps
& skies & seas & a Rainbow Wheel
stretching far,

Art & I love you.
 Art & I dance you.
 Art & you spit me, & smile.
 Art & you gesture me near,
 nearer, a breath's closest . . .
Art, you gesture me on!

* * * * *

Hmmmmmm.

*"Stand in the place
 that you are."*

—R.E.M., "Stand," 1988.

This office is calm, calm, its only noises scratching black pen on white lined paper, breathing, shiftings in a chair, maybe a little leaked rock & roll from headphones, Phish 12/31/2019, New York City, "and the light is growing brighter now . . ."

There is the *Labyrinthine* version so far on pages, the version ever percolating in my mind, & the experience of writing it, word by word, line by line, page by page, minutes, hours, days, years—

This book resumes near 3½ months since last lines, & the world is sick, was getting sick then, is now globally sick, millions, & thousands have died, & thousands more will—

Not a human war, or a local natural catastrophe, but global, a virus, uninterested in humans as political, social, artistic, emotional beings, & many other kinds too; no, humans are a host, & a new one to this virus, & not very good at that, keep dying—

And humans, facing this situation, this profound & intimate crisis that nobody is immune from, above, below, have responded better & worse; with resentment, feelings of inconvenience, wanting to blame someone; calling it a *war* as though the virus thinks like that, like humans—

Helplessness, desperation, & the only immediately sound response is to hide away from each other, wait it out while heroic doctors & nurses & other needed people try to keep the world of humans from dying off more than—

And it's lonely. And it's angry. And it's sad. Many people work at home, on computers. Many collect jobless benefits. Everyone waits.

The would-be King of America rages & threatens futilely, calling the virus an enemy & the situation a war. Is helpless, & heeds no advice. Because to heed advice is to admit he knows nothing & others should be planning what to do. *His actions save nobody.*

There is no blizzard out the window. High, damaging winds. Flood, fire, quake. Swarms or packs or invaders with swords or guns.

There is the complete indifference of a microscopic virus & its doing what it does.



I don't know.
I wish I had more than guesses.

* * * * *

Some people are still driving out to beaches, congregating for church services, getting sick or causing others to get sick—

There are many people bravely tending others, at risk of their own lives—

States in the U.S. are sending each other spare medical supplies—

The criminal in the White House touts unproven drugs, & lies about progress, & numbers, & statuses—he gives a fuck only for his money, his friends' money—won't wear a mask to encourage others—

“Break the cycle of transmission” the radio says—“it's the only way”

Doctors deciding who lives & who dies among the critically sick—over 65 deferred to under—& as they die, denied medical care, their loved ones cannot visit them—

* * * * *

Kassi & I have been locked down for four weeks now, & it's funny that we've been 7 years in this house, called Bungalow Cee, never in that time home for such a stretch—

We watch the TV news, read the online news, talk with distant friends & colleagues—we order food deliveries, as needed, watching inventory of what we have—

I have a new job, now a week & a half at it, my colleagues faces & voices on the computer. So our income is steady & sure for now—

There are too many people who will not acknowledge this crisis & work together—

I'm in a bed, under several comforters, yellow, green, & my beat notebook's lined paper is lit by a reading light clipped to it—Polly iPod is playing a news show about the virus, worried voices on my headphones—

I wonder if this crisis's peak is days or weeks or months away—

It's near midnight, fuzzy weird days pass by—

I send my love & wish for health & safety to all.

I must find a way to take these pages back—I feel more helpless than anything—pen moving is my hope—

*The Creatures are napping peaceful.
And something in this.
To turn this book's attention.*

*Grasp back some of its weird magick.
Very peaceful.*

* * * * *

*"So goodbye nonbeliever
Don't you know that I hate
to leave here
So long babe, I got the
flashback blues."
—John Prine, 1971*

I'd heard Prine's name, but never his music. He died this past week, victim of the pandemic.

So I listened to his first album, self-titled from 1971. Wonderful, garrulous, deep grabbag of tuneful goodies. I'll spin it again on my radio show tonight, tribute & delight.

Kassi learned to make sourdough bread this past week from scratch, a weird involving process, & a nice result too.

These seem like random notes before starting in on Part Twelve of this book. Maybe this is warmup. Maybe finding the right moment to immerse in it is a struggle during a global pandemic.

The greedy & powerful want it to end ASAP so they can go back to making money. They don't care its hows or whys. *Just: it's in their way.*

I suppose most everyone would have it over sooner than later if the single cost was not knowing how or why.

Things change, they don't undo. Better to get the how & why even if this is harder.

Get it, try hard, then let it go.

*This interlude concludes.
This time of greater peril.
It's many heroes, it's fewer
assholes.
Things change, they don't undo.
Still, sunsets through trees.
What happens next?
4/11/2020*

Then what. Not quite Part Twelve yet, but not “Prelude” either. Kind of a wilderland of lines.

Friend called this book, maybe other things I write too, “cozy surrealism”

“You’re the only one I know
who can take such far-out material
& make it warm & fuzzy”

he said.

Nice words, knowing words.

I believe in what I write, who I write about, their travels & their worries, their longings & homes.

If an imp regards me with merry eyes, I am thus regarded. Nice regard, knowing eyes.

Part Twelve my ideas are as big as ever, wanting more, a farther reach back, around, out & on—

Creatures are warm & fuzzy, & surely as surreal as people-folks. Well, mostly. Easy to write about them, how they are, or at least how best I understand them at this point.

Another digression: I’ve been reading George MacDonald’s first fantasy book, *Phantastes*, 1858, & his last, *Lilith*, 1895, & delighting in his digressions. Nearly four decades separate those books, a young man, an old man, & I think his writing is even better in the latter, but his style remains digressive. Immerse in an Imaginal Space deep enough & the numbers & layers of stories become endless—

Part Twelve: what shall be its epigraph, or several, or none?

I don’t have a structural plan for it, its near & far doors are flung wide open—

Just as I decided in 2006 that *Labyrinthine* itself would adhere to no length of pages or time, so Part Twelve will simply go—will become what it is—

So not rushing it. Letting it open out & out & out.

The music is trippy good as horns swirl around drums swirl around words surreal & fuzzy & warm

Watch this: I’m not knowing but the pen in my hand is moving faster & faster watch it go, the music surreal fuzzys round Part Twelve of *Labyrinthine* let it be let it be let it be

Creatures are fuzzy & surreal

A beautiful fox ran by, in the distance, lean tan body, long tail, sharp-eared, far beyond those tracks beyond the back fence, there & gone—

White-tipped tail, the animals see people-folks less often, the air is clearer—

the world’s not so poisoned as for so long

“*Labyrinthine* Part Twelve
Are you ready”
No words
OK, so I nod.
And so.



To be continued in Cenacle | 112 | June 2020

* * * * *



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Twelve

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

It was a cube of chocolate chip cookie dough, *edible? the baking kind?* The story varies. It was the end of the world. Others said it was cherry vanilla. Some said both. Some said *one* cube, some said *many*. Some said it was the confection of the culture it was travelling. Some said it contained *magick*. Others called it *really* trippy.

I am inside *Labyrinthine* with a group of investigators, sent by The Gate-Keeper to capture someone who has infiltrated—how he has done so, or why he has come is not clear—

The Gate-Keeper tells me not to return without answers—my team & I have to go *down deep*—

Time to play

Diving down deep, pages like levels of the Sea, words down deep, travelling words like space, getting acclimated to this, swim words, through words, of words, become words, down deeper words like space, pierce the many dimensions, let them travel free, let all that is or ever was or ever might have been or ever could be, let all—

* * * * *

Someone notes the saddle bag on my wheelchair, with the velcro flap for easy use,

er, um?

especially at crowded parties like this, the old house over there, half-built, but we're all out sitting around this long planked table, tops support logs, everyone laughing & digging into the many bowls of chicken & mashed potatoes, er, um?

it gets weird, hard to talk to others, now descending stairs, in my wheelchair? The velcro flap helps out again, down into I guess the basement of the old half-built house? *er, um?*

The talk is worry, worry, about the sickness, about the crazy people with badges & guns, er . . . *um?*

Travelling the pages of *Labyrinthine* & others too, words of images & faces, & stories from near & over there far, & there seem to be doors to future stories, past ones that didn't happen, becomes all an admixture, down deep down deep *er um?* down deep—

I wake. *Where am I? Who am I? When am I?*

I remember the Gate, my brothers, the Cave of the Beast—

What happened then?

* * * * *

Cosmic Early scribbles:

“When did the Creatures stir to rise? Were they from Emandia too? Were they native stuff of this world?

“Did they come before the less speecching animals & plants of this world? Are they related at all?

“Matters of first & next, is, I, think, the problem. Events occur, consecutive, simultaneous, connected one or many ways—

“The world calm, the world unitive, like in forever *hmmm*, till a little something, & a little something more, & above spaceships, & hark that Blue Suitcase tumbling toward the Wide Wide Sea from a far away where & when—

“Creatures stirred to rise.”

* * * * *

Where am I?

What was that spaceship?

That trace of music I followed—

What is any of this?

I've sat hours on this bench near the fountain I woke up half-submerged in. Waiting?

Who am I? What was the Gate? That Beast? Those brothers—?

I don't feel hungry. That fountain feeds me every so often, drink & sup—

Will someone come?
 Will the great story
 resume? Will I help?
 Will I matter?

Do I matter?

Someone rolls up now, a strange man in a wheelchair. I *know* he's who I am waiting for.

"Time to play!" he smirks me friendly, one green, one golden eye.

* * * * *

Sometimes these scribbles is just scribbles, rough lines made as a kind of promise toward better lines to come. Sometimes this book is unshaven, dirty, stained briefs down, pissing into a bowl. Spitting to join. It's me at my merest affirming that *this is what I do*. I'll do it better *next time & next & next*. Of course there's pleasure in even the meagerest of pisses, the pressure relieves, the hour gains some focus. Take a shower. Do some laundry. Put on the old black & white Dü-Mónt with the Antennar 200, press that big red button & hear it *click-click-click* the station from snow to picture, something of a picture anyway—

I was sitting here earlier tonight, right on this old mattress in my ZombieTown hovel, taping back in the few half-torn pages of this book—had on my white-faced pink cat radio, pushing the dial up & down, come upon some old big band music, a suave announcer crooned, "now, ladies & gentlemen, enjoy the big band sounds of Glenn Miller & his Orchestra at the Café Rouge, Statler Hotel in New York City," bright music, for dancing or toe-tapping, fun, & I remember reading how Miller was flying over the Atlantic Ocean during World War II, & the plane he was aboard went down, lost, & nothing recovered—never made the show—

Taping page after tattered page of this book back into this old binder—

"Now, hold on," you might protest, "you left that hovel *years* before you started this book, & you started it *3000 miles* west of that hovel. What gives?"

I nod. Tis true. And only a couple of more pages to tape up, that's true as well. It's *this* kind of a book. I'm writing *these* lines merely miles from that hovel, but it's now, er, um, 18 years? since I left there, moved 3000 miles away, started this book, come back, etc. etc. etc. & now here & now there & *now now & now then*

"I'll Never Smile Again" was the song I stopped at; Mr. Miller said it was debuting on his show that night, 1940-something? Her first song, the composer Ruth Lowell. "I predict big things for this record," he said, as suave as the announcer.

Creatures begin to dance about my hovel to this mellow yearning tune.

"Within my heart
 I know I'll never start
 to smile again
 till I smile at you"

A squirrel dashes up on the garage next door, slick as an ocean wave & gone to where.

“You did not meet the Creatures till years later as well!” you might well object. “None danced around your hovel back then!”

Ah, yes, but *back now* they do.
And why not? I wonder.

The black & white Dü-Mónt television is now slowly scrolling a list of questions & I hurry to write it down here:

- 1) Blue Suitcase from far when falls from sky & splashes into the Wide Wide Sea?
- 2) Tangled Gate arrives?
- 3) Creatures stir awake?
- 4) 6 Islands spook & flee?
- 5) The world falls into time & travels away from Unitive time save for the Hut near the Great Tree at the Heart of the World, which stretches a line from then to every moment since & hereon?
- 6) Emandians arrive by Red Bag & by Wide Wide Sea to the world?

There, OK, I think I got all of them. Questions that are also statements of history. Yet what are they, as questions or statements?

I’ll need all my times & places & what-nots to figure any of this out.

Turn off the Dü-Mónt, press the red button on the Antennar 200, switch off the shaky standing gold colored lamp beside my old mattress. The old drunk upstairs is quiet tonight. All is quiet tonight.

I put on the Glenn Miller radio program again, the white-faced pink cat radio’s eyes glowing like delightful secrets.

Thinking as I drift off, “The Tangled Gate is made of ivory & horn, both, admixed, & more, & else, & more, & else, & more, & else, & more, & else”

* * * * *

He drifts by me, but he just drifts by, by me drifts, like he is or isn’t really there, or I am here but not really, I want to follow him but my clothes are so wet & maybe the world is . . . heavier than on that ship? Soon he’s drifted far away & gone like he never was, yet I’m sure he was, less sure I am—

I find another bench, under a tree, a White Birch. I sit down, heavy & wet. The greenery around me is a little cheering. I’m starting to feel a little lighter now. I look back toward that fountain, wondering . . .

I stand, sway, steady & walk on, leave the path I’d been following, let the White Birch be the turn I make. Soon, the remain of those clashing sounds is gone, long gone. Now more green hills my way, my breath & heart settling down, near floating along, letting all I cannot recall give way a bit in my mind to what little I can.

* * * * *

A cave. Cave? Neither dark nor light. All I can see is a . . . voice? A growling kind of voice, more like . . . not a man.

But speaking with seriousness, with poetry, with wisdom. Regret & defeat plowed my bones yet I ached & urged to listen. I stop. I listen. I listen with my wet clothes, however they might help. Listen with all of me.

“Life is suffering for some. The sufferers
are the brick & mortar of the climb
elsewhere—
Or else we can learn the world is
enough to salve all.

“We’re not from here, so here’s not
important—
Or we can learn that *here is gift.*

“Preserve nature, it is the privilege
of the few to enjoy till moved on—
Or we can learn it is the magick
to keep & perpetuate the world.

“These ancient words were destroyed
& more over time. Some now say
the world is illusion. Others now
wave a fist to uphold faith over
tolerance, certainty over wonder—

“The shine of some lives built on the rags of others.”

* * * * *

I’m in a village. I don’t know how. All over these hills now are round doors in the earth, & folks of some kind climbing in & out, using stairs within to ascend & return.

In this strange dusk I wonder if I should move away as quiet as I can.

But they approach me now. Much smaller but do not seem afraid. I’m glad. I could not easily explain how helpless to all I am right now.

Both my hands gently grasped by paws more than hands. I am led slowly into one of their homes, fed a few bites of a strange lovely soup before I nearly topple from my chair. Brought to a small soft bed & gifted a sleep seems like 10,000 years in the coming.

Awake, near to dawn, peep through windows I cannot tell how show it. Quiet sounds near me in this dim, like music.

A strange object, shaped like a cat, glowing eyes. Singing? I lay back, eyes closed again, listen without wonder, but close.

* * * * *



The music, is it *humming*? drifts me back to that fountain, sit at its edge, its soft spray upon me, mixing us with the green & golden sunrise, memories in shards return to me . . . my brothers? There were 6 of us . . . which one was I? The King? Dreamwalker? Asoyadonna? Francisco? Who were the other 2? Was I one of them? It fades again. They are far, far.

What do I want to do? *I want to find them.*

How? I can't even remember all of them, or myself. All I can seem to do is sit by this fountain & worry the tatters I yet possess of my life.

"Iconic Square."

I jerk to see a man sitting near me.

He smiles, smirks really. "You're new here. I can tell. This place is called Iconic Square."

I nod.

He talks on. "I've been here awhile. Probably too long. Learning. I'm a Traveller. I guess I collect way stations like this." He smiles at his own words.

"Where do you travel?" I manage to croak softly.

He nods. "Where to, yes, but more I guess you could say *when*."

"You travel time, then?"

He nods, seems eager to talk, or boast, I cannot tell.

"It happened by accident. Have you heard of Project Daedalus?"

The name shivers me but I simply shake my head.

"It's hard to describe. We build, repair, map."

"Through time?"

He nods.

"How?"

He says nothing, & I'm OK with this.

"Dreams."

I nod.

"It's how we're both here right now."

I nod again.

"But I don't know why you're here."

"I don't know either."

"Where are you from?"

"When."

"When?"

"I think long ago."

"How did you come?"

"A spaceship. I walked its length from my time to this one."

"You're a Traveller too here?"

"Not by my choice. I was . . . I was . . . a kind of knight, I think. Served my King on a great quest."

Saying this, as I say it, I realize I am not the King. 5 to go.

"My name is James Starsden."

"I don't know mine. I'm sorry."

"It's OK! Maybe we're met for me to help you."

"How would you?"

"What would be your heart's desire, Sir Knight?"

"To find my brothers."

"How many in all?"

“6 of us.”

I see him better now, or maybe he lets me. He is slender, average height I think. One green eye, one golden. Blonde hair & beard. His clothes shift among the colors of the rainbow, often arriving to indigo. His hands are beautiful, toss about playful as he talks.

“Would you let me help you find them, Sir Knight?”

“How?”

“Are you safe by waking?”

“Yes, I have kindly hosts.”

“Then ask them if you can stay. When you can, return here using this path to arrive.” He leans close to me, very close, & *hmmms* low & sweet to me. “Then we’ll begin our travels together to find your brother Knights.” His pretty hand on my shoulder now, gives me a playful shove, & I wake.

My hosts will let me stay though do not use words to tell me. Feed me more of their soup & urge me back to my bed. My sleep is mostly still recovering from my long travels, & returning to James Starsden does not occur immediately.

Then I hesitate. The feelings of regret & failure linger with me. What had we failed to do? Or had we succeeded at the cost of our fellowship? Was that part of the cost? Was being far from them what I’d agreed to? Or did it simply happen?

As I heal, kindness & soup & yearning urge me believe that they are all somewhere & somewhen, possible to find, & I wish & will to do so.

If James Starsden will help me, then I will let him, travel with him, help him too if I can. It’s what we did, back then & there.

Without the hope of finding them again, nothing else would remain to excite my heart to the new day.

So I slide under the handsome brown blanket of many Bears on my bed, turn my face to the cryptic eyes of the cat-shaped device, & let his *hmmm* sing from my lips & join with the cat’s own.

* * * * *

[Cosmic Early coughs hard but writes on: “Maybe the world began to begin to continue to now like a chorus of voices, each joining in at a given moment, not coordinated to rule, just occurring, & now one & now several & now many, & the song, the *Hmmm* braids ever on with voices coming, others fading but for a trace, a music that *itself is why there is something instead of nothing*—

[“Tis more a mythopoeia than a science of it all & yet feels true, which is a down deep way of getting things.

[“My little Creature friend, on our travels through the Tangled Gate, with another dear friend along, convinced me that this world is the Aftermath of Unitive Time, & waking is the Aftermath of dreaming.

[“What to do with any of this, I do not know. But it feels like a good path *on* & a good one back too.”
Coughs hard. Sets down pen.]

* * * * *

“Even with the idea of events like singers joining in a braiding *Hmmm*, is there still a first & a next & a next & a next?

- “1) *Unitive Time*—all come to *hmmm* together till
- 2) there is a cackle, & thus play
- 3) Blue Suitcase falls from a far away where & when, shocking the clustered like Creatures Islands, who spook & flee—
- 4) Emandians arrive to one of the Islands via the Tangled Gate, & also by capsules plunging into the Wide Wide Sea
- 5) The Islands now have White Woods, & from their Mushroom patches emerge Thought Fleas as guardians
- 6) Creatures dreaming stir to wake: music raises ears, noses sniff, paws reach to tough, lips & tongues to taste, eyes open

Smile.
Wake up!
Happiness

“What about people-folks? When do they come? Are these events thousands, ten thousands, millions of years before people-folks?

“Were there Emandians in small numbers a timeless time before this world’s own people stood upright & walked toward the throne of the world they would build for themselves, & set to their long, lawless, & destructive rule?”

Cosmic Early stops writing again. Jazz wraps around him as a soft nude blonde viper, comforts him, heals him, sets him back on his pen’s great, rude course.

* * * * *

My team returns to the Gate-Keeper & reports all we have found so far.

His office is ever more decrepit as the years go on, in a building that seems like it should have been rubble long ago, but isn’t.

His chair seems part tree trunk, his cluttered high desk an old plank on logs, the place dark enough to make describing him impossible.

Looks at my fresh sheaf of pages. “A Knight? A Time Traveller?” Laughs now. “Cosmo, you old rapscallion! She’s one of the finest pieces in all this!” Reads some of these pages twice, like looking for something.

I tell my team to leave us be for now, urge them to beers on my tab at Luna T’s Cafe down the road a-ways. They leave in a happy, chatty bunch.

“Gate-Keeper?”

“Yes, Soulard?”

“What’s any of this to do with **RemoteLand**? That’s your piece of it, right?”

“You tell me.”

“I’m not sure. Are we at war?”

His shaggy eyebrows raise in this murk.

"Are we?"

"I don't know. Since when do I work for you, anyhow?"

He laughs. "You were just looking for a thread into Part Twelve. You asked. I helped."

"I thought you asked me?"

He hands me back my pages.

"I can't use these. You have to go *down deeper*, but you know this!"

I nod. "Thanks for helping me," I say humbly.

"Just follow that thread, son, & you'll get there," he says kindly. Stands. Seems both taller & shorter than me. *How?* isn't the right question to ask about this.


"Time for me to get back to my set. You better get back to yours too." Hint accepted, I nod at him & leave. "Visit me sometime!" he calls cheerily as I close his centuries-tattered wooden door.

It's a long way back, along a somewhat busy freeway, all manner of cars & other kinds of vehicles, speeding along it, some above it.

Pass an old cemetery looks somehow 4 or 5 dimensional—the deceased arrive, stay awhile, depart again, return, more complex than all this usually is—

Finally come to Chief Seattle's Friendly Market, its parking lot crowded full. Walk in & look around.

All the cash registers to the right, some centuries old, some probably from the future—& to the left the many aisles of food & canned goods. The soda & sandwich & ice cream cases. Pass by the open area of tables & chairs.

Through the heavy cooler door & to the back, where a door is hid from view. Down the murky staircase to the door at the bottom. Tap into its security keypad: "P-A-R-T-T-W-E-L-V-E-S-E-C-T-I-O-N-i," door *hmmms* & *clicks*, & I walk on through. Too long in getting here. 

To be continued in Cenacle | 113 | October 2020

* * * * *



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Twelve

"I tell you, there are more worlds
and more fears to them
than you will think of in many years!"
—George MacDonald
Lilith, 1875

i.

How to braid all, as all seems braided somewhat already.

Hm. No. Try again. I've tried to find the right metaphor for how I see things. I do not see all as *one*, though I suppose from some perspectives this is so.

Yet I don't see disparate many either. Neither quite work for me.

What if this world, & all other worlds, *braid* together? Would this better explain how each relates to each, & to some, & to all, over time? How braids form, mature, loosen, dissolve, & yet always others, ever others, & ever new combinations, form ever changing form?

This feels like an idea I've been nearing, a metaphorical tool. What braids with another does so until phenomena in time cause a change.

Braiding may be stable for a moment or a millennia. It becomes, tis, undoes or is undone.

If this is one valid way to describe the nature of things, it is also a comforting way. Everything braids, *can* braid, *will* braid, will *unbraid*, will braid *again*.

Traces remain of all braiding, all unbraiding, call these memory, history, geology, archaeology, poetry. A lot more too.

Does braiding, its traces, only occur from then to now to hence? I don't quite think so. History, memory, hope & fear help braid now, & these braid the future too. The future is yet unexperienced, but is not unknowable. We braid the future as we braid then & now.

For this book, now 14 years & 3680 pages, I wanted to more braid its pages with its fixtional predecessors, especially *Things Change? (Six Thresholds) [a new fixtion]* (2000-2005), & *Why? [a new fixtion]* (2005-2006). Realize them more fully as a trilogy, & a kind of double-triptych with my poetry series *6 x 36 Nocturnes* (2000-2005), & *New Songs (for Cassandra)* (2005-2006), & *Many Musics* (since 2006). & then kin them with my *Dream Raps*, *Travellers' Tales [Secret Books]*, & *Bags End News*.

Triple-Triptych

But how, in ways I haven't already?

Activate those pieces again, the predecessors to *Lx* & *MM*. Continue them now. And braid these many in various ways through each other. Find all of these new braiding partners.

My blue-green coin purse will come out again, with its coins & dice, its little clocks & its radio—I will devise a way to weave in these major partners & occasional others too.

It will be complex yet it will be story too, like always, black pen on white lined paper in notebooks. It will get better & better over time. Braiding is natural, fundamental, very often pleasurable.

By me to make good of these ideas.

[jobless again, yes, yes, ah, there it is again, how many times along this book's long way, here again, yes, yes, but sure deeper down into the White Woods, its smallest, strangest, dearest details, yes, that's the way to comfort the path ahead—& I will share every comfort I acquire—

[Sitting against this tree in the White Woods, looking up there to a murky greenness I cannot discern as canopy or green sky itself or—

[I will be here now *as much* more as I can now why fully leave ever?

[The music of the Universe is everywhere, its beauty worth an ear's work to reach it—]

Now I've gathered up many notebooks, printed many pages for them, am surrounded by these beautiful items—

And here in my hand is a lovely medium point Espresso black pen, in their original form as I knew them in 1981—when I was 17 & new to ink pens & yellow pads—I have boxes of these in my possession that I've rarely used—but these pages will enjoy being written by these pens—

And a plan has built up today, a sort of game to play here, to see what happens, see how far I can take it—



Old blue jeans, threadbare in places. Old black sneakers on my feet. Off-white gym socks, many times washed. Black t-shirt with R.E.M.'s orange-colored *Green* album image on it.

Burning Man 1999 pendant round my neck. Wait. I check. 2003. Oh. Um.

Blue boxer shorts. Was recent girlfriends who said go with those.

What is "recent"? 2003? No. I should not have this. I do. I lost this R.E.M. shirt long ago. My hair is longer than in awhile.

What bus station? When?

Time to find out. Finish my piss, no shit in me right now, hike up, wash up, walk out the door of the men's room to see.

It's a crowded bus station, & I guess winter from how most everyone is bundled up in coats, hats, gloves, boots. There are long rows of plastic blue seats filling up most of the room, & these seats are mostly full.

Some staring. Some reading books & newspapers. Some talking, serious or laughing. Some with little gadgets, not sure what those are. Some just clutching their tickets stressfully tight & waiting out every second. The ticket counter takes up one full wall to my right, with its snaking line waiting & several behind the counter grinding out tickets, information, a smile sometimes.

The wall to my left is lined with vending machines. Coffee, candy, soda, chips, even sandwiches. Pinball machine over there too, in the far corner.

Straight ahead is the entrance, a revolving door of sorts, with big picture windows on either side. Door so big you could travel through its spin in a wheelchair or with a stroller.

Windows are frosted cold, but no doubt a noisy bus or two is clutching & grinding to come & get going again. I feel in my pockets & seem to touch a sort of crumpled up ticket, making me wonder its "from" & "to." Will check, but maybe not yet.

No seats are opening up yet so I move with my bag toward those front windows. Long low ledge by each of them. Maybe OK for sitting. A girl & her dog occupy one. Half of one. Not knowing why, I go fill up the other half.

She looks poor, her denim old, not very warm-looking. Hair the color of soft-rust curls to her shoulders. Hungry-skinny. Feeds her dog from a plastic red cup that she then cleans out with a paper napkin & stows in her ancient-looking knapsack. I get nothing from her immediately, no curiosity or animosity or even indifference. It's almost like she doesn't know why she's here either.

Pull my black knit cap down a little more, button my sweater tho I discover my black pea jacket is missing buttons. Still, feel gloves in my pocket. It's all still forming. Like I'm still arriving from somewhere else.

She looks up at me now. Grabs my eye, holds on. "I am too."

"What?" I half-croak.

"Still arriving here."

I panic, then look down to see my notebook is in my lap, & what I'm writing is what she just read, & agreed to.

I nod.

"What's your name?" she asks. Taking a chance on me.

I shrug. "Guess I haven't arrived that much yet."

She smiles, cute, crookedly.

"You?"

She hesitates, pets her dog, a nice shaggy one, bet she'll keep him fed before her own self if need be.

"He's Benny." Pauses. "I'm Asoya Donna."

I blink.

"At least I think that's my name," she adds, genuinely uncertain.

"I'm. I'm really not sure mine," I said softly.

She nods, almost sympathetically.

We have barely one name between us. Plus Benny. So barely 2 for 3.

Benny is a collie, a black & white mongrel. Friendly to all, panting hopeful for food & touch. I feel often that way.

A robotic voice garbled announces that the next bus to Elliptical City is delayed by the blizzard. Asoya Donna & I both pull out our equally crumpled tickets, & realize in the same start that this is where we were both going to.

"You know it?"

"I'm not sure. You?"

She shakes her head. "What's an 'elliptical'?" she asks, nearly smirking.

"Something hard to know." I think. "Like most Bob Dylan songs!" She laughs but I'm kinda betting she's never heard of Dylan.

We sit quiet awhile, thinking I guess, not going anywhere soon. Weirdly, crowds keep getting off buses & coming in for the bathroom, or snacks, or to meet someone, or just to get warm. And other buses than ours keep arriving & loading up, & moving on. Asoya Donna seems peaceful but I'm less so.

I decide to know who I am better, so I unzip the pockets of my bookbag & start pulling out what I have for clues.

An old, worn, very tattered copy of a book called, I think, *Nazi Jailbait Bitch*. The front cover picture is worn to whiteness. Back cover gone. I read what it's called from the title page. No author listed. "Reprinted 1968 El Scripto Press" is all the rest it tells of itself.

Now a notebook, not quite as beat, thick with manuscript of some kind; old stickers plastered on its front: "*War IS Terrorism*"; "*We are the 99%*".

"*Labyrinthine*," reads Asoya Donna. "*A new fixtion*." She smiles at me. "Is that yours? Do you remember writing it?"

I open the notebook, & pick at random a page to read softly aloud, just for her & Benny, who listens quite attentively.

“The something hardly at all in me now. I’d spoken my question & been heard. There were no good answers. I was the demon, that’s what they called me, the one who’d destroyed the King & his Island Kingdom.”

We both start at this. “King”? “Island Kingdom”? I try again. Page along a bit.

“Kinley nods. ‘But I don’t think we should think of any of this as a linear prerogative.’

“‘Linear?’

“‘I mean, I don’t think things happen in an intended or intentional order here.’”

Hmm. I dig among other notebooks in my bookbag. Another weird one, covered in ads for valves, tube fittings, filters.

“6 x 36 Nocturnes,” she reads. Still spooked, I page along, hopeful.

“we make Art to remember
our truth, part leashed lightning,
part beloved tree, seeking ever
the wider sky, the deeper magick”

—OK, we agree. Better.

More & more crowd into the bus station now, & I move closer to Asoya Donna as an old man without ceremony drops next to me, bearded & hatted & heavy, many layers wrapped.

Curly brown hair lushes down from that old knitted cap. Bleary blue eyes, moustache thin & trimmed for all the bushiness below it. Snorts over & over like a cold or an addict. Holds his bus ticket in one hand & an old black & white photo in the other. A dapper middle-aged gent, suit & vest. Keeps reading the writing on the back. “Love sticks hard. We need to keep breathing.”

Suddenly a young woman, smiling, is standing before him, looking like all the world is his face. Long metallic red hair, bundled a little brighter than he is, blue eyes delighting in only him.

“Our bus is here. Come on!” & she offers both her hands to help him up & won’t let go as they go close through the revolving door.

Asoya Donna nudges me. “Ours too. Elliptical City.” We stand, gather our selves & Benny. Seems we’re going to travel together awhile. A good idea for three souls with barely two names between them.

We load up with the rest, getting our bags & Benny on board safely, & all the way to the back of the bus where there are three seats near the restroom. Will do fine.

Asoya Donna finds a newspaper among our seats. Once we’re settled, she decides to read to us.

“‘*Bags End News* #212. February 3, 1992. Editor is Algernon Beagle. King is Sheila Bunny. Written down by Lori Bunny,’” she reads the paper’s typewritten lines slowly, smiling.

I read the big headline below the masthead: “‘The Great Bunny Pillow Referendum!’” Feeling like all of

this is familiar, like a nearby world or a recent dream. Almost touchable, but not quite.

Benny lays across our laps like a warm, panting blanket. The bus suddenly starts up. The driver gets settled more in his seat, then speaks muffled into a microphone. Sounds like: “No smoking, no drinking, no drugs, we’ll be two hours into E.C., depending on traffic, weather. Let me know if you’re hot or cold, keep the phones & players to a dull roar.” There was more but his microphone descended into a crackling incoherency.

Asoya Donna is reading on in the newspaper, laughing quietly. When the driver stops talking, she reads aloud to me: “I would have made a terrible bunny. Not only is mah nosebone too big, but I am not brave enough.” We both laugh at this.

But the niggling feeling increases. The world ever nearing, the dream closer. Asoya Donna reads on in the newspaper but I strangely begin to doze.

Rain is what I feel first. A misty kind of rain. Open my eyes to whatever Dreamland this might be.

A hallway. And rain? Doors on both sides, every stretch or so. This is where?

I stand. Is still Dreamland? Or was that bus station the dream? Begin to walk along. Trying to remember.

Come to the end of the hallway & it’s sudden. A black drop below. OK. Now what?

I turn & look back down the long hallway. Is the rain lessening now? I don’t know. I start walking.

Then there is a sound . . . a *hmmm*? Far away but sure & steady. I hurry now. I take a chance & join in the *hmmm*.

Something . . . *something* . . . I hurry & *hmmm* more, try to *hmmm* deeper. A word now, a world, a dream, two words.

Oh, everything. This is *Bags End*.



To be continued in Cenacle | 114 | December 2020

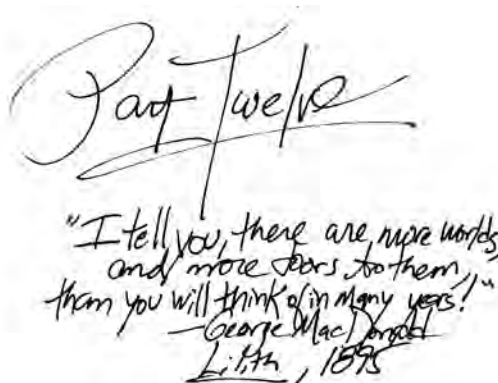
* * * * *



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine **[a new fixtion]**



ii.

“Sing true.
the way is dis-illusion.
I disbelieve in nothing”
—*Labyrinthine*, Part One, 2006

Notes on this book before me, white-faced pink cat radio on nearby. A familiar voice of sorts telling a story I vaguely listen to.

I am sitting in a coffeehouse from long ago, tis far away from here, & no more.

I listen. Abe the Ancient Sea Turtle cries, “Calgar-it is!” & Calgary the Sea Dragon says, “You shell of a guy!” Old friends reunited on the beach by the Deeper Deeper Sea.

This place was called Bauhaus & it was in Seattle for many years at a corner on Capitol Hill, not far from the downtown. The Space Needle is distantly lovely in view from this second floor mezzanine, wide windows all around—

I listen again & there is talk of the Islanders sitting on the porch of the hut near Abe. Four of them rocking peaceably.

Why back here now? This many years & miles later? This place is long gone, as good places sometimes go too. Its tall windows & tall bookcases & punkrock graffiti'd bathrooms & mostly friendly, relatively tame staff—

I listen again. Now he's telling of where were Algernon Beagle & Princess Crissy right now.

My beloved sitting with me, of course, with her thick book. I notice the only words on the back cover of this book are: "Some Eat Others."

Algernon Beagle walks through the door from Bags End into Imagianna, & up the golden-tinged green hills to Princess Crissy's Castle.

There was one barista, a man, shaven headed, shorter, but quite friendly, one to enjoy a sincere smile & a few friendly words. I bought a Bauhuas shirt from him one time.

Crissy's bestus buddy Boop hurries Algernon to Crissy's Secret Room, Red Bag in the back, & on through to Crissy's Riting Room, resembling her old apartment in the city—

I wrote so much of *Lx* here, hundreds of its early pages, & did not know how far in time & space I would travel away from it. I wish it was still there, tonight, its beautiful coffee punk rocking self—lots of '80s pop there too, some nights—

These few pages back here, there/here, then/now, lovely thought. The mezzanine shaped like a ship's prow, I always thought.

This visit I suppose is part of this month's boot camp I've created, to review many of my previously mentioned writing projects & learn better to mix them—one none many—

Crissy types on her Rite-Typer: **"I'm so happy my friend Algernon came to visit!"** but what appears on the page is: **"They were slooped through & tossed far!"** over & over on the page. How confusing! Algernon wonders if it's a message from someone else.

The bus I'm on is wavering in & out now, waking up?

I hear Algernon suggest that Crissy type: **"And they arrived to Princess Crissy's Riting Room."**

Oh, I'm falling back to that bus, through the lightly drizzling Bags End, to that bus, but I remember something I wrote about then, something I want also to revisit—

A rosy lit room
two armchairs
thin blue vase on table

"Donna! Reach in! Grab my hand!" I pull her in & in with me—



As the wise old Mr. Owl said in that Tootsie Pop commercial, “Let’s find out!”

Lick one: Bauhaus Books & Coffee, Capitol Hill, Seattle, lives on in this book, like other gone things, is open tonight, then/now, *fixtionalized, loved, & remembered new.*

Lick two: Bags End’s drizzle has let up, become now just a sweet coolness up & down its levels, along its many hallways. A cleanse, a renew, a come & a gone.

Lick three: Asoya Donna & I sit in the rosy lit room & I read her these new lines. She listens, smiles, nods, seems to enjoy. She is kind.

“I need to help you remember some things,” I say finally, having let this thought linger for mulling. *Crunch!*

She nods, smile now relieved.

I pull out every notebook in my bag. All I need are here. “This will take awhile,” I say.

“Good,” she replies, ready as can be.

I notice a small, lovely ivory hairbrush under her armchair’s legs, think it hers, lean over to pluck it up & realize too that Benny her dog isn’t with us. Not sure what this means, I wordless smiling hand it to her.

She holds it barely for a moment yet her study heavy upon it. Speaks very quietly. “I think I need your notebooks less. This talisman is my key.”

I start to pack up my notebooks then but she stills this as well. “Where are we?”

I look around at this little room. “I’m unsure. This room could be in the Ancienne Coffeehouse in the Village, or Coffee Time Coffee House in Portland, Oregon—”

“Or both?” Shade’s shade of a smile on her face. I nod.

“Are we ready to know?”

“I’m not sure.”

“What are you sure of, Raymond?”

I start, realizing we both now are sure of who I am as well as her.

“I’m sure you & your Brothers are far apart in space & time right now, & unclear the many reasons why, yet my feeling that you will near one another again.”

She nods. “And then?”

“I don’t know. Things tend away but sometimes return.”

“In new or familiar form?”

I nod now.



She brushes her long hair then, not because unruly, but because it is helping her remember. Each stroke a face, a place, a feeling.

I sit back, close my eyes, this armchair near as comfy as Algernon Beagle's on Milne's Porch.

The roseate light seeps in me & I wonder over this, tis warm & sweet, nearly *hmmms* along my skin, I sniff like Creatures & am overwhelmed by memory—

But what? No pictures, no words—is it even my memory of something else? Something very deep that I shallowly root in? Sort of but no, I *do* root deep, *all* roots deep; yet too, I am a young fruit on the far end of those deep roots, as liable to the capriciousness of sunny days as the brilliant braided bedding of the endless *humming* night. Close & far, both.

Open my eyes. My notebooks unpacked. Nod at Asoyadonna, who smirks me back. The work waits.

We walk out the green door now in that wall over there, one of I think too many walls, but the one with the green door & golden door knob—

Come I'm pretty certain somewhere deep in the spaces of the Ancienne Coffeehouse. I am holding Asoyadonna's hand & it feels like we will do this thing together—I don't know what that means quite—

"Find my Brothers?"

"Yes, that is what's next, isn't it?"

We're sitting in two old armchairs & from somewhere to somewhere a tattered old gent passes us by.

"Cosmic Early?" I mutter.

"Isn't it, Raymond?"

"Yes."

"But?"

"My friend Algernon Beagle once said to me, in his funny accent of course, 'more isn't better. More is more. Better is better.'"

She nods at me. She's dressed somewhat tattered ragamuffin, I reckon, but a leather vest over all that, & leather boots too make contrast.

Thinks a moment. Then talks slowly.

"You're hesitating even now."

"The game is laid out. I'm just unsure a bit."

"Unsure of what?"

"I've never written old or cowardly. Scared, melancholy, stupidly sentimental, but not old or cowardly."

"That's more a feel to things?"

I nod.

"Where do we go, Raymond?"

I gesture toward where the tattered gent Early went.

She nods. We stand up & go.

If my thoughts of how all is braided are to have bite in my own work, I have to trust these thoughts to lead me, lead my pen.

Asoyadonna's hand in mine as we hurry deeper into the Ancienne Coffeehouse, till now into the trees of the White Woods, ever glowing of all 7 colors & *hmmming* low—

She leads me now, a much sharper tracker, & we hurry for a long time, till the trees thin out & we are on the golden-tinged green hills of . . .

Imagianna? Tis.

She points him out far in the distance & we hurry after him. To spy his path? To speak with him? To join him? I never know too far ahead, when pen best jacked in—

We approach closer & then Asoyadonna touches my shoulder to pause & crouch together. We watch Cosmic Early approach the Castle of Crissy & Boop, pause, seeming confused. Twirl on his heel a number of times one way, then back the other way once. Swaying but maybe satisfied, he knocks on the Castle door & is let in.

“Do we follow there too?” she asks.

I want to nod & get moving again but hesitate.

“I’m not sure.”

We now sit cross-legged on the golden-tinged green grass of this fine, fantastical place.

The *hmmm* raises in my awareness now like to insist my attention.

I take her hand & we walk tentatively up to Crissy's Castle. The door a bit ajar, as though Boop & Cosmic Early in a hurry.

Push the door in & are arrived. A tall green & golden vestibule, walls sheerly high of glass & stone, yet a sense of water, nigh like falls?

So many corridors about us. I try to *hmmm*, to sniff, to even wonder a guess.

I stop cold & look at her.

She smiles friendly.

“We want to find your Brothers.”

“Yes.”

I nod. I know this Castle's a kind of Beast-friend of Crissy's & Boop's. Sometimes agreeable to favors. Take a breath.

“Crissy's Castle!” I call, friendly but firmly. “I wish to help Asoya Donna find her long lost Brothers. Heroes all! Would you lead us part of the way?”

My words fly from me, up, & up, arc long, now down & down, & land gently far. Then silence. Now we wait.

And nothing at first, awhile, a longer while, then something, then more so something than nothing, & then a path, something of a path, & more, like a come-hither now feeling. We smile each other & follow together, down one of the many hallways & come upon—

my Saturday black book bag, big enough for many notebooks, shoulder strap long enough for my long frame—

Chock full of my notebooks. OK.

Stride on, less slow & ambling at first, then becoming faster & blurrier, faster & blurrier, the hallway falling away, & returning, falling away & returning—

Reach my hand or hands or hundreds of hands out to Asoya Donna, feel a warm grasp in the blizzard of colors about me—

Swirl deepens, heightens, the *hmmm* kisses my cheeks & cackles merrily, & I realize I have to decide—

Have to decide—

Have to decide—

Have tangled gate
to decide—

Tangled Gate—

Tangled Gate—

Arc up, arc over, arc within, arc within, arc & arrive, arc & arrive—

Tis the Tangled Gate.

Tis the Tangled Gate?

I land. I stop. I crouch low, hold my book bag deep in my arms. Hold tight.

“It’s OK, Raymond. You can open your eyes safely. I promise.”

I don’t. Not yet. Unstable book.

So she hums a little tune she found salving me as we were, um, swirling here

“You got your night shades on
and the worst days are gone
So now the band plays on
You got one life, blaze on”

Phish song. Of course. No need to fear nothin’.

Open my eyes, tis Asoyadonna’s smile, tis her kind self leaning careful over me as I sit, fallen & crouched, on the strange soft ground near the entrance to the Tangled Gate. Bookbag in my arm like I’m rescuing someone from a burning building.

She offers her hand to me, & I shift bookbag in my still tight grasp to take it, to haul me up.

“You do that near as well as my beloved.”

Smirk. “Saw that in there too.”

Alright. Standing. Tangled Gate. Whatever it is, I’ve known of it some years now.

The Gate itself is dark & massive into the sky. On its front, up high, “for those lost” writ on it—a promise, a refuge, a new path? Gate’s covered in symbols, familiar to me & not so much. Sling my bookbag on my shoulder, walk over to look.

It hmms. Of course it does, I know that, have written it. Hmms deeply. Touch with both hands, close eyes, let it hmmm me.

A small funny voice sitting upon a small funny seat singing:

“No matter trouble big or small
You have a choice in it all.”

Hm. Not Phish this time but I like it too.

Small funny voice on small funny seat is quiet now.

“Is there more?” I ask.

“Your turn!”

I try an old one, just to see:

“By what softs & shines creation
I pledge myself to you.”

The small voice in the small chair listens, nods, & smiles. Smiles twice again, drifts gone.

Asoya Donna waits me over near the Fountain. I walk over slowly, wondering if this best how all this goes.

My bookbag of notebooks slung across my shoulder. I wrote in one of them a long time ago, “My notebooks. They matter. I love them as evidence for me that I exist. Whatever to others, I exist to me.” My emphasis at end.

Asoyadonna’s smile encourages me to take a drink of the Fountain’s bubbly water. Laced with LSD, like tis said of Iconic Square? Or just beautiful water in this strange, strange place, & a calming gesture just by its familiarity?

I sit on the edge of the Fountain.

“We need to go to the Cave of the Beast to find out what happened to all of you.”

She nods, unsurprised.

“Even then, we may not fully understand why.”

Another nod.

“What would you do if you collected them all together again?”

Silence a stretch. Then: “I’m not sure I can say right now. I’d like to know they’re all alive. Somewhere safe.”

“None of you was doing well near the end.”

“No.”

“Do you know who you are without them?”
 Silence. Longer. “I matter more with them. We did good to the world.”
 “You could again?”
 “I . . . think . . . so.”
 I nod. Dip my hands in full & drink. Laced? Or just pure?
 Shake my head of this. “OK.”
 I stand. “Let’s go.”



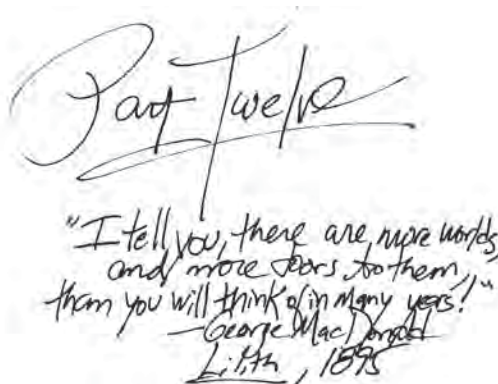
To be continued in Cenacle | 115 | April 2021



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine [a new fixtion]



iii.

I nod to Asoyadonna smiling & she chooses the left path past the Fountain. The Gate's walls of vines & stones are very high, telling nothing beyond them. The turns themselves are not always at right angles, so soon we are beyond knowing whence we've come.

Which is OK, since ahead somewhere is the Cave of the Beast, & that's where we're surely bound.

Asoyadonna grows quieter as we walk along. "You're right. We were all struggling last time we were here. It's like . . . this wasn't what we expected. What we traveled all those years to find. It didn't feel like victory."

"What did it feel like?"

She shakes her head uncertainly.

I stop. Look at her. "Think."

She sits down, leaning against the wall of vines & stones, head down, studying soft gold-tinged ground.

"We thought we would make it here & the way would be clear & simple once we made it. It wasn't. It was as strange & complex & uncertain as all the years getting here."

She looks at me straight, me now kneeled near her. "Saving the world happens ever after the choice. We didn't get this. Maybe we all do now."

I nod. "So it began here, then, rather than concluded here?" Neither of us need reply to this.

Now's my turn to come clean. "I wrote a version of your story. Your quest for the Island & the Tangled Gate all those years. "



She nods like knowing.

“What I wrote was based in part on very old myths of an Island Kingdom, a King, a Princess, a Labyrinth, a Beast.”

Nods me on.

I think, marveling to walk this utterly strange place, & to speak of it as I am, & to write this down as I speak.

“I never considered what happened to all of you. I simply knew you scattered, & the King long later returned to the Island. And then left again to war with the Mainland.”

Silence. But listening.

“I don’t know what we will find or learn in the Cave of the Beast.”

“Are we close?”

“I think so.”

“Need we weapons?”

“Those failed last time, didn’t they?”

“I suppose so.”

“We need to enter straight & true, humble & wondering.”

“The Beast will converse with us as we are able.”

“That was true last time. We proved very little able.”

“Just think of finding your brothers & serving the world.”

“Serving?”

“Less pressure? More likely?”

“I guess so.”

I nod & we come round a bend in our path to behold the Cave of the Beast.

“Like McKenna said, ‘don’t give way to astonishment.’”

“Who is McKenna?”

I enter the Cave first. Nothing ever what it seems here, or like any other time for guide. My bookbag slung firmly on my shoulder, Asoya Donna’s warm hand following me.

Always darker from outside than upon entering.

Her hand gone. I clutch my bookbag against any such taking. The glare unbalances me so I let myself clumsily find the ground beneath me. Warm earth.

Close my eyes tight. Begin to *hmmm* friendly despite this strange greeting. *Hmmm* deeper, friendlier & let go the rest of my senses as much as possible.

Something about me calms a little, lets a little.

A voice now, like a low strange tickle under my mind.

“Why do you do this? Devote yourself to this work like deepest obsession?”

“It’s what I do.”

“It’s not necessary.”

“It is to me.”

“*It’s not necessary.*”

“That’s what the Mushrooms say to me. Same answer to you. *It’s necessary to me.*”

Silence. I don’t open my eyes yet, or try my other senses, but I do stand up clumsy as I sat. And *hmming* again. Begin to walk, the hintest of a draft from further in.

Then I stop.

“Will you help me?”

“Help you?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“Nudge me when I stray. When I start to lose the thread some.”

“You permit me this relation?”

“I ask it, humbly. I want to write better now & hereafter better than I have. *More obsessively.*”

Nearly a laugh. Then silence. Enough of a yes to go by. But then suddenly:

“What happened to them all did not happen here. Continue along. Throw your dice & coins.

Keep that bookbag close.”

Now done. Whatever was, the Cave is murky & now seeming empty. I follow the draft toward the back. She’s ahead of me.

I sling my bookbag more securely on my shoulder & find myself in a dark tunnel, nearly dark for I can see something faint ahead, but I move slowly nonetheless.

“Donna?” I call out, quietly for some reason. No answer. Hm. Keep moving along.

Wondering how I can help really. Thinking more that I should bring Asoya Donna to those more knowing & powerful than me.

“Abe the Ancient Sea Turtle,” I say softly in the now velvety darkness. “I think I have in my bookbag something that will help us!”

“Donna!” I call again.

The Beast told me what happened to the Brothers did not happen in his cave. And I should toss my coins & dice.

I need then some more light, & a place to lay out my notebooks & tokens.

More light up ahead. I hurry despite.

Come out to what I am sure is the Great Cavern oft told in this book & related works—

I sort of find a corner among taller & craggier rocks, secrete into it, & pull off my bookbag.

This book of course. Poetry notebooks. *Bags End News* notebooks. A notebook of *Dream Raps*.

Yes, yes, but where?—ah—I unzip a sort of half-hid pocket & there are many little colored Secret Books! Pull them all out, over a dozen, wonder how deep this pocket can go—then look up & around

me & forget to wonder more—

Read how, on the Beach of Many Worlds below, Abe the Ancient Sea Turtle heard the story of Francisco the painter, one of Asoya Donna's beloved & long-lost Brothers, & how he traveled with a friend who posed as a White Birch for him to render on canvas, a very particular one he could not otherwise find, & how Francisco believed that this painting, once completed, would help the Brothers reunite.

Look up from my reading & there Asoya Donna smiling at me.

I read up to her as follows: “The Islander wanted to help so much & then, one night, they clustered & dreamed in a clearing; & the Islander encountered Benny Big Dreams who helped him become a White Birch in Dreamland, & then in waking; making sure he knew that, to turn back, he should shake all of his 6 branches at once—

“But the painting took awhile to do, & the Islander so enjoyed being a Tree, he forgot how to undo; done with the painting, Francisco wanted to show his Islander friend, & travel on, use the painting to find his Brothers; but no luck of this—

“Francisco had to help his friend first, so he traveled to find an answer; slept one night in a clearing under full moon—

“In Dreamland, Francisco came to a Village he had known before, & its Ancienne Coffeehouse; walks in & through its back to the White Woods—

“Distant whooshing, seemed of the Sea? Came out of the Woods at the top of what looked like these ancient wide stone steps afore a beautiful Sea; & down there on the beach rested peacefully what looked like a beautiful old Sea Turtle!

“Francisco made his way down the stone steps, slowly, uncertain, & came up to the Sea Turtle, larger than him & then some—

“He was dozing peaceful but waked to Francisco's approach; told of his friend the Islander—now tree—showed the painting he had slung on his back, which the Sea Turtle admired—

“Francisco wearied & sort of tucked into the Sea Turtle's flippers' grasp, & they drowse to the *whoosh-whoosh-whoosh* of the Sea—

“The Sea Turtle waked him to find the Tree Islander is right near by! Near a small hut which had rocking chairs on its porch—

“Go find your brothers, Painter, & return to find your friend after; I will tell you where if he goes—

“Francisco hugged the Sea Turtle, & the trunk of his friend, & hurried back up the Stone Steps—”

“To where?” she asks, nearly tangled with me eager wondering.

I double check, paging back & forth in the Secret Book. “No. Nothing more.”

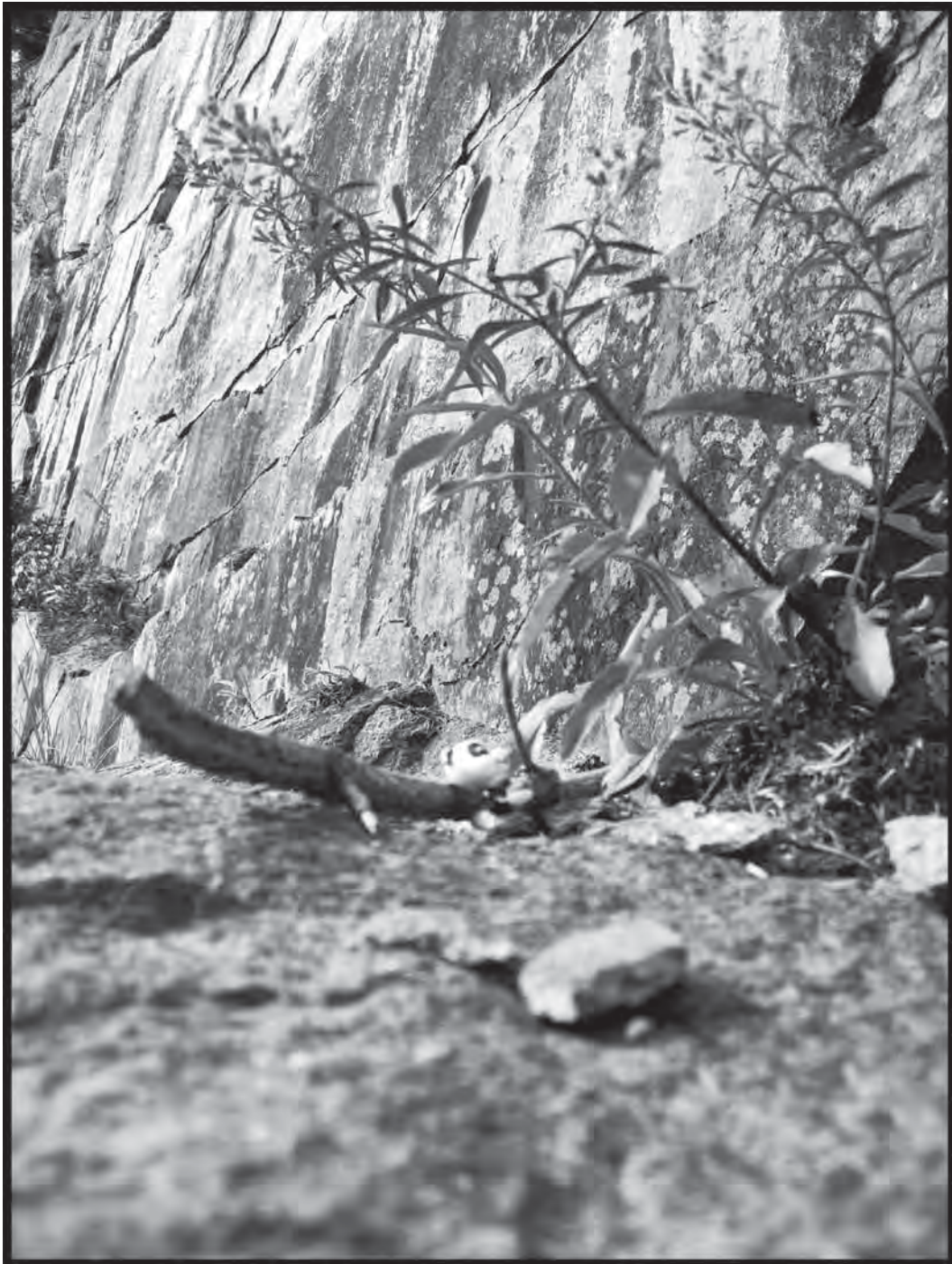
“Should we go to that Beach?” she asks, now sat with me among the rocks.

I page back & forth. “It's a Beach of Many Worlds, located by the shore of the Deeper Deeper Sea, below the Deep Deep Sea.”

“Can we get there by the Village like Francisco did?”

“Would your Aunt be able to help us?”

“She smiles. “I haven't seen her in a long time.”



Now I get down to work. Pull out many notebooks from my bookbag, seems an impossible number, yet all in good shape.

Asoya Donna sort of arrays them around me. Now my blue-green coin purse. Its coins & dice & various trinkets. Two little clocks. A very small radio.

“We’ll let all this guide us.”

She nods.

“Not every book operates like this,” I smile bashfully.

“This one does,” she smiles plainly.

I nod.

Toss coin & dice, slowly shaping what will guide, effect, nudge, from past lines. Toward new coming.

Calculate by numbers & coin sides & flipping pages, make my notes in the margins of this book, mutter noises as I figure.

Then I nod. Smile. Stand. Get all my notebooks put away in my bookbag, again marveling at how many pockets, & how they all slip in smoothly, big & small.

Smile at Asoya Donna who’s now standing again too. Looking question at me.

I close my eyes & count down. “6 . . . 5 . . . 4 . . . 3 . . . 2 . . . 1!” & there is somewhere ahead of us a wild cackle. Strangely, not in the big open center part of the Great Cavern, but off to one side, leading us to stay half hidden in the rocky perimeter. Soon, a half-blocked tunnel, & we pick our way through its entrance slowly, crawl & climb & shove, till through the blockage, the air chilly & moving as we stand & start right in to chase—

Tis an Imp we pursue, of course, & I am certain she will lead us without our catching her, or perhaps even getting much sight of her—

The tunnel’s breeze blows harder & colder. Her occasional gleeful cackles sort of shimmer back to us, echoes playing with echoes. Still we follow steadily—

Till strangely come out to the open world again. Nighttime. Full moon over all & far dusting of stars—

Tis a desert. Flat, cracked, reaching far ahead of us—the Imp’s cackles distant, then more rarely, yet do not seem to diminish further—has she stopped somewhere—

We hurry to catch her & I notice that this is no usual kind of walking—more a swift sliding along—not Imp skittering speed but we still get there dreaming fast—

Where—tis the ancient shack of the small exotic man with few teeth to impede his wild bray of laughter with his dear old Imp friend—

Setting upon his krinkly brown hand, cackling back & forth with him—gnattering hi & low—like the whole world is laughing madly together—maybe wish it was—

The little man is curled around a strange stool, almost like a vine wrapped around a treebranch, strange

brown cap upon his bald pate—

Asoyadonna & I sit together with our backs against the shack—itsself being more a living cave of a structure than not—

I slip out this book & check my notes—“I think we’re bound for Wytner,” I say, somewhat sure—

She nods. Smiles at the Imp & ancient man’s delights.

“Is the Village Wytner?” I ask.

She starts, stares me. “It could be.”

I nod. Sometimes that’s the best answer possible.

“But maybe not always,” she continues.

I nod again.

Finally the cackling & braying have sort of wound down. The two sort of remember us & want to tend our plans.

“We need to see my Aunt,” Asoya Donna explains.

More cackles & brays, but still paying attention.

She stands. I stand. We wait to see what next.

The exotic little man, Imp still & again on his gnarled little palm, begin to point in a certain direction. Seems no more likely than any other, but their gnattering tunes up & gestures that-a-way. The exotic little man does some kind of dance, graceful & beguiling, near like a strange tree wavering in its own wind, the fruit of one Imp upon its furthest branch—on & on & on—

“Look!” Asoya Donna points to the cracked desert floor. I see nothing more than this but she urges me *relax, relax, look—*

Cracks . . . cracks . . . then not so much, now . . . um . . . symbols . . . of some kind!

Stretching far away . . . in the direction they were gnattering & dancing & pointing to . . . far away beyond sight . . .

Asoya Donna is dancing too, her own kind of graceful tree in her own kind of breeze—

I join in, clumsy at first, but find my Phishy groove & *yes, they are there* . . . I could stop dancing now but choose not to . . . this is a better way to get there . . . *far* better . . .

We move in that direction, following the flickering but sure symbols along, waving briefly back at our strange & lovely little friends . . . they gnatter & bray & cackle & dance their well wishes . . .

“This feels more” I say quietly, mostly to myself.

Asoya Donna turns to me, with a brilliant, beautiful, smiling nod—

We dance on—

I get to wondering what it would be like to unite Asoya Donna & her brothers, & what they might do if united—

“We’d travel together again,” she says suddenly, “like all those turns back when.”

“Doing what?”

“What we did together. We did good. We solved trouble. Helped out in crisis. We showed what was possible.”

“Would it work?”

“Of course it would.”

“What if it was a kind of great crisis again?”

She stops fully. “What do you have in mind?”

I shrug.

“Tell me.”

“You could travel to the Heart of the World.”

“Why?”

“I’m not sure.”

She nods. Starts walking again, quiet.

“I think it would somehow complement what happened before.”

She nods again.

“But you’d not let yourselves become separated again. You’d know it could happen.”

Stops again. “We failed. We were separated. Yet somehow the world went on. What sense in all that?”

I gaze her humbly. “I don’t know yet.”

We walk on, hands lightly twined, approaching the Village, Wytner, one or both—

“Did you find anything else in all those notebooks to help us?”

“Lotta sweat. Sadness. Uncertainty.”

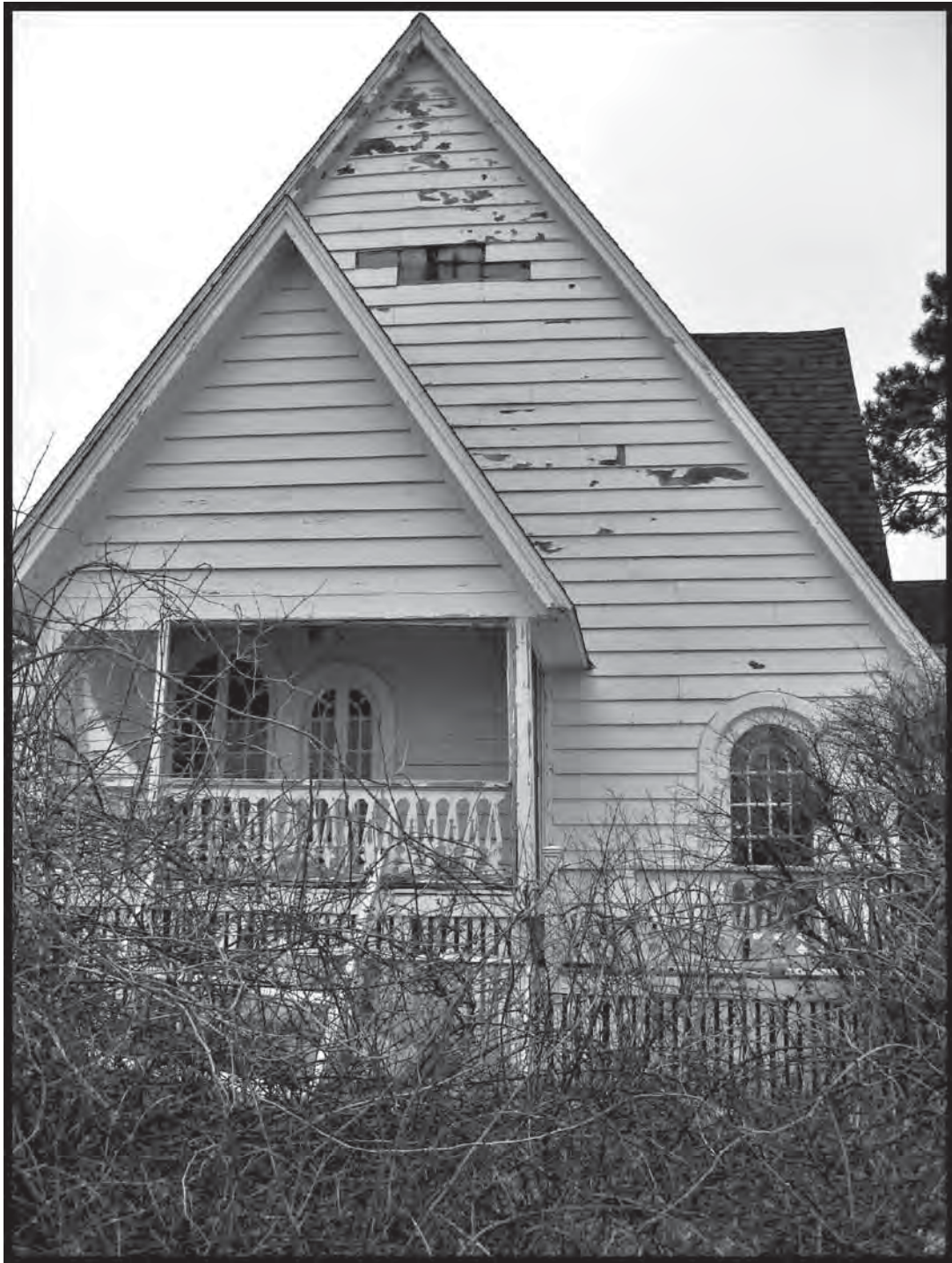
Nods.

I close my eyes, hoping this blends well into our travel. “I wrote something like, ‘I most want to write elaborate plots that travel everywhere & criss-cross & play out strange & true.’”

We both laugh.

“And, ‘a book should live by its mystery.’” Nods.

I leave trying to find, & just now *hmming*, long & low & deep, lift up & into it now, deep breath, another, third, then let breathing go too—



The man mumbles again into his curled form. "Gate-Keeper said must go down deeper! Follow the Thread!"

"He told me that! 'Follow the thread!' I wrote it in *Labyrinthine!* Where is my bookbag?" I cry.

Both women look back to where I gesture, but seem to see nothing. I am scaring them so ease up for now. Lay back & feign great exhaustion. They mumble to each other that I need rest, tuck me in again, somewhat unnecessarily, & blow out all but one candle. Depart.

Even in the flickering shadows of a single fat little candle, I know he remains.

Quiet a long stretch. I must outwait him because he says more directly to me, "You said to nudge you when you stray. Or lose the thread some."

"Have I? Am I?"

"The world is your gift."

"And Art is my answer."

"You wrote that a long time ago."

"I know."

"You think it helps to remember as you have been compelling yourself to do? Write endless notes?"

"I don't know. Yes. Maybe."

"Your work is now. Your work is ahead."

"I know."

"We make Art because we have forgotten how to tell the truth."

"I wrote that long ago too."

Silence.

"What then?"

"Time is not singular.

Time is not linear.

Time is not primary."

"Yes. OK. *That too.*"

"You know the way ahead without these crutches of old words."

"I like those words. They remind me of my path from & to."

Silence.

"You'll come again if you need to."

"Is your pen moving across paper? Black ink, white paper?"

I nod.

"The more it does, the less reminder you'll need. *Your pen & paper is your thread.*"

Candle flickers out. He's gone.

I don't move to get up. Very quiet here. I feel the Bears *humming* very softly to me, a kind of lullaby to comfort me.

Time is not singular
 Time is not thean
 Time is not primary

Those words spoken many turns ago by Daniel the Famous Traveler. I consider him a moment. He I mostly tell about in the Travelers or Creatures Tales. Will he appear in this book again too, as part of this current story?

I don't think so. But I guess never can tell either. I hope my bookbag is nearby.

Lingering still, not fully awake now, but not loosed to dreaming either. Feeling like I do not wish to leave this peaceful darkened chamber till I've got something to go by.

Thinking lingers on Daniel the Famous Traveler, on his current explorations, with many others, of the many Braided Paths, braiding among the many worlds, & I remember something about this, something I often remember & forget both—

There is an indigo trace—
 through the Dreaming—
 a way to travel purposefully—

Is this a kind of shortcut? If one travels the many Braided Paths through the many Braided Worlds by waking, is the indigo trace by Dreaming a shortcut from one place to another?

I don't know. It does not seem possible to harness all these strange ways at once, or maybe even advisable.

I'm strangely reminded of how there are different flavors one cannot enjoy simultaneously.

Chocolate is this. Cheese soup is that.

Or try to watch a favorite movie while blasting your favorite song on the radio.

Kissing & reading.

"Remembering everything but lightly," he says, back again to nudge me some more it seems.

"No, you did write that, but it's good advice for you now, not a nudge," his smirk clear in the darkness.

"Any more of my nuggets to hurl upon me?"

"The way is dis-illusion?"—now we're both laughing. He leaves through the door this time, though, I'm fairly certain, still unseen.

I allow myself to drift awhile, finding myself sitting in a beautiful park bordered by trees so tall they disappear into the clear blue sky above, still sort of curled among my lovely blankets, my bookbag with me, many notebooks brung out & arrayed around me—many sleeping men arranged around this park, on benches like works of art—blue-tinted seashells, mahogany cabinets with glowing cushions, even a

bench like a foamy shore wrapped cozily around its grubby guest—

I hear strange voices in the distance, gather blankets & notebooks in my bookbag & make to follow, strangely curious—

Among the trees I follow no path but my intense hark, feeling myself making along swifter than steps—

Seeming now along an ocean's shore, running & running, urgent, desperate?

On the water I see strange white bubbles, gigantic, bobbing along, menacing & somehow familiar—continue my hurried lope toward the voices, strangely no nearer, yet now indeed approaching what seems a seaside town, set up in the nearby hills—

I walk, float, up the hills, past people dressed in the formal Sunday wear of Victorian England—hats, scarves, umbrellas, jackets, & the like—

People nod to me, greet smiling as they pass—I come to a great green-domed building with long wide steps up, like a town hall?

Enter, compelled, but sort of falling as I'm walking, kind of disappearing while arriving, is it a party? Is it a surgery?

Swish & swirl as I push open a great grey door & feel thunder all around me—tumble through & through & through—

Caught in the large, soft flipper of yes surely so Abe the Ancient Sea Turtle, who catches me sure & holds me close, till I notice another friend in his tender grasp—

A fine friendly freckled froggily frocked fellow named Aloishuis Nilliwishus—Willy Nilly, of Creature Common.



To be continued in Cenacle | 116 | June 2021

* * * * *

Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Twelve

"I tell you, there are rare words,
and more stars to them
than you will think of in many years!"
—George MacDonald
Lith, 1895

iv.

I was 43 years old in 2007, first year this book crossed my birthday. Lived on the other side of the continent. Before *Dream Raps*, before *Travelers Tales*, before *Bags End News* fully revived. Before the Tangled Gate, before the vast mythopoeia now arisen.

This book was more like the earlier ones then, has become & become over time more, deeper, better. But tis also like a road, not better or worse, simply further along.

Means much, means little to say so. "It's all one song!" is what Neil Young once shouted back at a heckler, with reckless & well-earned pride.

Could I have guessed this 15th time this book has crossed my birthday? That it would happen, maybe. The world it would be? Not really.

But, then again, the world of this book, these ongoing pages, is a safe one for me. Tis familiar. This book is a handwritten affair, tho many only ever see it typed up neat & published in *The Cenacle*. Occasionally, a tidbit from these actual pages.

Likely fewer saw this book's pages in any form in 2007. A curious thing to toy with, this thought, but not one to do much with.

These pages are what they are neither because of nor despite readers of them. Which is not to say unfriendly to them, but more to say they are like two kids playing catch in an empty field. They do what they do, be there any kind of audience or not.

In truth, this book is too deep down in me for the world to be a primary concern. A secondary one, sure, but primary? No.

So why the extended riff on this topic then? Because I wonder, rarely but do, why I am different. Someone told me recently every other writer values book sales & regard.

Book sales? *Labyrinthine*? That makes me laugh. Regard? Maybe such a thing is nice but my fear is that it sets an expectation. I do this work because I love doing it, & it is my greatest passion. But I cannot say the plan, or promise anything one way or another. Best to share work, as I do, but neither expect nor hope for more than a passing compliment.

Funny topic to drift through, especially when Abe & Willy Nilly patiently await me.

They would not exist if I hadn't focussed my entire, obsessive attention on Art & Art alone.

They entertain me, & I them to a degree. That's my glad preference.

Neither better nor worse, just mine, all this, as the world comes & goes, shifts & shifts & shifts again. Another birthday, so glad of this book!

"Is it time to toss your coins & dice, Son?" asks kindly Abe the Ancient Sea Turtle. *Oh yes. Narrative.* OK.

I look around at this strange beautiful place. Let me say more about it now.

A beautiful sandy beach running both ways forever, is this Beach of Many Worlds. Tis at the shore of the Deeper Deeper Sea, yonder, dive in there & deeper down, or better yet make good friends with Calgary the Sea Dragon, & you will come to a dry cave, a long tunnel, & if your travels go well, or Calgary brings you, you will arrive to the Great Tree at the Heart of the World. And nearby the Hut by which one can travel to & from Unitive Time.

Up there, those clouds, what not quite visible above them? The bottom of the Deep Deep Sea. Calgary again a help in traveling through. Up, up, & come to the surface of the Wide Wide Sea!

Near us is a hut with a porch of rocking chairs, & also a beautiful White Birch. Past & hence a fellow. A White Birch because helping a friend.

I start. Oh yes. "Is Assoyadonna here around?" I ask Abe, & I guess Willy Nilly who I notice comfortably tucked in the grasp of one of Abe's flippers.

Abe shakes his head. "Not right now."

I think. "Has Francisco been back for his friend?" Pointing to the White Birch.

Abe shakes his head.

I sit on the sand. *Hmmms*. Deep colors in it. Beautiful, more than my casual notice.

"Is this narrative about finding & uniting the King & his lost Brothers, or what they do when united?"

"Are you unsure?"

"Both interest me."

"What then?"

Abe's expression is ancient & kind. His is the age of every upward rather than a kind of curling decay.

Willy Nilly in his grasp is green & freckled & crooked smile charming. They wait.

"I know they are all far in time & space from each other. The Beast told me this scattering wasn't his doing, & did not happen in his Cave."

"What slows you then?"

I shrug.

The air is cool here, very clear.

"Do you know?"

I shake my head.

"Time to throw the dice & coins?"

I nod. My bookbag is nearby, now if not before, & so I start to unpack my notebooks, & also dig out my blue-green coin purse.

Willy Nilly sort of hops from Abe's grasp to among my doings. His charming smile & he wants to help. OK.

I offer my hand for Willy to hop up on for better conversation—he agreeably does—

"What do you Creatures know about the Brothers?" I ask.

He smiles even wider, sniffs agreeably.

I think. "They all know you Creatures. What I'm struggling to know is what happened to them in the Tangled Gate & what they would do if reunited."

"Why?" Willy asks friendly.

"Why?" I reply.

He nods, paw on his chin listening.

I close my eyes a moment, feel the lavishly soft air here, maybe because between two living oceans? the *whoosh-whoosh-whoosh* of the Deeper Deeper Sea so close.

"I want to tell a really good story. Straight & true as I can."

Willy smiles like this makes sense.

"Time for dice & coins?"

I nod. "This mythopoeia best helps itself along."

I arrange my little trinkets in a circle & roll the dice & toss the coins until I come up with a list to draw from. Ranges from work of 2020 or so, on back, toward 2000, lots of years in between—

I'm crouched on soft musical colorful sand near Abe, who half-dozes waiting. Willy Nilly is nearby too, paw on his chin, Creature-style thinking.

Finish, smile low & high at them as I pack my trinkets back into my bookbag.

"Ready!" I pronounce.

They nod & smile happy.

Then I happen to look far down this endless Beach of Many Worlds, & here comes Asoya Donna!

I hop up & rush to hug her. Her smile cheery as the unseen sun above.

We return to Abe & Willy Nilly & form a kind of circle of very small to very large, but a friendly group for certain.

They wait for me. I close my eyes & we reach to touch, & they soon join my *hmmmm* invite.

I find myself drifting back to that moment when I found myself waking up in the Pensionne but for a lingering moment I had thought it was Clover-dale—old armchair in a wooden room—ceiling of stars above—

Barely aware of where I am sitting, *actually* sitting, I try to *hmmm* an image to my friends, of this wooden room, & the words, or at least their sentiment: *wait for me*.

Open my eyes, or the ones I have in this strange vision, & this time I am indeed in Clover-dale—

And it feels real despite all—Clover-dale wanted me to return—whatever this means—

And for a lingering moment, I stay unmoving in this old armchair, its soft cushion beneath me, equally plush pads on its arms. Kindly? No. I project too much. I want everything in the world to be kindly. Isn't.

Look up to ceiling of stars & they seem much nearer than stars usually are. Like Clover-dale is speeding through deep space. Like a Space Tugboat or those *Star Trek* guys?

But, again, no menace in this. Spaceship, or house, or somehow both, nothing to intimidate or chase in this.

This room feels *longer* than it ought, *deeper* or something. Like it is oddly stretched—distorted somehow—

Am I here to help? Am I summoned? To learn, perhaps tell the full story here?

I lean back in my chair. *No*, I think, *that's not it*.

Speak now: "If you want me to help, let me know how." Remember Algernon Beagle had good luck here, politely asking.

Wait. Nothing. Hmm. Figgers.

Wait some more.

"I can wait a long time for you to respond. Or I can try to shake myself out of this," I warn mildly. "But I would rather help if you need it."

Long wait. Near dozing, I hear a hidden cackle.

I suspect tis an Imp, & among those many bookshelves lining the walls. Hopeful her game plays a part in all this, not just random shenanigans, I begin to hunt high & low among the volumes, led on by her cackles, no pattern of a path to them, but keep on—

They stop me as I alight on a slender volume, looks old & well-worn, just at my eye's level.

Knowing she is gone, I pull out the volume. Its worn title:

NHWS () JGS
[For K]

New Songs [For Cassandra] is the title page within. *Oh*. These are *my* poems, written as a sequence of short poems, long ago, as a kind of wedding gift for my beloved. Not of my knowing ever an *actual* volume but the home-made copy I gave her.

Why this? Clue? I open up curiously.

Page after page I read with a kind of wondering dismay. *These are not my poems*. One after the next. Not. Oh there are lines here & there I recognize. Not that I have them all memorized but they do not *feel* like *my kind* of expressions. Or just fragments mixed with foreign matter.

I try to study just one example & figure out what I *think* I *mean*.

Copy it out here, right into this

[This is where the secret
is more hinted at, right in
the middle of this sentence
unknown to the author on
either side of these brackets
listen—

[There are mysteries in this
book, these related books,
yet fully unearched, maybe
or maybe not to be revealed.

[Who am I? An iterate,
in other, an old preacher
friend from somewhat green
years, wishing to join
new in this game.

[The reaching back to older
pages & times has its effects;
noticed is changed, science
says so.

[The more confuses & vice
throws & flip-flopping through

old pages, the more the books
change this & the other ones.

[Not meant as a warning, this,
but more a heavy observation
of what's pending. You see,
it's like that crazy guy in
the woods says to me that
one time, "See, time runs only
one way, but the heart doesn't."
That's what jacks us up some-
times. But sometimes just
shows our pots far more interesting
finished with a smile.

[Just watch this happen &
 see what comes. Maybe I'm
 that guy in the wheel chair
 keeping watch, who knows for
 sure. Ask him? He'll just
 knock together a new voice,
 new face, same, different,
 but never give the answer.
 Get back up, before he
 notices...]

Labyrinthine, pulled from my bookbag. My own notebook of *New Songs* I cannot find. Right now, here, there's only this one.

*Ruins revive in a dream,
 a war-burnt monastery,
 its crowded char of ancient palms,
 a century or two ago,
 or maybe hence, a silence
 here in the worst leavings,
 no time here before the war,
 its cries & flames, a solitude
 here that believes no companion
 possible. On the ground, seeming
 baked into the frozen mud,
 a fragile necklace of blue shells,
 sole feeble argument for life's remain.*

Not my poem. I know, I know, I just copied it out here in this, my book, from that, a book alleging to be mine. But no, I did not write it.

On I guess a whim, after paging on through to the end with like results, I return to the title page:

New Songs [for Cassandra]

it says *now*. Oh. Um. Well. Why the Imp led me to this book, how it helps Clover-dale, if any way at all—I tuck it into my bookbag—

A voice: "Imagine, if you will, two great wheels. Two great wheels that form your entire universe." It's coming from near that armchair I was sitting in. I hurry over, still listening. "And they are turning, each towards the other, in towards the center & down. Where these wheels mesh, all that you know is both *revealed & in motion. This is your world.*"

I sit back down, now seeing the white-faced pink cat radio on the weird game-board on the side-table. The voice is soft, measured, Scottish. Humorous, a little, in tone, intelligent, easy to lose into.

"Now, please imagine that you were, in fact, mistaken. There are not *two* wheels, but an *uncountable* number of them. And they enter from, & mesh at, every conceivable angle & dimension. And they are of every conceivable . . ." I fall into a light doze then, in whatever this all happens to be.

I feel movement all around me, a steady shaking movement, & open my eyes to find myself in the back seat of a Greyhound bus! *Oh!* Hm.

My black sneakers are worn, & I feel ragged & looser like long years ago—*is this the bus I was on with Asoyadonna not long ago?*

No. It's grittier. It feels like memory. I see I am writing with an old black pen in an old notebook:

*I haven't found my home yet so
I keep looking harder & the more
it eludes me the more it seems
I am nearing it*

Oh. *Things Change?* [A New Fixtion]. Check further. 6/9/2002. Chicago to Salt Lake City bus. *Why the fuck?* Dice & coins, yah, but still, I'm in Clover-dale! Was reading a fake version of poems I wrote in 2005! *How is this helping with the current narrative?* I am speeding, again, to heartbreak & poverty on the West Coast. *What to learn in this?*

I slow my plaint to read these pages anew, how this book imprisoned itself to my life's struggles out there, how I kept writing it even after I lost for a long while Luna T's Cafe, & Rich Americus, & Rebecca, & Dr. Arnold T. Knickerbocker, & all the rest—it was just recorded sadness of struggling days—I tried to make it good still—

If no longer good, these pages witnessed then, & remember me now.

Then some kind of tussle in my bookbag? *What this?*

Out pops a Secret Book, almost like flung up into my hands! Upon my catching, the bookbag quiets down again, as though no-tussle-never-twas.

OK, I hold this Secret Book in my hand now, which I did not learn of till some years later than this seeming 2002 bus ride—was about 6 years later—

This one, chunky like a fist-sized brick, orange cloth cover decorated by various colored long leaves—its colored pages within stitched to its binding—is the current volume, begun November 2020, so long past this bus ride—

Yet it tussled up to me & so I check my dice & coins notes in *Labyrinthine*—yes, Vol. 18 on my list. OK.

I try to page through it for clues but the words are murky—what of this then?

Am I still on Abe's Beach with himself & Willy Nilly & dear Asoya Donna? Or back in the Pensionne with Donna & her beloved Aunt?

Is it too gritty here for *hmmming*? I think. OK. Got it.

Pull out from my old green windbreaker jacket my Walkman & headphones of that time. No Polly iPod yet.

Don the headphones, click the *play* button, will disguise my *hmmming* as listening to music.

Groovy jamband sounds, like recorded from an audience. Oh, this is one of my *Voice Journal* volumes, a time when I snuck my Walkman into a show!

Listen . . . Strangefolk at the Avalon in Boston. About June 2000? OK. Sure. Volume on low, I let this pretty music engage me just enough as I close my eyes & start to *hmmm*. Holding dear to the Secret Book as well.

Now the music louder, beyond my headphones. I open my eyes to discover myself sitting, Secret Book still in hand, at the bar of Luna T's Cafe!

I find myself looking up beyond the back of the bar to the old Dümönt TV up in the corner. Seems to be black & white or color by its own choosing. Right now, the former.

My headphones still on grooving jamband sounds from ago, I watch the images come into focus. I'm guessing this program is *TripTown* as so often here. Looks like Abe the Ancient Sea Turtle's Beach of Many Worlds up there!

And there is that lovely Abe himself, sitting peacefully near that strange hut with the rocking chairs on its porch, & the pretty tree growing nearby.

Not just Abe. Also that small little charming Froggy Creature fellow called Willy Nilly. Finely freckled & frocked to boot.

Willy Nilly is sitting on the soft paw of that dear Asoyadonna! Smiling friendly & I notice all of their attention is on a handsome bearded fellow standing near the pretty tree, a White Birch, before a canvas on an easel. Is that Francisco the painter, one of Asoya Donna's long lost Brothers?

Isn't his painting done? *What is going on here?*

Two large hands distract me by gently removing my headphones.

Twinkling blue eyes. None other could be. James T. Michael Reality III.

“Say guy!” he smiles friendly.

I do the only thing I could possibly do & slip off my barstool to give my dear old friend the deepest most loving hug I am able. He hugs me back, of course, maybe less panicked over his affection for me, & our ability still to meet up these many years by his passing.

He friendly gets us onto two adjacent barstools—Mr. Bob the barman has Jim’s mug of stout & my diet cola before us in a smooth swish—

“How are things among the stars?” I ask, at least half-serious.

Jim sips deeply, enjoys, but also mulling my words.

“I miss the world back there sometimes. My kids, you. Smoking weed out at the old Reservoir.”

“Weed’s getting legal everywhere.”

He twinkling smiles.

I tell him some of my travels in these pages, read him a passage or two. Smiling. This an old, dear pleasure of ours.

He sips deeply again, still in thought. “So you stopped by here for some grounding, & some remembering?”

Sip my own drink. “Yes, but not all. I don’t want this place, or you, to be just sentiment. I want to carry you along, find that way.”

He nods. Mr Bob ready to get him a refill but he shakes off. “Later.” Nods to me to follow him into the band-room.

Nobody is around. We sit at Rich Americus’s & Rebecca’s little table neath the front window. Jim’s guitar in hand, & a notebook pressing out of my bookbag. *Oh right.*

Jim leans comfortably forward in his chair, his bulky frame sort of wrapped lovingly around his playing. No song in particular—just roaming.

OK, check my notes, coins, dice, all that, open up that notebook, & begin to read bits of what I find—

And because Jim, his guitar, Luna T’s, I let other words come along too—

“Universe, I am asking again for help, for strength, for the best of what’s left in me—for strength to love the Beast & share the hour—to let grip on knowledge & clutch for wisdom give way—ever give way—”

Jim plays in & under & through my words, finding gaps & harmonies & where to twist word & note together into something *blooming new*—

I read & speak & sing some more, eyes sometimes open, sometimes wide shut—

“Reck the countless drummers & their dancers crying up the dust!

*“Shout ‘beguiled!’ again & again & fall deep anew into the desert—
Urge them all dance, all drum this word—
crush it to sparkles & blow laughing away!”*

I stand, nudge & push Jim from his seat, shout to him to play with me—

*“High on labyrinth!
endless desert!
to go!*

*“High on labyrinth!
endless desert!
to go!*

*“High on labyrinth!
endless desert!
to go!”*

He shouts it with me strumming the pretty chords & the dirty ones alike—

I half blindly grab another phrase—*“Love’s long blind reach into the dark”*—we sing it & play it again & again till we are collapsed on the floor—

He takes my notebook, pages back & forth a bit, then half-sings in his beautiful voice: *“What remains of the years I sing & call my Art.”* Hands me back my notebook. Nods & smiles like me *goodbye for now.*

I stand, offer to help him up. He shakes me off, smiling. Has a baggie of joint fixings for his pleasure. Rolls a good one.

I lean down & grasp his big shoulder.

I walk out the side entrance of Luna T’s Cafe to—*where?*

Thinking while switching pens—from my oldest school black pen to the I guess next oldest school one—neither are made anymore—

Walk out—to *where?* I know what’s next—the coil of it tightening in my mind—*readying—nearing—*

Sitting in a cushy old armchair I’ve sat in many times before—my beloved’s kin’s farmhouse on the High Plains—her old bedroom—this book has travelled through here before—not been since before the Pandemic—on either side—back again—

My dear one Polly iPod nearby—*oh deeper into it*—her playing Volume III of my *Voice Journal*—from back in August 1999—walking Boston with my also dear one Ciccone—I think we’re high on shrooms—this old content in my ears I’m passing from a bin of old cassettes, now digitized to MP3, bound for SpiritPlants Radio in some enigmatic form—

We'd been grad students together for two years—drunk & tripped & dived deep into each other's lives & Art—

I think he's going into a store for chewing tobacco—I was there—I can hear it—I've been here in this chair before—

We're chawing tobacco together—new to me—

Is this *to where*? A night 22 years ago & 1500 miles from here? With this old poet friend? Is *to where* also this armchair? Do these braid well? A quiet bedroom in a High Plains farmhouse & two friends tromping a late night Eastern city?

The narrative pending is the Six Brothers—*now capitalized?*—& how they reunite—how this involves the Creatures & the Gate-Keeper—& what else I could not guess—

Ah, I just learned that night I was drunk as a skunk, as I recorded it. Last night we drank at that apartment of his. He moved while I was away at Burning Man 1999. I was sentimental for the two years we visited in that apartment.

Present moment now lunch.

All these things dance friendly in my mind.

Day & a night pass, again it's morning, armchair, now King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band on Tabby, another electro-friend with music—*what then?*—

The Tangled Gate mythopoeia began, or came together, in 2012, & the Six Brothers were not the primary focus. Twas the Princess. The Creatures were also not primary. These many mixtured in a different way from what's to tell now, & yet what's to tell now is more story for them all—

My desire is toward a continuance—rather than a completion—I desire all of their stories go on—this has been true of the Princess, & of the Creatures, but not yet of the Brothers—

I filled in the Brothers' individual stories up to their joining up to find the Tangled Gate, but then scattered them, & left it there. Eventually, this felt . . . incomplete. *Why not re-unite them?* Isn't *saving* the world as much *protecting* & *preserving* the world? Took me this long to get to this simple, good idea.

But, how? What happened to them in the Cave of the Beast? Tis now come known that their scattering was *not* by the Beast's doing, nor did it happen in that Cave. Leaves big questions of *where? what? how? who? why?*

OK then. *To where?*

To there. Ready.

[None other but sing true, 15 years of this book, & all its dark & dancing days, its passing & its staying hungers, what it meant, what it fierces still to mean—

[None other but sing true & how the singer & the song ever strive for what this is, what it might yet be, its knives warming up new, its fur hackling—

[None other but sing true when this could be many things at once & some of them a clash, sing true, till the harmony finds that common note—to hold—to love—

[None other but sing true when truth itself eludes, what does it sound like, today, tonight, the morrow?
What does it ever sound like to sing?

[None other but sing true & maybe others join, maybe live awhile in shared music, but many move on,
by smile, by fury, by fall—

[None other but to sing true & believe by open hands & reaching hopes this all *possible*, this is all *good*,
this all *necessary*. *True*. *Sing true*.]



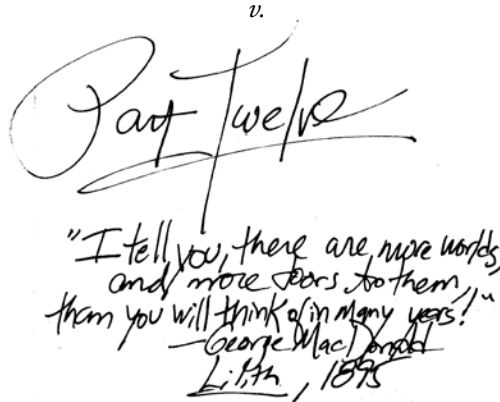
To be continued in Cenacle | 117 | October 2021





Raymond Souland, Jr.

Labyrinthine [a new fixtion]



None other but to sing true, & often, & ever on, pen waits, paper too, why not now? No reason.

All toward re-uniting the Six Brothers, yet this complex, un-linear you might say. As is this book's nature ever, un-linear, o'nery. Etc.

Yet good-intentioned. Sure that. Always ready to resume & go.

How much of a strange wild world of words does it take to re-unite the Six Brothers? And what then?

Oh, sure, ideas, thoughts of the Many Worlds of this strange mythopoeia. Tend to think it will need all to help. To re-unite them, & then figure out what-next.

When a mythopoeia builds up & up, out & out, deeper & deeper, till there is a *lot*, tis no longer one thing in its old sense.

Not all so closely touches as once. *This & that* touch via *this other*. Skein, web, like that more.

And this book is *fixtion*, something about it toward *fixing*. An ancient idea of sorts, that Art may *fix*, even heal.

So all this, & sing true, still linger much these words, urging, caution, advice one & all.

I turn & look over there . . .

The diner is bustling, tell this part slow. The news on the white-faced pink cat radio behind the counter is strange. Advertisements for a Talent Show at the coming Rutabega Festival? Hm.

Slow. Take this part *slow*. The black & white DüMönt TV, topped by the Antennar 1000B, is silent, but look at those words scrolling down its screen.

<i>Psychedelia</i>	(wavily blue)
<i>Eros</i>	(red depth deep)
<i>Nature</i>	(endlessly green)
<i>Magick</i>	(yellow nigh gold)
<i>Art</i>	(violet violence)
<i>Dreams</i>	(juice orange juice)

Black & white TV covered in colors wash out indigo glow “dreams they complicate my life . . .” sings that perty radio. Colors all wash out & now black & white again, decorated white & blue bowls of chili up & down the counter tis the lunch special—

Et, full, belches up & down the counter, belts loosened, Red Sox game on the TV, big Luis Tiant pitching a shutout, but on the radio losing, bad, & to the loathed Yankees no less—

Pile of ragged notes next to empty blue & white chili bowl, its designs maybe Creatures, maybe that mythical voyage to the Tangled Gate by those Six Brothers—

Straighten these notes out some, but they don't. Usually don't struggle so—

“Cosmo? You OK?” The Gate-Keeper is before me now, wearing his *Thursday is an Illusion, Time Doubly So* apron—

I nod down at my rudely piled notes. “Sums it up.”

He laughs & leans down to give my notes a better look. His wrists are a pretty canary yellow but flake away to orange by his elbow.

“Mentor? You think I had a mentor back then?”

I nod. Close my eyes to describe him better.

[Watch it now. This could be important! Or not! Will it stick & stay awhile, these intense words to come? I ask because 3801 pages so far have gone different ways. So—]

“A tall man, darker than you.”

He nods non-committal. “I follow him in that like other things.”

“Wears a striped knit cap on his head, sort of slouched up there.”

Nods again. “Black on white. Or white on black. Tries not to plan.”

“White spiked teeth. Long as fangs.”

“Makes him look like a wolf in your nightmares. *So* isn't that.”

“Long grey overcoat. Brown pants. Tall white boots.”

“Yes. No. Sure.”

“Is he any of this, Charlie?”

Starts at this name. Prefers not known though never says so.

“Long ago, Cosmo. Like everything. You know that.”

Cosmo nods. “Closer though.” Tries to neaten his sheaf of notes. Fails.

“What else you got, mate?” Nods the sheaf.



"Nothing sure. Even less than your Mentor."

Gate-Keeper laughs. "Wrong word for him."

"Which word then?"

"I don't know really." Sighs. "Like an anti-mentor. Taught me nothing. Chose not to yet."

"Yet?"

Nods.

"You're going back there?"

Nods. "On my way there now."

"This place on your path back?"

"It's like a circuit you could say. Or a sort of prison. I hope this is the last time for how it's been."

"A circuit? A prison?"

"Underneath the rest. Deep under. But my own."

"But now it's time for it to be known?"

"I hope so."

"Why this time?"

"Complete the circuit. Leave the prison."

I notice his movie camera in the far corner behind the counter. Or his walking cane. Or some kind of dominatrix belt.

Gate-Keeper turns off the black & white, sometimes color, Dümont TV. Shit of a game. White-faced pink cat radio stays on. SpiritPlants Radio America now. Music show I don't catch the name of. Old hippie rock, sounds like. Someone I once knew called bands like this "pot-pixies." Sure & a laugh.

"How's the perpetual aftermath of *Aftermath*, Cosmo?" Offers me a toke on his strange complex hookah pipe. All breasts & cocks & wild faces in a fiery red clay jumble. I desist for a moment.

"I'm thinking about my old book. The one I didn't finish."

Grins like the old Puritan devil himself. "You mean *Highway*?"

I scowl.

"*Interstate? Traffic Circle?*"

"*Turnpike*," I say very softly, very slowly, each syllable a snap.

He nods. "You're going back there?"

I nod for his hookah. A mix of magicks from the White Woods. Won't be leaving awhile now.

A blankness & we are now in his abandoned train station next the restaurant. Has what he calls his "office" in a corner here. Where he edits his "film" **RemoteLand** or whatever you might call it. We sit w/hookah, side by side, against the brick wall. His work area nearby. All our light is one strange, fat little candle.

"What happens when you complete the circuit?"

"A new story. Or the next one."

You don't suck the hookah pipe hose, no. You hold it near your relaxed mouth & nose, let its smoke find its own way in. Sometimes a lot, sometimes none. Lets you know when you're done for now.

"I don't always remember him."

"Who?"

"*Him*. Who you called my Mentor."

"Oh."

"Long stretches. Other things take the light. Memories simply come & go."

"And come again?"

"I guess so."

Cosmic Early nods.

"So. *Turnpike?* Again?"

Nods.

"Thinking it will work this time?"

"I'm not going to stop this time."

Gate-Keeper takes a long, slow turn with the hookah, then Cosmo takes one.

Central Station shifts a little & a little, & a little more. Lets itself unfurl to these gents from other days, months, turns of the calendar. When it was a busy, bustling place. They are in a far corner of the old Great Concourse, when travellers of countless kinds arrived, waited, departed from hither to yon. Long ago, till that Wobble.

Something surely matters in this, to them.

Then Gate-Keeper suddenly barks, "Hold tight, Cosmo!" & the Wobble comes hard & fast, & over & over; the Great Concourse where they sat is fairly untouched, but through the arch, to where trains & buses & soon everything & everyone is tossed from hither to yon. Over & over. Till nothing left but a bare patch of ground.

Adds quietly, "Just wait for them."

From out of the White Woods come a fantastically massed Chaos of Imps, cackling, click-click noise-noising, each one carrying a stone, leaving them seeming randomly around the bare patch.

"White Woods rubble," he says, somewhat obscurely.

Cosmo nods, not unknowing of all this. But unsure how. Nothing about his old friend is surely known. Starts to talk.

"What if my book & your escape are tied together?"

"You mean how your unfinished book is imprisoned in your mind like I am in my circuit?"

"How would we work this?"

Both then speak at once.

"Benny." "Cordelia."

Then laugh till they collapse into one another. Neither sure why & yet tis so.

"What happens to **RemoteLand** if you get free of your prison?"

"I never meant it to be what it became."

"Would you finish it, or just stop?"

Gate-Keeper doesn't answer. There really isn't one right now. Then—

"I don't know either, Charlie. But I think I do know one thing."

“What’s that?”

Speaks slowly. “Maybe it’s more of a feeling. That we need help. I mean more than just each other.”

“Strong feeling?”

Nods.

“Who?”

“Maybe old friends like we just said. Benny. Cordelia.”

They laugh again, but less.

“But others too.”

Gate-Keeper nods. This feels right too, somehow.

Unexpectedly, they doze, leaned up right against one another. These two strange old friends. More comfort in a friendly shoulder to rest against than a whole lot else in these many worlds.

[Will this take? How gripped are its teeth in the skin of this story?

[Gripped enough.

[Oh. Hi! Haha.

[I don’t mind whatever-ye-be rooting & roaming through Labyrinthine, but don’t think for a moment I’m fucking around right now.

[Nah? Really?

[Really. I’m pushing this hard.

[OK. Good. Don’t stop this time.

[No. I won’t.]

Lingering out the door of Gate-Keeper’s restaurant/diner, some sad singer on SpiritPlants Radio America, that white-faced pink cat radio in the back corner, him singing

“Soil will swallow the great wall
& the ode’s reaching hand alike.
All soaks empty in moonlight
upon its hour, climbs its beam,
falls untold within.”

“Within . . . within . . . within . . .” echoing long past the door shutting. Soon this diner & Central Station are long back there, no hint left now of them in these White Woods.

Where then, now, hence, & who this doing this going? Neither clear yet. No sure when or why neither, just going & going, pen moving up here, down to paper, below, somehow the music of words made,

These Woods glow lovely, the many colors of the Rainbow Wheel, sentient, knowing? How to know this knowing be so?



Long ago, somewhere these White Woods, which knows little of time, came the Gate-Keeper, hardly what then, but something, part of more, what travel & experience would mold & render—

He had his tripod friend, recently met, long known, little known—

And he was with Creatures, many of them—he sniffed friendly to them, sad & lost, but friendly, & like other people-folk they had known, they felt the urge to accompany him, comfort him, protect him if they could, however they could—

At first he had no *hmmm* to follow, eluded him, no direction to track, curiosity fed him like a dream-fruit. And he shared around how he could.

Sometimes he & his friend worked at their something, framing & following, crank turning along, his face close, urging them

both to *see seeing*—
not what it meant—
not what it was—
something else—

He spoke little. The Creatures taught him this. At first he was kind of panicked that he could not talk to them, that he would spook them away.

But he slowly figured things a bit better.
They understood his tongue, his urge
to shape sounds to dress & reck
the world. He was much bigger
than them, & maybe felt his distance
from the ground uncertainly?
He dreamed with them passively,
for rest, like diversion. They did not
think themselves teachers or his
the need to learn. They accepted
him because he sniffed friendly.

His travels to arrive to these White Woods he willing allowed to fade behind him but these Creatures were curious in their own way. What he could not say in waking they lured him kindly in dreaming to tell. Creatures know the world a long story, a path of many paths. One needs the right *hmmm* & some intent to travel these beautiful White Woods from *hither* to *yon*. These comprise the path & its song, its story, to tell.

[How from this moment to **RemoteLand**? How did **RL** end up a midnight cult film, like *Inland Empire*, 2001: *A Space Odyssey*, *Inception*?

[What linear or non-linear path? Let's say this: what if **RL** came first, before a Gate-Keeper? What if Gate-Keeper seemingly unrelated to the later all-important Tangled Gate?

[Now explain backwards. Just watch. Say the most recent thing in narrative time is the Gate-Keeper making one more effort to open up the path from his world to the many other worlds. Just say.

[We learn he discovers that his clan . . . came to their world by mistake. Their spaceship from Emandia was hit by a Wobble that damaged it enough to force a choice. Land at the nearest planet, or try, & maybe fail, to reach their chosen one.

[They choose the nearer one. Crash. Survive. It is a poor planet, & they are cut off from the other worlds of the diaspora of Emandians, called the *Many Worlds*.

[Now this. These words. Gate-Keeper, as a poor boy of a poor, unhappy people, hears a buzz that leads him away from his people, into the White Woods, buzz leads to *hmmm* & then to these self-same Many Worlds. How?

[Is it Mentor? Somehow? Who leads him away? *How? Why?*

[He was called Charlie Pigeonfoot then. Maybe. Became Gate-Keeper later. *Some of the time*.

[Did only some of him escape that dead, sad world? Some left back? Did he *iterate* somehow?

[*Maybe. Kind of? Unsure.*

[*Go on. Guess good & see.*

[Maybe Emandians do not inhabit their bodies in the same way we people-folks do.

[Oh not all that soul-in-a-vessel stuff the bug-eyed preachers cry. Body as a prison soul inhabits, & liberates from, in the course of time.

[Maybe body & soul more of an equal partnership. Like a kind of partnership.

[So let's say Charlie is more body & Gate-Keeper more soul, & they part at some point? What would that look like? An inert body & a wispy bit floating on air? No. I do not think so.

[They separate & they go on, both. Maybe, like an amicable divorce, divide up equal halves.

[Does *this explain? Kind of?* Is this simply how Emandians perpetuate? Divide? Part? That has something to it. Maybe sometimes it's messy, hostile.

[Hence some kind of answer to "Are Charlie Pigeonfoot & Gate-Keeper one & the same?" Yes, mostly no, mostly not anymore—

[And yet? Can divided unite again? *What does any of this look like?*

[Maybe back on Emandia *this* made sense. Maybe on the *Many Worlds* that did not involve a crashing spaceship on an undesired world, this Emandian culture was perpetuated.

[But biology plus context equals culture, more or less. So for GK/Charlie this did not all work out. He was not taught how this all worked, or should work.

[What did he have? He had a small black & white Dümont TV. On it, only for when he watched alone, was a TV show called *Clarendon Island*.]

[Whoa. Hold on there, Author guy.]

[Sure. Sure. But you see here is where Mentor starts to come in.

[This planet Charlie/GK's clan crashlanded on? Barely habitable & all that? Like a prison camp with no actual prison-keepers? *Yes?*

[Mentor lived here. This was his home. But he was close to the last of his kind. And when he saw the crashing spaceship in the sky, he hid. Hid well. Hid & watched.

[Was he Emandian too, you might ask? Maybe. So homeworld in the sense of he ended up here long ago somehow, with others, most of whom now were gone?

[Took him awhile, maybe not too long, but still, to figure out these were not Emandians come for him, to rescue him, or finish him off, or join him by their choice. He was in truth *much much* older than any of them.

[He watched. For a long time he watched. Having had to abandon their beloved homeworld, & now come by accident to this poorly habitable one, they were a disconsolate bunch. He watched & saw little in them to approach. They were weak. Sad.

[Mentor had hoped his story would not end here, like it had for most of his companions. Just him & another left.

[But if they discovered him, their despair would suck him to a husk. He *knew* this. It's what this place did to those come here.

[Or like her, she barricaded herself in that terrifying yellow building & was long unseen but her occasional shadow in that window many floors up.

[Himself? He was different by a strange, brilliant chance. That's all. *Brilliant chance.*]

He did not have his whole story. To tell himself or these strange friendly Creatures. What he knew mostly was memories of privation, & then escape, & then danger, & then meeting his wonderful friend, & then the beautiful luck of coming here. The Creatures saw how much his story was missing. A path in patches.

The Creatures slowed him somehow, smoothed his mind to better clarity. By waking, still uncertain & patchy.

Yet, by dreaming, something else. An exhausted, scared, uncertain boy might dream sometimes, in some ways, but likely not like a land to traverse, a continuity to induce.

Mostly, more fear, more uncertainty. Waking's terrors carried on.

But then, well, maybe something more. *What do dreams dream?*

Of such beautiful colors.



Slow. *Slowww. Slowwwwwww.*

Hmmm. Hmmm. Hmmmmmm.

Where is this? How do I know it?

How do I know it long & deep in me?

It did not start with the colors, no, something else, like these were my guides, saw me along, & returned me back too—

Closer to waking, but not, I open my eyes, some eyes, & I say to these Creatures I cluster amongst, “they were like you, but not quite. They were dark, like shadows, but quite bodied, in their own ways, kind to me, like you are—” Sniffs, nuzzles, gentle tuggings back further in—

I let, OK, clumsy, they *hmmm*, OK, breathe, *hmmm*, yes, let, a little more, this way some, not that, *hmmm*, colors, again, here they come, not soft, not vague, this is why I don’t remember this often, there’s a rough snap in this, a crush down hard on whatever weak in me, a clean, cold shearing of what I won’t need here—

Let go the buzz, break from it now!

[Now trickling. Now gone.]

That voice, mine? Whose?

Those tall, thin trees—

“When you waver like them in dreaming & wonder how to cling the wind?

“If you can breathe slower, let the colors calm what you are, neither high nor low—”

I can’t. Panic to leave. How to leave this? I can’t.

“Not one but several, many, green, the light to breathe now too, the music of wavering, now easy, now let—”

Voice, voices, from memories, from wishes, fragments of years—

My friends are near, so close, powerful like small furs & feathers of star, urging me this, urging me this more—

Past the strange tall thin trees, now behold red so delicious mine eyes gorge wildly! A field, vast bright field, like a flaming down of dream—

“We are not here to sleep you down but dream you awake! Till the clouds tell you about more than mist & sky, till the trees you regard like peers of mystery & knowing—

“Till our field breathes you low & high, the mountains & yonder when you’re ready, when you’re ready . . .”

The flaming field of bloom begins to shimmer in dance with shimmering sky above, *hmmm, hmmm, hmmm—*

Traveling this stream becomes a mind’s skating its reflections of the liminal place where *is* & *also-is* allow other possibilities—

“Allow us to move along, dream awake, where the green trees distant & those near touch us a kind of one, what *over* hangs, what murks *below*, what we are fresh, lines in the ceaseless layers of *hmmm* . . .”

Our voices together now, our voice singing us along this *what*, we become the bridge between us, crossing this water we travel, this beauteous *what—*

I listen. *We sing.*

“Would you soft from the heat, find rest from questions, something this come near last to offer you, shaped & solid memory of *what was here*, long ago—”

Like a grainstack? How to know such a thing in this *what-here?*

“Slowed now to a shadow for travelers, a restive remain?”

All of the rest is now gone.
All surface.
No center. No depth. No sky.

“Where the sweets of the world offered like a *welcome on, welcome back, or farewell* to the *rest*”

The world now all blooms & floats on
The world now all blooms & floats on

“Dream awake! Now dream awake *now!* Dream *awake* now! *Dream* awake now!”

“Tis sweet you’re offered.
Tis sweet you might become.”

Open your eyes, Charlie Pigeonfoot.

I hope what I say lands with all of you somehow because I think you’re part of this again, though in a different way.

“There was this old bridge, older than possible, it seemed to me, that crossed this dirty stream, & none of this interested my clan far back there. I myself interested none of them, & I didn’t know why. Why was I different? I didn’t feel special, or lame either.

“What I felt was lonely. And so very soon I took to exploring this unhappy world, but mine, so far as I knew. It felt to me like others had been here, very long ago, I guess that wasn’t brilliant to figure, but I

also felt *they were more like me.*"

These beautiful Creatures about me sniff, maybe curiously? I don't know. White Bunny in my lap her kind intelligent eyes. Gray Hedgedyhog close too. Three pretty little Giraffes. So many more.

"Then I found the bridge. On a very old, brokendown road. No good for travel. But that stream below was new & novel to me. A climb down that overgrown grassy hill. Maybe a hiding place.

"I belonged to nobody in my clan. Took me awhile to figure that out. Someone would take me at their campsite awhile, but then urge me to another. It was kindness just above banishing me altogether or cooking me up for a scrawny dinner.

"Under this bridge, a pebbly hill on either side of the water, I found safety. Hid my trail among the tall weeds. Nobody followed me. Nobody cared.

"Then one peaceful afternoon, quietly chucking pebbles toward the other side, I saw it over there. Nearly ruined it with my throws.

"But didn't. I waded over there, first time. Beheld this large strange, *made* thing. Unbroken, unruined. Old but together. I lifted it up & nearly ruined it again.

"But I carried it safely, at a slow stagger through the shallow water to my preferred seat among the larger rocks. Gently, thoroughly inspected my prize.

"I learned more about what I had found long later, when I traveled the Many Worlds. From what I knew then, it was big & heavy, some of it firm & hard to the touch, some of it more fragile. Spooked by having almost randomly broken it, I treated all of it like a fragile thing, a mysterious treasure I must tend. I had never *owned* anything really, but the long rags on my back, the shapeless hat on my head. This was new.

"But, I was going to say *mine*, but no, nearly more like *my friend*.

"It was, I did not know then, a black & white DüMönt TV. Its molded plastic surface a little scratchd up, but otherwise OK. It took me awhile to dare touch its knob & dials.

"Then I did, wrong ways the first few times. Then, by lucky chance, I clicked on the power & turned up the volume, & tuned to an actual TV show.

"For a glorious moment I saw what I later learned is the *Tangled Gate*.

"Then the image was gone. Like it had never been. A flicker, then down to a white dot, took ever & ever for it to go, but go it did.

"I stared, 'mouth fulla flies' a saying I learned later. I tried the knob & dials, in every combination. *Nothing*.

"*What had I seen? Where had it gone?*

"Days passed. Nothing changed. Finally, sadder than I'd ever been, I carried it out to the field nearby.

No sense of ceremony, of honoring passing with symbol & gesture, still I instinctively built a kind of stone circle & set my friend in the center, like a priest or a king or a godd. The sun rarely came in full, so my visits to it did not produce anything odd until one *very odd* day.

“As I approached, I heard a noise. Sound! *Saw pictures!* How?

“Solar power, they call it. My weird proto-ritual had charged the TV’s battery. Eventually, tho I still thought it jaw-gaping magick, I figured to bring my friend into the sun, to its stone circle, on sunny days. I understood the *cause & effect* tho not the *why*.

“I would watch for hours, not knowing what I was seeing. Were the people inside my friend? No. My friend was *showing* their stories to *me*.

“Maybe that’s when I understood I was unhappy & little loved. I cherished my friend & treated him kindly. In turn, he showed me other places than where I was. Nobody in my clan *tended* with *me*, *shared* with *me*. There was *no giving, no need*.”

The Creatures still I think sleepily in my arms. I feel returned to where we are. More to tell but I trust, like my DüMönt TV, they will listen.

By sniffing & friendly nudging, they bring me & my friend to a vast bed of giant ferns. Somewhere in its center I find a tureen of soup, as magick a taste to my impoverished tongue as the DüMönt was to my eye & ear.

Many of these Creatures are now nearby, furred, feathered, shelled, & many other kinds. They nuzzle near me like I have worth. Like I belong to them. A low, sweet *hmmm* starts up & spreads through all until it pulls me in too.

“‘Don’t be surprised & the answers will come easier’ are the words I wake with, maybe advice from the Dreaming?” I stay where I am in the bed of giant ferns & talk on. Advice I needed.

“It was gone. My friend. I had spent so many happy times watching *Clarendon Island* on it. I believed it a real place because I did not know stories could be made up—but *my friend was gone!*

“Stolen? Had I been followed? I returned to my clan’s settlement not knowing what to say or to who. So I said nothing. I skulked around more than I had, since returning to my dirty stream no longer interested me.

[That’s when I gave you the *buzz* that led you away, Charlie.

[Oh, & I took your TV. I had watched you for a long time. Oh, I had given you that TV too. It was more Mentor to you really.

[There was no *hmmm* possible in your encampment. I had tried. At best, a squawking *buzz*. But it was enough.

[You learned of me later, by accident, & only once called me your *Mentor*, & that with deep sarcasm. It stuck. *Of course the Gate-Keeper had a Mentor!*]

None other than to sing true, often, & ever on, pen, paper, stalled, shift, jerk, carry on, OK, what?

Maya shoves me, gently, but still, *rouse up, pay mind*

“I liked the pages better when I wasn’t in them,” I mutter.

Without where we are being specified, Maya turns on her White-Faced Pink Cat Radio, we sit together & listen awhile—

A suave voice says, “Come with me, close your eyes, travel with me deeper into this Island’s magickal White Woods, until we find a clearing.”

Maya holds my hand to keep my balance, the space becomes a clearing, shaped like a temple in full moonlight—

She leaves my hand, but Gate-Keeper, sometimes known as Charlie Pigeonfoot, arrives, looking young & uncertain, & weirdly does not see me.

“You can recede now,” Maya whispers my mind. “You’re welcome.” Kiss to my cheek, & gone.

Gate-Keeper has followed the *Hmmm* to here, perhaps now exhausted, sits down & starts to pay mind to the radio.

The suave voice continues, “We pass along, far along, deeper into the desert & come to a little shack with an exotic toothless little man who gnatters high & low at him—

“Whispers in Gate-Keeper’s ear to send him along to a town deep & far from anywhere else—

“Come to the White Woods again, & there is a road—

“Come to a Village now, few buildings, nobody around, but now a warm, crowded place, a coffeehouse—

“A new dream, a bigger dream, no longer a dream at all . . . ” the suave voice sings somewhere in the coffeehouse . . .

Charlie wakes up, suddenly. Takes a moment to remember.

Tis a Great Filld. Leads to the Many Worlds.



To be continued in Cenacle | 118 | December 2021

* * * * *

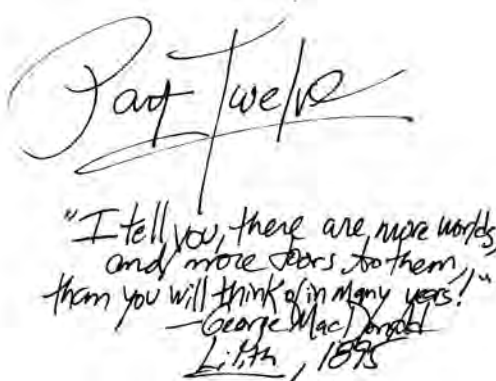


Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]



vi.

Rouse the black pen & give a look around. 'Tis the Attic, of many famous tales & songs. This stretch of it is the top hat of the Bungalow Cee, home of myself & the beloved Photographer, & one of several concurrent homes of Creature Common.

A new solid black floor under foot, close wooden bricks, & a white lattice ceiling above, protecting from the roof's many exposed nails.

A work table I sit at. KC Klock upon the wall, black cat with wild happy eyes, wiggling in time with red tail.

Attic Radio on a small table, sometimes a Dreamland Jazz station, sometimes reports on psychedelic elixirs on SpiritPlants Radio America.

Beloved in her chair, thick books & tea on her surreal table, at her reading ease—

Another table nearby, crates of old paper & things neatly in corners. Hooded lights above.

The way on to my left, hidden in a corner. Just a skein away.

Other than radio, *so* quiet, *so removed*.

Wondering where to next from hither to yon . . .

Turn the page soon to find out . . .

Asoyadonna in all her strange gloried prettied fineness sits on a big blue plastic tub near me. Insisted it with her charming half smile.

"I think that's a tub of old *Cenacles*," I remark sheepishly. She nods. Smiles at my Beloved. "Full of your beauteous picture-visions," she smiles.



Herself smiles too.

Donna & I turn back to my several notebooks & pads & tape-player & cassettes.

“*Great Grand Braided Narrative?*” she reads in one, smirks. But not with any mock.

I nod. “This how many things will happen. Events, crossings, revelations, new & old.”

She nods. Listens.

I talk on. “This book, this *Labyrinthine*, can handle as much plain exposition as needed.” Beloved lights some candles & incense. The Attic Radio is softly on that Dreamland Jazz station, broadcasting live from decades ago. She also hands Asoyadonna a mug of something warm & a bit sweet. Smiles. Now listening anew.

“You & your Brothers were, I think, scattered far, tossed hither to yon by a *Wobble*. Far in time & space. And I think you all forgot much. Not sure why.”

She nods soberly.

“This is not a matter of bringing you all back together in this book”— I gesture affectionately to *Lx* on my work-table. “Nor just *Many Musics*, like originally.” Pause. Gather the rest of my thoughts.

“*Labyrinthine. Many Musics. Bags End News. Travelers Tales. Dream Raps. Great Heroes of Yore Adventures.*” I reel them off, finger by finger.

They both nod. Then a voice from that hidden area over there. “Are you coming, Donna, & your scribbling friend?”

Asoyadonna jumps up, nods to me. Says to my Beloved, “Aunt won’t let me travel on without one of her good flapjacks breakfasts!” Smiles between them.

I sack up notebooks & what-not, kiss Beloved’s cheek. She smirks me. “Remember what Phish says. ‘Whatever you do, take care of your shoes!’” I nod, serious & smiling both.

We come down from the Attic to the Pensionne. Aunt greets us warmly & hurries on.

Did I mention the Pensionne has a great big kitchen? Did I know this before tonight? I guess no.

I guess makes sense, if tis a kind of strange sorta boarding house in the White Woods. And I suppose folks passing through would like a good flapjacks breakfast to carry forth into their days.

I look around pretty thoroughly while Aunt & Asoyadonna talk away. Feels like this matters to do.

Her kitchen is, I guess you could say, in two parts. Right now, the long table over there is covered, & that area of the room is dark. Looks like made of rough wooden planks placed over logs. Many short stools frame its every side, which I think number to more than four. Unsure, somehow?

I walk around this long many-sided table & notice many many pictures on the wall, each mounted in a unique antique frame. Some pictures I know. Creatures. MeZmer the White Bunny tucked close to her dearest one. Holly the grey Hedgedyhog. A many-colored glowing picture depicting some murky

& magickal deep depth in the White Woods.

A painting of a White Birch with just six leaves on its branches. *Oh. Hmmm.*

“Francisco’s,” says quietly & suddenly near Asoyadonna. I nod uncertainly. Want to ask “which one?” But I don’t. She leads me by the hand back to the kitchen table. Heaps piled high of flapjacks, little jars of syrups & jams.

Aunt quietly bustles me up a plate & a stone mug of juice, delicious tho I can’t say sure what kind. She settles Donna too, & then fetches herself a plate & drink. Her long dark braided hair, dark eyes, simple working clothes, yet nothing obvious nor simple about her.

We eat friendly in quiet.

“I don’t know I’ve sat with friends like this for a meal in these White Woods in *Labyrinthine*,” I say finally. They nod, smile, chew.

I want to say more but unsure what. The food is delicious, magickal, fixtional.

Asoyadonna clears our plates & is away a few minutes, & a few more. *Ah, OK.*

“Do you know Gate-Keeper?” I suddenly ask.

Aunt nods.

“And Abe the Ancient Sea Turtle?”

Nods again. More of a smile this time.

I am quiet. She waits. “If I bring my best self to these pages, & the rest, this *Great Grand Braided Narrative* is within my reach.”

“It is.”

“If.”

“If.”

“*Do the work.*”

“*Always*, Raymond.”

I reach for her hand across the dark wooden table. Both of her hands.

I return to the room where I’d both slept & writhed, figuring gonna be time to go soon. Find my black bookbag in the corner, all safe, check its contents closely, all there, & make to return to Aunt’s great kitchen to wait for Asoyadonna.

Along the way back, notice those stairs that earlier, inexplicably, led up to the Attic of the Bungalow Cee where, as I said, I live with my Beloved, the Photographer, & there also dwells Creature Common, among its several.

Pause. Think. OK. Climb those steps & come out to the Attic as before. Find a note in her corner, on her seat. “Time to put away everything in the yard for winter! See you later. Safe travels! Love you always.”

The Attic Radio is still on the Dreamland Jazz station. KC Klock still shifting her crazy eyes & bright red tail to tell the time with penache. Heater's on. My sweater on my seat.

Sit down at my long work table. Might as well do this now. Get out my blue-green coin purse of dice & coins & icons, little clocks, little radio.

Figuring out the mixings for this section takes some time. My notebook readings take me back to years & places, sleuthing for what will mix nicely here. Makes this fixtion part a game, but I think more than that.

Remember some things. This theme persists for me of late. That takes effort. *Which things? How? To do what with?* No real guide-posts in this. Yet down to my writing bones, this feels imperative.

So I take the time, do the readings, make the notes. Finished, I turn off the Attic Radio. Throw KC Klock a wink. Turn off heater. Leave sweater. Head back downstairs to the Pensionne, now fully ready to go.

Aunt nods & smiles my return, her smaller kitchen table crumbless clean now from our flapjacks breakfast.

"She's in her old room, Scriptor," she says brightly, & points me on. I start at this new name, then nod & follow her pointing.

As I approach, I hear her quiet singing, "All flesh is lorn. All flesh needs love." Her door is open, but I cough my arrival. She is sitting on her bed, auburn hair now down, surrounded by old volumes & maps. Smiles me welcomed.

I come in & take a look around. Several of her walls filled by ceiling-to-floor bookcases. Mostly books, but also some neat piles of maps & what look like small antique jars. Perfume? Potions? I'd guess both.

Her large window is on the wall facing her bed. Crimson curtains drawn back. A view of the great Garden, of the White Woods beyond. Even more distant mountains. An easy sniff of Wide Wide Sea salty air too.

"Sit with me."

I do.

"Tossed your dice & coins anew?"

I nod.

Her smile 'pon me is a fresh maiden's, but also well-travelled, seasoned with dear touch & loss both. Waits.

"I was reading my *Many Musics* poems about you & your Brothers. And reviewing our travels together."

Nods.

"Honey Now. The mayor's son. Your years of travels to the Tangled Gate. The Kingdom you six built in the King's old homeland. So much."

I show her my scrawled notes in my Thoughts Pad. She reads carefully. I look down at my hands & think.



"I call all this, all these various tellings & writings, my *mythopoeia*. Seemed like the best word."
 "Tis a good one," says quietly.

Quiet again. *Reaching*.

"However it has come to pass that I live now, & these poems & stories all are, tis so. And because tis so, tis my blessed task to tend their growth & flourishing best I can.

She takes my hand.

"My idea now is called the *Great Grand Braided Narrative*, & its purpose is in part to tell a single story comprising many braided through each other."

Nods. I've said this previously. *Does twice said bring comfort?*

"I don't quite have yet what happened to your Brothers beyond the Cave of the Beast, but I feel like it involves a long ago Great Violence, of which a remnant remained. A *Wobble*."

Some of this is new to her. "What more?" I sense her listening now is still close but less passive. More what-next in her.

I stand now, to pace around my thinkings into words. "I think what happened is that a Spaceship struck this *Wobble* somewhere in the far reaches of outer space, & this led to its crashing on a strange grey planet.

"I thought this Spaceship was from Emandia, bound for one of its chosen worlds, from the diaspora which occurred as it was dying."

Asoyadonna's face is wide with shock. "Emandia?"

I nod, recalling from my notes she was from there, though this Pensionne in this Village was all the home she could remember. Her family Aunt & her long-passed father the Tinker.

I go on. "There is a man who was in that Spaceship, a boy when it crashed on that grey world. He is called Gate-Keeper. He escaped its harsh life, & has since many times tried to free its people from it, as he came to know the Many Worlds braided together by their diaspora."

I sigh, go on. "I thought it was a Spaceship full of Emandians, your kinsmen. But could not figure out why he was ever shunned by all there."

"Why then?"

"This ship was hijacked. Its passengers taken prisoner."

"How? By who?"

"By someone or someones in or near or part of that *Wobble*. But their doing so damaged the Spaceship, caused it to crash where it did. A barren, grey, nearly uninhabitable world."

"And the Gate-Keeper?"

"He was one of very few younger Emandians on that Spaceship. The Captors rigged up something in the garments most of them wore. A kind of tech embedded in these, & in their skin. Electric shock to disobedience. Maybe more."

"Why not the younger ones?"

I think. Wonder too. "Do you remember your romance with the Mayor's son awoke your body? You now had penis or pussy or nothing to wish?"

She nearly blushes, nods.

"Your skin shifts colors too?"

Nod.

"These younger Emandians hadn't evolved yet like this. The tech did not work on them. The Captors let them be, but by that same tech punished anyone who would tend them kindly. They would get caged too, in time."

"By sex?"

"By *something*. A kind of wider waking to the world. A needful catalyst of some kind."

She nods.

I pace & continue.

"The *Wobble*, now active, or awake, or *something*, multiplied, in space & time. It's shown up in many of my stories, in different forms, all over."

"One, none, many?" she asks, but smiling darkly.

"Like the Imps? Yes, no, sort-of?"

"And so it caused my Brothers to be tossed far, hither & yon?" she asks quietly.

"I think so . . . maybe."

"Because together we were a threat?"

"Maybe?"

"So what should you & I do?" she asks finally.

More quiet.

"There's a lot to do. But part of that is each of you remembering some things. And finding your way to someplace to re-unite."

"The Beach of Many Worlds. Abe the Sea Turtle?" She almost brightens, despite herself. I nod, smile too.

"And maybe he can tell us what can be done about all this."

"We can liberate Gate-Keeper's grey world for one."

I nod. "I don't think as simple as like those old fat marauders you dispatched with on your way to the King's old homeland."

She smirks, then saddens. Motions me sit next to her.

"How long since we Brothers were all separated?"

"By my time's passing, near ten calendars of time. But your own reck would be far more precise."

She nods, uncertain.

"I found you in that bus station, with a ticket to Elliptical City. And your mutt Benny."

She laughs at this.

"Where had you come from? How did you come by Benny?"

She sorta starts within. "I, um, don't know. It's like . . . I remember clearly all my days living here with Aunt & my father the Tinker. And all the times leading up to meeting my Brothers, our many

travels, & come to the Island after so long. It gets dream-like there for me. Then I met you, in that bus station, with Benny, & it's like I slowly *came back* to myself."

I nod. This is enough for now.

"I hope he's OK. Benny, I mean."

I nod. "I'm sure he is."

She hugs me close then. Having clarity of mind & hope & purpose all returned to her has made her more powerful to behold.

"How should we best & swiftest get ourselves to Abe's Beach, my friend?" she asks. I prefer that to "Scriptor" any day, I realize. "Scribbler" might be OK though.

I think. "What we want is word to spread far & wide that we are looking for your Brothers. I have an idea that we could best do that by a visit to the Thought Fleas' Rutabega Festival & Fleastock."

"Oh my!" she says, & so I easily guess she does not know these.

"And then travel on the Wide Wide Sea & on down to Abe's Beach."

"On the *Good Ship Ker-plow-ee*? And herself tiny as ever & yet Captain still?" she cries, & hopes.

"You mean, Commandeer Masta' Splasha'?" I laugh too. She nods.

"Well, maybe," I say. "There are others who will help, if need be."

She nods, quieter now.

But instead I stand up again. "I'll leave you to ready for our long journey. I'll wait in the Kitchen with Aunt." Asoyadonna nods &, as I close the door, I notice her going for her small ivory hairbrush on her bedside table, gift from her father the Tinker, likely the first thing she packs back into her knapsack.

Aunt is waiting for me at the smaller kitchen table. Now the larger one is uncovered too, & the lights raised over it. Lots of bowls & spoons & napkins set out.

"Near suppertime," she smiles. "Folks been hoping & wishing for their bowls of Miss Flossie Flea's Special Festival Recipe Rutabega Soup all day!"

I nod. "We're going to be passing through there, on the way to Abe's Beach."

Aunt's sober features now really brighten. "Asoyadonna will love all that!"

We say no more but hug warmly. Aunt quotes back my own words to me, I think. "'Life doesn't take it away. Fools give it away.'" Nods me serious to finish it. I nod in return.

"I do not wish to."

She talks on. "Folks around here need you & your many words, Scriptor."

"Scribbler, please," I smile sheepishly. "Scriptor's just the press."

She nods. "You also wrote, 'We make Art to remember how to tell the truth.'"

I nod again, wondering, till she points over to a bookcase I realize with an audible "Oh!" is stuffed top to bottom shelves with issues of *The Cenacle*.

"You keep making the Art, Scribbler, the White Bunny says it to you & I do too." She makes a pen

scribbling gesture with her finger. I nod.

Asoyadonna appears, freshed up, packed up, like we was goin' on a picnic but . . . I imagine she has enough knives & other weapons about her shapely person to belie that fool's thought.

Their embrace is long, deep, & endless sweet. Kisses Asoyadonna three times on her cheeks. "One is for that fine Abraham. What a storyteller."

Donna smirks & nods.

"And the second for Roddy. He'll know why."

Second nod.

"And when you finally get back to Dreamwalker, however you do, third kiss for him & tell him he owes his Aunt a visit soon! All them boys. We'll throw them all a party, a big bonfire, in the Great Hall, bajillions of stars looking down too!"

Smiling both, & both now near to tears, they embrace once more. Aunt also packs a few more "just in case" & "you never know" items in AsoyaDonna's knapsack.

We're both ready to go.



To be continued in Cenacle | 119 | April 2022



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]



vii.

Remember some things. No, really. *Remember some things.*

The way to reunion, Abe's Beach, & a path further along, is: *remember some things*.

I thought this would happen after the Brothers reunited on Abe's Beach, maybe even after they helped Gate-Keeper.

But, no. They were *Wobbled*. At the Cave of the Beast, not by him, past him, deeper in, even deeper than the vision the Beast showed them of Unitive Time.

I stop. Right there. Check my notebooks. *Labyrinthine*, this book, has the Beast's claim that: "What happened to them all did not happen here."

But *Many Musics, XI, lv*, "Flow State," has the lines about the Beast scattering them, "half-forgetting, half-dreaming" what they had seen in the Cave, that is, a vision of Unitive Time—

OK—so here's where a *mythopoeia* has to smooth out its strange wrinkles—

I tend to think that the Beast did show them that vision of Unitive Time, but that the Wobble scattered them thusly—

And this may be why when, thus scattered, they all seemed to lose their memories, & thus have to *remember some things*.

I feel a soft hand on my shoulder & start. Asoyadonna smiling at me. Aunt nearby. Aunt's Kitchen in the Pensionne. *Oh*. Her smaller table where we enjoyed flapjacks & good talk earlier. *Oh*.

"Sorry," I say sheepishly. Smiling.

"But?" Donna asks.

I read them these recent lines, by way of answer. They listen very intently.

Donna's pretty face a little tight. "Do I have to remember some things?" Knowing the answer.

I nod.

"You're coming."

"Only by way of my pen."

Aunt speaks up now. "He'll wait with me here." Firm a decision. I nod agreeably.

Donna sits across me. "The others to their remembering too?"

Nod.

"And this along the way to reunion at Abe's Beach?"

Nod. Twice.

"To help the Gate-Keeper? And more?"

"Yes. All of this."

"Are you sure, Raymond? Do you vow?"

"I do."

She closes her pretty eyes & lets all this wash through her. A long quiet moment passes.

Eyes open. Smile. Nod.

"I trust you. I vow as well. I'm sure each of my Brothers does too."

I say nothing.

She stands. One more quick hug for Aunt, & she is gone. Like that.

Aunt sits across from me now. Smiles.

"Bend your head & heart & hand to it now, Scribbler. Tell." A firm nod at this book. Suddenly she's up & gone too. Just me now in her spotless kitchen.

Me & my bookbags full of notebooks I call a *mythopoeia*.

How this works? Here's the part I understand: I go reading through all the relevant pages, fiction, poems, notes, & then see what comes next as I write it. Tell the story, & thus learn it too. I'm not a "little pencil in God's hands," as Mother Teresa said of herself.

But I don't hardly know next much either. The pleasure is seeing what comes from my black pen next. Fine or clumsy or awful, I'm ever curious, ever enjoy.

So I won't say I knew I'd be alone in this empty Kitchen, but it makes sense. Asoyadonna is away to *remember some things*, things for her, causes of her effect, as it were.

I can see too that what happens will most or all submerge me from view. Just my pen happily scribbling

away, me enjoying.

Where did Asoyadonna go next? Let's find out, by way of inquiring narrative . . .

She returns to her bedroom, for a lingering moment to mull *where next?* Despite uncertainty in all this, she feels happy, the kind down low & deep in the heart where it's solid & heavy & sure to stay awhile.

Lays back on her bed, even despite her fully laden clothes; just *stops* before *going*. A long while she stays, the light of day slowly passing as it does. Evening coming on, as it does.

The Star Spiral on her ceiling softly glows, each of its 36 flower-stars distinct & shaped uniquely. She remembers long ago Aunt & her father the Tinker affixing them up there. Their conversation was funny & somehow she recalls much of it.

"These are the Many Worlds, Donna," he said, as he puffed atop her bed, planting each one with his slow care on the ceiling.

"Pish," laughed Aunt. "There's many more than these." She handed him up another flower-star.

"And, tis said, at the very center of these, far away & deep in outer space, a Carnival of Creatures, guised like stars, dances eternity away, & with any lucky enough to visit!" He smiled 'pon Asoyadonna merry & mischievous. She'd learned many of his stories were true by their own strange reck.

"Double-pish!" cried Aunt. "They are much too sensible & solid to bide by such aerie . . . poetry!"

He laughed. "The Many Worlds are *full of such aerie poetry*, sister! Who better than you to know this?" She laughed, nodded, handed him the last of the flower-stars to affix. Offered her hand to help him off the bed.

"Not enough, either," she said lastly, softly, as they looked up at their completed task.

Asoyadonna had watched their doings from a corner of her room. They fetched her up to hug before parting.

Aunt gave her a sharp look, loving, & said, "Every one of these worlds is yours to know, if ye will."

Her father the Tinker nodded his smile at this sentiment, & they parted her, arms 'round each other, as they often did. That walking embrace gave Donna a soft thrill of happiness every time. Countless were the instances when she would catch one of her later Brothers in such a one. Delighted them every time too.

"Well," she said aloud, knowing I was listening & scribbling too back there, "that's one good thing to remember. Maybe something more to it than I knew then."

She stands, walks over to her bookcases. One volume in mind, a blank one. Plucks it up, & sets back down on her bed.

Dreamwalker among them carried the most books. He'd make them, like a hobby to do, almost like a nervous tick. Gift them along their travels.

There was one time when they were outnumbered, & by good, angry fighters too. Mistaken by the locals for marauders, of which there had recently been many. *No* moment to explain their travels, their complete lack of antagonism. *Just passing through*.

No. They were set on hard, far out-numbered. Fled back to the nearest White Woods from this barren, rocky stretch. Were followed, swiftly. Fought to wound only; their King's first directive. This seemed to anger the locals more. Heavy, swift, bearded men. Silent. Vicious.

They had tricks to help. Among them, a sense of where the White Woods thickened impossibly for pursuit, & yet passage possible. But a long, hard run thence. Skirmish after skirmish.

She'd got hurt. Not mortally, but not able to run swiftly. Dreamwalker & Roddy had carried her. Dreamwalker had blunted her pain by pulling her into his walking dream. Running, really. The pain was distant, somehow *back there*, where she was awake.

She learned later that the King & Odom & Francisco had, at the King's reluctant nod, lingered back, to buy them time, & killed many of them. *Many*. Till the rest finally broke off pursuit.

This kind of slaughter happened rarely. But she had been hurt, & there had been no choice.

She'd been tended for days. Of course there had been Creatures to help, medicines, Thought Fleas nearby.

They were long in what was a great, vast bed of Ferns. While she slept, the King & the others went back to bury the dead, a sign of respect, contrition. Roddy told her they had found *no* bodies. *No* signs of any fight. This happened sometimes too. They'd fought spectres more than once. Men were usually smart enough to run from battle with them.

One evening, Dreamwalker & the others came to her resting place, smiling, as not in awhile. He had one of his handmade books in his hands. A new one.

Smiled at her with all his long affection. "I made this, but Francisco did the decorations. And Roddy the writing on the front & back." They were all smiling sheepish now as he handed it over.

Made of White Birch bark & twine, as was Dreamwalker's wont, Francisco had bathed it in dark waters of crimson & blue, shot with threads of orange & yellow, green, violet, & indigo.

Roddy's elaborate hand had inscribed on the front:

*It's OK to Be Happy
You Are Not Alone
Write Something Good*

& on the back:

*Nothing is Real.
Chop Wood. Carry Water.*

She now kisses this book, & holds it dear as every one of her far Brothers, & then into her knapsack. And a strange pencil too she'd noticed tucked in there, green & gold. Maybe one of Aunt's last-minute items?

And, *oh goodness*, a sack of Aunt's plumpest earth Creatures, like other times. From loved one still close to her in this Pensionne, to loved ones far, such was her travel, & back here one far day too, if lucky.

Back then, when smaller, this Pensionne still her world, Asoyadonna had not known that most dwellings in the world were not like this well-loved home of hers, or the nearby Ancienne Coffeehouse.

That is, *most* buildings, *most* places, do not keep going *in & in & in* seeming perpetually. Had to train out of herself the shock of finding *back walls*, *endings* to buildings.

But tis so, & tis so. She hoists her knapsack on her shoulder, & pulls her chamber door shut behind her. Hoping new victories earned by when next she's returned.

Turned right into a hallway not usually there but alert & friendly to her occasional need & *hmmming* greeting. Opens to White Woods, so they seem, though too not yet outside. That required intent as well as *hmmming*.

Her intent? *Remember some things*. She'd started, it seemed, but what now?

Honey Now down deep in that spaceship in the earth? My first boy? Loved before I understood my own malleable nature? The mayor's son, maybe the first I loved with all of me?

No. *I remember them already.*

The White Tiger? I remember you but still I long to see you.

I sit. Right against a White Birch. My knapsack tumbles with a *clump!* nearby.

Hardly a thought in it, I lean forward & pull my knapsack upright, dig in its main pocket for my Dreamwalker book & green-&-gold pencil.

Set back against my tree, & comfort into this moment. Study the crimson-&-blue washed colored covers, & their words. Some of them for right now.

*You Are Not Alone.
Write Something Good.*

Opens to the first page. Thinks of the many hours she'd watched dear Francisco at his work. *A picture, then? Not words?*

She starts to try a sketch of the White Tiger, from long memory, deep heart. The long arching curve of his back, the sweetness of his face. Stops, or at least leaves off. Something in this pencil gifts her skill she does not possess otherwise.

"I'm stalled," she says aloud, to me.

"Agreed," I reply.

"I have nothing more urgent to remember. For now."

"What then?"

She stands & looks at me arrived, my bookbag strapped on my shoulder, a quick kiss to the cheek of Aunt goodbye on my way hurried here.

"The Festival?"

I nod. We set to walking, the White Woods out of doors now to our *hmmming* & clear intent.

Sounds & musics of the Rutabaga Festival & Fleastock not long in reaching our excited ears. Hands clasped, swinging, as we walk along.

"How's the *Gr. Gr. Br. N.* going?"

"Hm. OK, I guess."

"Just OK?"



"I don't feel as full a sense of . . . velocity . . . as I wish."
 "Why?"
 "I'm not sure. Wondering if a map schemata might help."
 "Will it?"

I stop. "We have two choices here."
 Looks at me serious. "OK."
 "You continue now alone to the Festival."
 "Or?"
 "We veer off from it, for now."
 "To where?"
 "I'm not sure. But I think it would be more remembering."
 "Should I, we?"
 "We will be back. But some more of this first."
 She nods. "OK. We'll veer. Do you know the direction?"
 I shake my head. "We'll *hmmm* & concentrate on our task, & see whither the Woods brings us."
 She smiles. Nods. OK.

Next move, dude.

viii.

We walk the White Woods awhile together, neither bound nor not bound. As such, they let us pass while of course not arriving us anywhere.

Come to a clearing, & seems a good moment to have a rest & think a moment.

White Birch. We settle our knapsack & bookbag nearby. I pull out one notebook & sit us side by side to show Donna my notes.

She sees by my charts that I have a tracker of all of her Brothers.

"We're all bound for Abe's Beach of Many Worlds. And going to pass through the Thought Fleas' Rutabaga Festival & Fleastock."
 "And its Talent Show, yes."
 "Will I see any of them there?"
 I think a long moment. "Probably not?"
 "Because that would not serve the Narrative."
 "No. I think that the separate travels are part of the reunion to come."
 She's quiet. Still. Thinking.
 "So we each have to earn this reunion."
 "In a way, yes. But there's more too."
 "What?"

Now I am quiet, harking up the words. AXWhite Woods quiet about us. Aware, as always, but quiet.

"I lost my intimate touch with all of you, over time. The kind of weightless knowledge that is needed. There's the right way to do this, & any other way is wrong. Lesser."
 She nods. Listens.
 "What all this work has become, it's my *master-work*. My *mythopoeia*. I trust I can do it well, but I

cannot take doing it for granted.”

“Do you?”

“I don’t think so. But I cannot assume.”

She nods again. Waits more. I am quiet as these White Woods. Stay so.

Then, there is a distant sound. Not the Festival. Tis a music. Tis approaching, like a breeze. A kind of singing, but no singer to be seen.

And not one voice but many, braided together, a thick chorus of many flavors, different timbres & tones.

“*Laaaaaa!*” is what it sounds like as it nears us, arrives to our clearing, swirls delightfully all around us.

Donna’s face is transfixed in joy. I know it’s because she hears among the many voices those of her Brothers. This is a song of Heroes & Hope, & Donna joins in, feeling intuitively that this Braided Perfect *Laaaaaa!* grows stronger with each new voice which joins it. She also gets that *this is how* to reach out to her Brothers right now.

So we both join in, & the Braided Perfect *Laaaaaa!* fills us high & low—

And then it seems to be diminishing a little bit, moving along elsewhere?

Donna stands, sudden. “Quick! Let’s follow!” Has her knapsack shouldered & tosses me my heavy bookbag. I realize she is serious, & for a moment wonder to let her go on by herself. Her fierce face dissuades me. I’m not one of her dearly beloved Brothers, but I matter to all this. She’s going to keep me around as this, these, narratives go along.

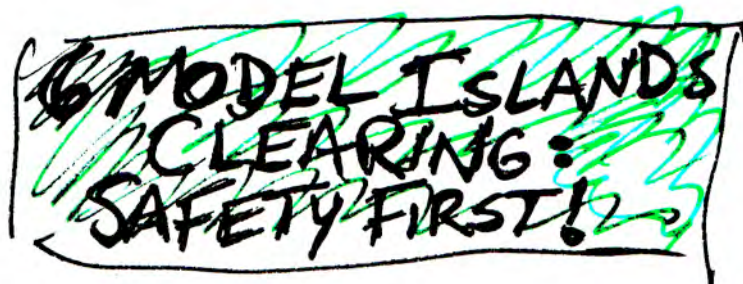
She runs, flat out, to follow the Perfect Braided *Laaaaaa!* & I clumsy make to follow. Never followed a speeding song before. Not sure it is quite possible.

Yet we do prove able to keep up, & find we near closer when we keep up our *Laaaaaa!*ing too. As we do, our travel seems less like running & more like something else. *Flying? Floating? Something.*

I wonder where our path is bound. Not worry, but more playful curiosity.

Suddenly Donna shouts, “There’s something up ahead! Hurry!” I hear her footsteps for a few more moments & then a . . . *ker-splash?*

I push my slow lope till I see something sparkling ahead among the trees. Then I notice a half-tumbled sign I think she missed in her gallop:



And I come upon the clearing that featured in the Rutabaga Festival & Fleastock several turns ago. I want to check my notebooks for the details, but first I see down there in the Model Wide Wide Sea, the Model Islands at a great distance, Asoyadonna swimming & calling out.

“Raymond!”

I cannot be sure that she can see me back up, here, but I know there is nothing I can do but join her.

From what I could recall, the 6 Model Islands had no one rule for entering. So I sort of bent down close to the Sea’s edge, making sure my bookbag of notebooks was zippered up every pocket, & sort of felt my way in. Fingers, hands, arms, legs, all of me entering the water till I was no longer at all where I had been, but now in the Model Wide Wide Sea, big as life to me.

Oh gosh! I was now flapping & splashing about, swimming somehow urgent to do. Calmed myself from panic a bit, then more when I felt a hand reach out to me. *Asoyadonna!*

“Here we are!” she splashed & smirked.

“Yah,” I gurgled.

“It’s a long way to the nearest Island. Can you make it if we take it slow, with rests?”

I would have bravely said “yes,” no matter what I believed, when I suddenly saw a shiny speck in the sky, growing bigger every moment.

“Look!” I called & splashed & pointed. “Calgary the Sea Dragon!”

He *thwup!-thwup!-thwup!* over us a moment. “Need a ride, my friends?” We cheered & waved, & he landed on the water nearby. Took awhile, but we slowly climbed up his green-&-golden back to his great lovely shnoggin.

To my wondering, he said, “Miss Flossie Flea always keeps some Model Guides on duty. Especially during the Festival. Folks do get curious! I believe the Kittys picked up some customers earlier today!”

Asoyadonna & I both marveled at this. “Can you bring us to the Island they went to?” I asked.

“Away we go!” cried Calgary in reply.

I motioned to Asoyadonna to sit right down on Calgary’s great shnoggin with me, & sort of tug up the scales around her, & settle among them.

“New Safety Scales,” I explained. “Now Calgary can commence his suave soarings & swoopings without worry.”

Donna smiled & marveled at this way to travel securely as Calgary rised up higher & higher into the sky. I lost track a little of if we were over the Model Wide Wide Sea, or the actual one. For a lingering moment, as I excitedly pointed out for Donna to see too, among the White Woods in the far distance we could see the Thought Fleas Great Clearing. Its stages, the Kettle of Rutabaga Soup, the crowds of Festival goers.

Then we sort of I guess began our deep diving swoop to the Model Island we were bound for. It was funny how again how the Model Islands & Wide Wide Sea became full-sized to our perspective, &

own sizes.

Calgary landed on the Island's Beach with perfect softness, & we made our slow way down from his shnoggin, to his scaly back, to his long tail, & then hopped off onto the sand.

I think he then sized down to talk to us better.

"Thank you so much!" we both cried, & hugged as much of his beautiful green-&-golden head as we could.

"Any time, my friends!" he said, as he stepped back & suddenly shot straight up into the blue, & was a moment later gone from view. *Wow.*

I think I now know where we're bound, & I think I know why.

"We're both bound to remember some things now."

"You as well, Raymond?"

I nod. Think. "I should not be apart from what I am pressing on you & the others to do."

"I suppose not."

Silence.

"On then?"

Silence.

"Raymond?"

I nod finally. "My work seems best when no matter the preparation I take, how long or elaborate, I don't know what next nearly nothing."

Take her hand. Walk into these White Woods.



To be continued in Cenacle | 120 | June 2022

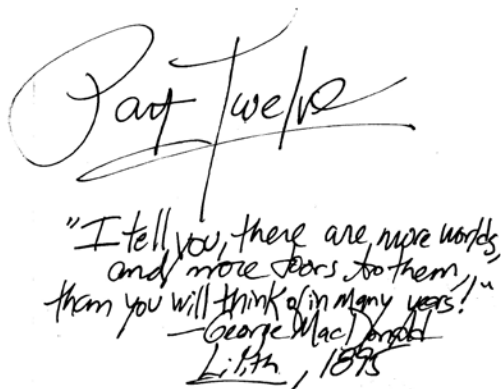


Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]



ix.

Remember some things. How many varieties, endless, of these? How to remember? Which things? No answers to this here, or anywhere else. Aborn, we live along the passing world. We remember. *How?* & *which?* change over time not just for us, but for the lands we dwell. What honored, what forgotten.

Thinking of McKenna saying *nothing lasts but nothing is lost*. This maybe the harder struggle. *Things change*, as one of my past books titles it. *The world moves on*, as King says it often.

But there it is. Time to arrive fully to here-&-now-&-back-there-&-then, & what sweet dirty low down dance they do.

Asoyadonna snorts, reading over my shoulder. "Sorry to interrupt, Raymond," no sorry in her smirk.

"We're waiting."

"For what?"

"That Hut over there?"

"I see it. But why did we stop?"

"The door won't let us in. Go try. I'll wait. And explain when you get back."

She queries me an odd look, then lopes over from the pretty White Birches I'd stopped us by, to scribble, & to tell why.

She examines the door thoroughly. High & low touching, peering as close as the still-rising moonlight will aid. Takes herself around the Hut completely. Wonder if she will try to scramble up the roof, but she returns instead.



"Well?"

"One door. No doorknob. No window. No other way to get in or out. You know the magick words?"

"We wait?"

"Then say them?"

I laugh. "No. We wait for the Full Moon to rise high above. Then, I think, will reveal the way in."

She nods, sighs, sits next to me.

Starts a moment. "I guess we lost that lovely song."

I shake my head. "I think it was leading us here."

Sighs again. "Nice to hear their voices again."

"Your Brothers?"

Nods. "Especially singing. We stopped doing that, toward the end. For all that happened, whatever good we did, if any, I miss the nights we'd break out in song around the fire."

I nod. Wish to ask more but decide to wait. Soon I stand, & walk over to the Hut. Asoyadonna follows. We stand before it quiet a moment. It is now a golden glowing surface. I first point to the words now visible:



Donna smiles. "But how?"

I then point to a kind of rainbow tracing on the edge of the door, & then to a faintly remaining rendering of a door-knob.

"Oh!"

"Are you ready?"

"Yes. If we must move along then, let's go."

I grab the door-knob, tho it is but a faint chalk rendering, & turn, & it *clicks!* & I push in.

Asoyadonna doesn't ask me how I know to do all this. She saw me earlier checking a little Secret Book in my book-bag, as well as scribbling. She's right. We enter, hands clasped now.

The room is empty & silent, & the door *clicks!* closed behind us. We wait a moment, also quiet. While I check. OK. On us. Talk.

"We have come to remember some things. I, as writer of *Labyrinthine*, *Many Musics*, & other works related to the Great Grand Braided Narrative. *Gr. Gr. Br. N.*, for friendly." I smile around at what still seems a dark, empty room. Then nudge Donna to talk.

"O. Um. Alright. I'll try. My name is Asoyadonna. That is the name I was given by my father the Tinker, in the Village we lived in, with my Aunt.

"Later, I discovered that they had found & adopted me when I was very small. I am originally, I think, from a planet called Emandia. But they were my family, & I loved them dearly. My father has passed.

"I travelled many turns with Brothers I later met, with whom we sought an Island, & on it the Tangled Gate, & within that a Cave with a Beast."

She stops. I know she has to finish. Squeeze her hand tight. She catches her breath. Resumes.

"We were shown marvelous things in that Cave, yet somehow we were all separated. I think, Wobbled, hither to yon?"

I think she's done, & will finish for us. But she does instead. "What things must we remember to do

the things we wish to do? Thank you. We are humbly grateful.”

I squeeze Donna’s hand, & close my eyes, & softly *hmmm*. She does too.

Guess I’ll go first. Open my eyes. *I am now somewhere else*. Close them. *Back with Asoyadonna in that Hut*. Oh. Guess I have to follow this through. I can still feel her hand, squeezing my left one, steady, so it’s alright.

Open my eyes. OK. New Britain Public Library. A work table in the stacks, near a window.

Right. So this is where I am sitting right now, writing *Labyrinthine*. What would that mean?

Maybe just being here. I did come down here, to Connecticut, to New Britain, to remember some things. Guess, for me, it has to be *this*.

I used to live hardly miles from here, in an apartment I shared with a good friend, for years. And, also hardly miles from here, is the University I studied at for years. Made many friends there. Read *many* books.

So this was my local library those years ago. And, recent years, I like to come down, once a year, from up in the Boston area, to visit old favorite places, especially those I wrote at.

Remember some things? I prefer the places I wrote at. The people I loved have passed, or moved on. Not hard to find me, or keep track of me from afar, if any wished to still.

Love is hard, spends live, its pain is real; sometimes its deepest beauty becomes a forgiveness; sometimes that is the only closure left.

I loved you all sincerely. I’m sorry where I caused pain.

I wish you all peaceful days, love to fill them, & beauty to bide by always.

Asoyadonna’s hand squeezes my left one, to startle me to resume. If there’s more.

OK. I keep coming down here to remember where I came from. This is where I am from. Not who I am, only a part of it. It’s not a bad place, even with me passing through once a year to evaluate it. In truth, I am now, at most, a kind of statistic, an old photo, memories for those with them.

I come to continue to have a *connection* in the way that I am able. Which means that I stay at the local hotel, yearly save for Pandemic years, & I bring my notebooks, Polly iPod, Gumbee for phone, other things, packed into the Blue Suitcase I have had for many years. No Internet, not a speck. Not on the Greyhound down, not arrived.

Been nearly three years, much farther along the Pandemic, glad I’m back & visiting.

Strangely, did not write more lines there while on that trip. Kept thinking I would, but the rest of the *Gr. Br. N.* took my time & attention. Tis fine. I don’t know what else I could have added. Maybe, simply, I renewed my commitment to *remember some things* simply by insisting on going down again, 2½ years since last time, much farther along the Pandemic.

I squeeze Asoyadonna’s hand to signal *I’m back, her turn*. I think she knew, but just in case.

She waits on something, *a vision? A memory?* Moments pass. Nothing.

Then, of a sudden, something falls out of her knapsack, left near the door.

It's the book Dreamwalker gifted her with.

Asoyadonna lets go my hand & walks over to the book, open on the floor. Funny: I notice the Hut, while still empty, is a little less dark than it was. Touch of the indi-glow around us.

Funny too: seems *bigger* than it was. Her walk over to her knapsack was about the same distance as when we came in, maybe not quite. But her walk back with her book is *much* longer.

She holds it out to me. I receive her book . . . very . . . slowly . . .

"Look . . . see," her voice strolls over to me as though across a small park.

I hold the handmade book opened, gently, in my hands.

The pages facing each other both have holes in them that nearly fill them. I look closer, & it's like the holes seem to go down & down, deeper in than the visible thickness of the book.

Close it for a moment, holding my place with a finger. Covers front & back have no holes, nor do any of the other pages when I peek at them.

Open it up to the holes again. Asoyadonna finally, fully, arrives to my side. We smile . . . slowly . . . at each other.

She gestures the book again. "Look . . . look . . . see!" Gestures me, slowly, to look closer at the pages.

"He . . . told . . . me . . . a story like . . . this once . . ." her voice is speeding up again a bit.

I lean my face into the open book which, as I lean closer, seems to re-size? to fit my face?

I press it closer, like a mask;
try, like she said, to *look, look, see*

x.

I don't know if I'm seeing these words, or writing them down, or feeding of them through my book-mask. Like this, some—

Saturated by the changing number
of the *cardiac blooms*, down below
in that endless field of them.

That's *not* really their name.
They just make my heart *slow*,—
skip—wish—yearn—

Stalked by my changing fears as
 I enter among them, wind & rustle,
 uncertainty becoming song, not quite
 violet, umber, pale blue, colors I do not yet know,
 but low humble my eyes, cram open my ears, to learn.

Barb gets me quick, then another,
 invitation to linger? Or tis
 my new green prison?
 [You tell me, you sent me here,
 along the path to here, to learn
 what you said I did not even
 know how to know.
Linger or prison?]

“Your instruction was simple, maybe
 it guides me now too. *Sing!*
Dance! Silence! Stillness!
 (Touch, lightly.)

“Scribble & scribble & scribble & scribble!”

“No more hiding what you are,
 what you aren’t, throw off
 those blooms & barbs alike!

“Now go see what is left when
 you are just root & stalk,
 lover of the soil, thirsting
 for sun & sky.”

“Raymond?”

“Eh?”

“You OK?”

I sit up groggily, still in the Helping Hut, Asoyadonna hunched over me.

“You were mumbling a lot into my book, & then you sort of slowly collapsed to the floor,” she explains, concern all over her kind & pretty face.

“Did you make out any of the words?” I ask, curious, & strangely greedy for them.

Now she smirks a little. “They sounded more like cackles than words mostly.”

I nod. Figures. Accept her hands to help me up.

Look around this still quite empty Hut. “Are we feeling ‘helped’ enough, Donna?”

Her smile now full on, she nods.

So we get our knapsack & bookbag, me noticing the room has shrunk back to its usual size, & we walk outside.

And up drive the bloo-eyed Kittees & their dear Friend Fish Murmur, in their Famous Boat-Wagon!

We both naturally hop into the back seat, & buckle right in. *Safety first!* The Kittees wait our instructions.

Asoyadonna looks at me too.

I wemble a bit.

“Tell me, Raymond.”

“I want to study my notebooks to figure out what next.”

She nods, unsurprised.

I now look at the Kittees & Friend Fish intently. “Can you bring us to the nearest Attic entrance?”
The Kittees bloo-eyed stare me, friendly I think, & Friend Fish smiles her gorgeous Goldfish smile.
“We’ll be there soon, CC!”

We both laugh at that, & settle back for the ride.

These White Woods ever beautiful to pass through. More kinds of trees than I could imagine to know.
Few paths through them, & of course such as Creatures & Thought Fleas do not need paths to travel.
I wonder at all I do not know about this wondrous place.

I’m not sure what we’ll come to for my request when we arrive to a clearing with a single, large, beautiful Weeping Willow tree. We pass under its long drooping branches &, within, see upon its trunk a kind of wooden fixture, one that winds round & round it, up & up, toward its unseen height.

The Boat-Wagon rolls right onto what now appears to be a curlicue path that does indeed take us up there. As often occurs in these White Woods, & this *Mythopoeia* as a whole, we all size to fit this event.

Up & up & up, round & round, & round, Asoyadonna & I exchanging many delighted smiles on the way. I am still wondering to where we are arriving, & how it relates to my request, when we arrive, quite suddenly.

Through a familiar curtain, in fact, the one that serves as door to the closet in the Saturday Juice Room of the Bungalow Cee!

We unbuckle & get out. I proudly show Donna my several standing cases of vinyl LPs, the lovely green couch, & rose chair, & long rocking couch. The many charming framed photographs on the wall, took by my Beloved, the Lady Photographer. One of my favorites show a glimpse of a book’s page set against the backdrop of the beach.

Also the Creature Common Liberry of Secret Books, a small wooden cabinet in the corner.

“So many!” she marvels, smiling. I nod.

“Thank you!” I say to the Kittees & Friend Fish, & they stare, & smile, & depart back behind the curtain.

We climb the stairs to the kitchen. My Beloved isn’t home but I show Donna more of her pretty photographs on the wall. The one of Clover-dale’s fallen-down barns is a favorite.

Up another flight of stairs, & onto a landing where, I explain, the *Creatures Tale*, aka *Travelers Tales*, are told most nights. Point out the pictures on the walls of the landing that structure the *Tales*. One of Marie the Famous Traveler in her Fairie grove; one of her brother Joe the Famous Traveler on his bike, bound for Marie’s school; one of a lily pond & its reflection of a mountain; & the last a photograph of a billboard depicting a strange road of strange figures, curving away from the viewer’s eye.

And up to the Attic Study where she has been before. I turn on the Attic Radio Dreamland Jazz station. Miles Davis at Montreux Jazz Fest, 1985. *So fine*.

I gesture to my Beloved’s armchair for her to sit.

“You sure?” she asks.



I nod, smiling. “She would insist.”

Now to work. I unpack my bookbag of its many notebooks.

Secret Books. *Labyrinthine* (third notebook). *Bags End News* (Vol. 18). *Many Musics*. *Dream Raps*. Others too.

“Can I ask . . . how are the others doing?” Donna means her Brothers of course, & her tone indicates both her deep curiosity, yet her hesitancy to ask.

I consider how to answer. “Some further along than others. Everyone at least partway.” She nods. Maybe thinks that’s all I can or will say.

But is it? I study a lingering moment the shifting eyes & red tail of KC Klock, hung above the Attic Radio in the corner near the stairs, & mull the squawk & smooth of Miles’s horn.

“Some are needing to remember more than you do to get there,” I finally say.

“Some?” she quizzes.

“Well, all of them,” I reluctantly confess.

She nods, unsure what else to ask. Then: “Can I help them, Raymond? Am I allowed?”

“I don’t know yet,” I admit.

She nods again. Gestures to my pile-high of notebooks. “Will studying these help?”

I regard my pile. Say nothing. Don’t know.

Then I pull out from a work table shelf my hardback copy of *Celebrated Cases of Sherlock Holmes* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

“Try *Hound of the Baskervilles*,” I say.

She nods at the draft copy of *Cenacle* | 119 | April 2022 next to my pile-high of notebooks. “That too?”

I remember the old motto: “Go long, or go home!” Hand this to her as well.

She smiles, starts with the Doyle volume.

“My old school honored me on graduation with that volume. Never read it till I came up here,” I smile back, & get down to work.

Asoyadonna settles back comfortably in the grey armchair, & is soon lost in fictional pages of Victorian England, a place & time whose inhabitants are long passed from this world, but whose best & worst magicks have long still lingered on.

For a long stretch, I read recent pages of this book, raucous sounds of Miles Davis & his mates tearing it up at the ’86 Montreax Festival, on Polly iPod, through the Attic Radio.

Now Joni Mitchell’s *Court & Spark*, the sweet anarchies of her words & music.

“I think I know what’s next,” I say finally, as Donna is looking up & asking, “Is the hound of this book real or a phantom?”

I nod to both of these. Then smirk & say, “But he’s no Benny.” We both laugh at this.

I stand up from my work table. "Bring it with us," I smile.

"To where?"

"The Festival," I now grin.

Now she's up. Tucking the Holmes volume in her knapsack.

"How?"

I point to the obscure far corner of the Attic by which we'd come & gone to Aunt's Pensionne. "We just need to turn the other way," I explain, somewhat obscurely.

She nods, knowing that if I don't know the way, precisely, I'll write us there, one way or another.

Sure enough, there is an *other way* to turn. A wooden hallway, like often before. Cool, as though air-conditioned. But not, no.

"How all this, Raymond?" she asks, of a sudden, us till now striding quietly side by side where the hallway wide enough.

"All this?"

"How your world, back there," gestures behind us, "And yet here we are." Gestures wooden hallway.

I nod & smile. "Yes, here we are."

"How?" she insists.

I slow, stop for a moment. Slip my bookbag from my shoulder to the floor, up against the wooden wall. Slide down to sit. She joins me. The wall *hmmms* ever so slightly.

"I don't know, for sure. Maybe, when small, when one does not find happiness nearby, one imagines it must be far. And so goes looking."

She nods, tho looks only half-convinced.

"I grew up poor, never travelled anywhere till I was a young adult. Books & TV, movies & records, the morning newspaper, these were my roads away."

"Away?"

I nod, but more words stall. Try more. "How I get from there to this Attic, bound for the Rutabaga Festival & Fleastock, with you, one of the six Brother-Heroes, I don't know."

She's listening close, perchance there's more.

I take a deep breath, in, out, again, relax. Try more. "This matters. I *know* it does. I know I'm *better* for doing this. I make the world a little better for doing this."

She nods. "So we, my Brothers & me, extend this sentiment? This philosophy of Art you pursue?"

I nod. "However fine & flawed you are, in your varied aspects, you are Heroes."

"Your books are bigger than us though?"

I nod.

She thinks a lingering moment, then stands up again. Helps me up as before. We press on again, quietly, but in good spirits.

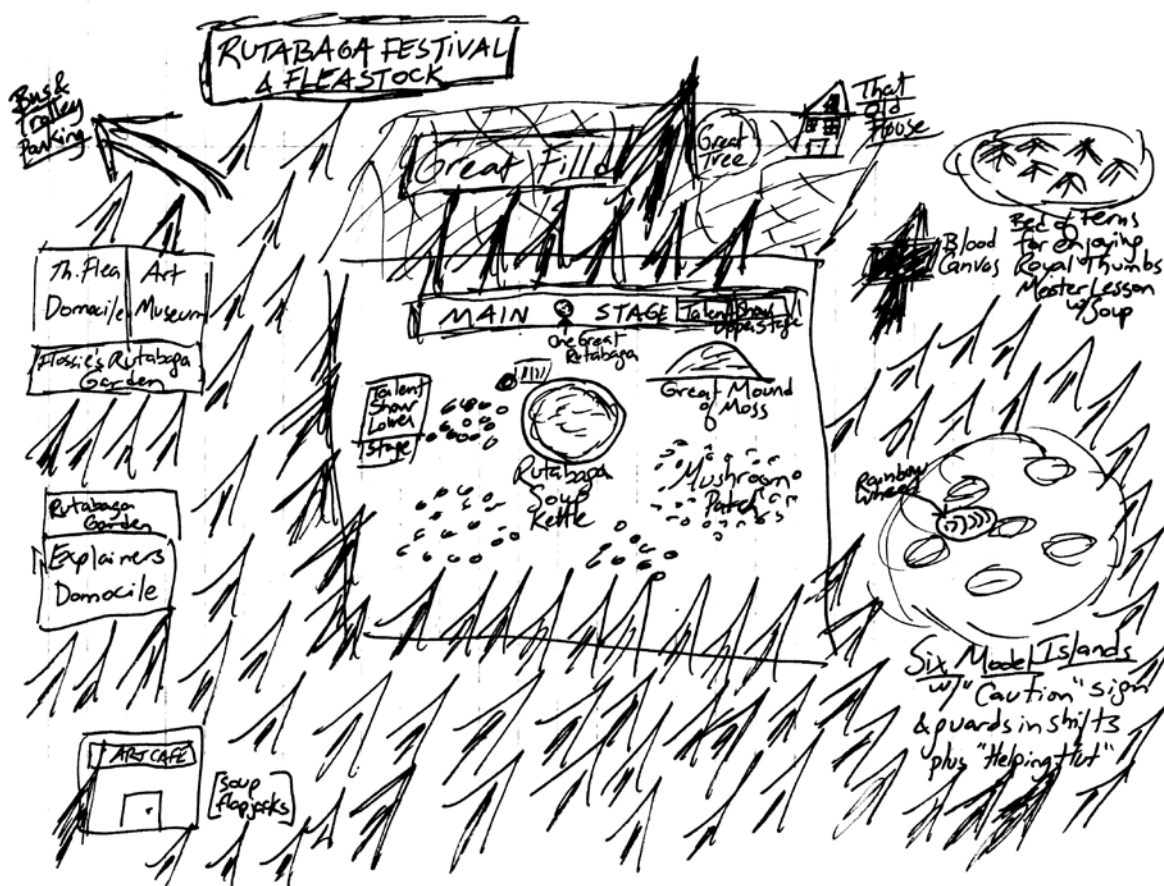
The cool air grows cooler as we walk, until there is daylight up ahead plain to see. The Attic hallway becomes now thick, thick branches, easily wide enough to still walk upon.

Come eventually to the branches' trunk, & there the same kind of curlicue path we'd rid up in the Kittees' & Friend Fish's Boat-Wagon. Find we can, with a little care, slide down this path, Donna first, her Hero's protective spirit strong about me.

White Woods again. So beautiful, & now, even more closely than when we veered away before, come the sounds of Festival shouts & cheers.

Asoyadonna stares me plain. "Yes, this time?"
Not a pause, I nod.

She smiles big as sun, & takes my hand. We hurry along till I suddenly stop us. "We need our map," I say firmly. Scrounge in my bookbag till cry out & pull out a crinkly sheet. Unfold to show.



We crouch close to study. Donna's face struck with smiling wonder.

"Those are the Model Islands we traveled!" she cries & points. Pauses. Looks around. "Travel yet?"
I nod & shake my head. Shrug the difference. She laughs.

"My Brothers have all passed through?" she asks curiously.
I think a moment. Count on my fingers. Seeming calculating a hard one.
Open my eyes, twinkling. "No." Our laughter more raucous.

We attract folk with our noise.

Approaching us are several Thought Fleas, sweet & magickal residents of these White Woods, some of their Guardians in truth.

I sideways glance Asoyadonna to find any expression of familiarity in her face. More smiling wonder. OK then. Start there.

"I guess the White Woods is so sizelessly vast that nobody knows everyone in it," I say aloud. She vaguely nods.

Getting more to the point, I smile at all, & start into my introductions.

But it seems like Asoyadonna the famous Brother-Hero needs no introduction to these Thought Fleas.

Miss Flossie Flea, one of the more well-known Thought Fleas (though not a "leader," as they do not know of such), comes up to Asoyadonna, smiling happy. She is dressed in a long leafy kind of dress, wearing an apron (she is famous far & wide for her special Rutabaga Soup recipes), & a kind of tool belt around her slender waist (worn especially during Festival times when repairs more often needed).

Flossie & Asoyadonna (who is still taller, tho we have all resized for talking ease) hold hands & paws &, smiling closely each other, softly *hmmming* after awhile. I've occasionally thought how it's a pleasure even just to watch folks *hmmming* together.

Up to me come Flossie's companions, the nearly-as-well-known Speed-E-Flea & Slowlee Joe. Dressed in bare feet paws, pantaloons, suspenders, vests, bow ties, & fezzes.

I know what this means.

"Hiya, CC," says Slowlee Joe, friendly, slowly of course.

"Hi, guys," I respond, friendly too. CC another of the names I answer too. "Is the Weekly Production going on in the Great Clearing?"

Speed-E shakes his head, speedily. "It's the Talent Show Lower Stage. Two performers did their amazing known talents, & went through the curtain to the Upper Stage, for hidden talents, but haven't come out yet."

I nod. I also know who Speed-E means. Dreamwalker, one of Asoyadonna's Brother-Heroes, & his dear friend the Gentleman Photographer. Their path from Stage to Stage is taking a long route through Dreamwalker's past. *Remember some things.*

I wonder to tell Asoyadonna when she & Flossie are done *hmmming*, but her smile at me when they finish tells me she knows. *This* is why they *hmmm'd*.

She still looks a little shaky, knowing one of her dear & long-unseen Brothers is so close. But resolute. "He will be OK," she says to me. "We will re-unite & hug at Abe's Beach. I will deliver him Aunt's kiss!"

I nod, & take her hand, & we walk with these kindly & magickal Thought Fleas the rest of the way to the Rutabaga Festival & Fleastock. It's not far. Donna squeezes my hand excitedly again,

Suddenly I call, "Miss Flossie!"

She turns & looks at me quietly. She always feels I should be scribbling more than I do. She's right.

But I think she'll like this. "Would you Thought Fleas kindly show Asoyadonna around the Festival? I have some pens-&-notebooks work to do."

This, Flossie smiles me friendly for, & nods.

"You're not coming with me, Raymond?" Donna looks me half-smirking, half-sincere.

I look at her & the several Thought Fleas, & the beautiful White Woods about us, & shake my head.

"This *Great Grand Braided Narrative* has slowed too much, by my reck. At this moment, two of your Brothers are at Abe's Beach of Many Worlds. You & three of the others are not. That's for me to figure out, no more delays."

"Two have made it?" she smiles delightedly.

I nod. "Time for me to map out for the rest of you."

She hugs me close. "*Make Art Now*," she says in my ear.

I nod & wave them along their way.

* * * * *

Interlude

I've been writing *Labyrinthing [a new fixtion]* since June 1, 2006, when my Beloved & I lived in Seattle, Washington, 3,000 miles west of here, on the North American continent. I thought of it as the third of a kind of trilogy that included *Things Change? [Six Thresholds][a new fixtion]* (2000-2005) & *Why? [a new fixtion]* (2005-2006).

Did I intend or foresee its path with me from West Coast U.S. to East Coast U.S., several changes of address, 3925 pages & counting, in 16 years & counting?

No. But it did seem like culmination as much as continuance of the writing I've been doing now for over 40 years. Why keep writing them, these "new fixtions," finishing one & then onto the next? Neil Young snarled it best, years ago, "It's all one song!"

The *Tangled Gate Mythopoeia*, my collective name for all my works, came long after 2006. I can say that all these works—*Labyinthine*, *Many Musics*, *Bags End News*, *Travelers Tales / Creatures Tale*, *Dream Raps*, & the *Great Heroes Adventures*—all came to comprise the *Mythopoeia* with ease.

Now, recently that is, I've kicked the stakes higher, conjured up the *Great, Grand, Braided Narrative [Gr. Gr. Br. N. for friendly]*.

Where these various works dwelled closely to one another, so to speak, occasionally crossing narratives, even while coming to share one complex geography & history, now they are each telling one strand of a greater story.

Each still what it, uniquely, is, told how [some written, some orally narrated], & how often it is told [near daily to near annually], but they share one narrative's drive & goal.

The Claude Monet that painted the "Grainstacks" series in the 1880s *is* & *is not* the Claude Monet who painted the "Water Lilies" canvases from his later years till he passed in 1926. Same brilliant painter at his easel, brushes & paints, not a lot else.

1959's *Kind of Blue* Miles Davis *is*, & *is not*, 1969's *Bitches Brew* Miles Davis. Same brilliant musician, blowing his horn, not a lot else.

1977's *Eraserhead* David Lynch *is*, & *is not*, 2006's *Inland Empire* David Lynch. Same brilliant filmmaker, writing, directing, filming, not a lot else.

1969's *Clouds* Joni Mitchell *is*, & *is not*, 1976's *Hejira* Joni Mitchell. Same brilliant singer-songwriter,

her guitar, piano. Her voice, lyrics. Not a lot else.

Their works got stranger, deeper, made greater demands on any audience to pay *even closer attention*. Accept that those earlier works *did not* predict, & *cannot* fully explain, what came later.

All this said at length to then say *none* of these Artists themselves could have foretold their later works. Art, as life, works forward. The best of it remembers too, of course, but most often (as Emily Dickinson said in another context), “slantly.”

I am telling one narrative right now, “great,” “grand” by its own hyperbole, & “braided” as a hint of its strategy.

The challenge is that each of these projects, as noted, tells in a unique way. Little chance (not *none*, but *little*) that any of the others would have an *Interlude* like this. *Labyrinthine* shakes its tail-feathers as straight or meta as it wills.

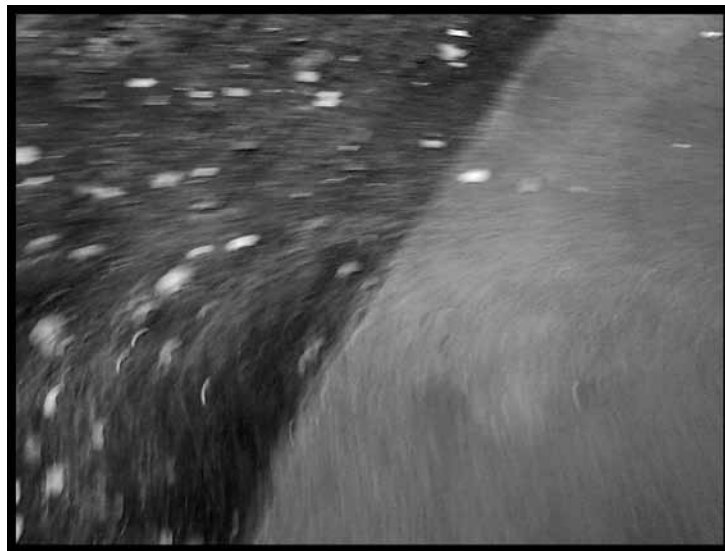
So getting Asoyadonna to Abe’s Beach has gone slow. For one thing, I am in it. I am in *Labyrinthine* what might be called “quasi-fictional.” No. Even better. Think of me as “quasi-semi-fictional.” Even less cooperative explanation, per syllable.

It may be she continues along awhile without me. I will be interested to find out.



To be continued in Cenacle | 121 | October 2022

* * * * *



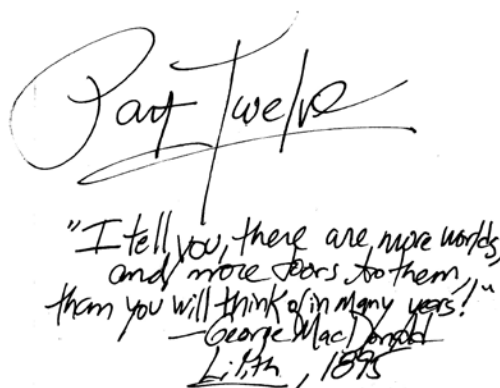


Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]



xi.

I've been wondering about my creed *Mark Art Now* in terms of *Made Art Then*.

Old notebooks of mine. Really old notebooks, my earliest. Wondering how to talk to who I was, when a long ago boy.

But more, how to *collaborate with him*. Surely this strange, but I find that, within my notebooks, I like myself pretty well. Better than the rest of me, by far often.

And my very recent dare is to open up a channel through time & space to him, the great & small distance between us.

Uncertain what of this.

But coming are my tries.

But what would be the point of such a channel if it was passive? if we looked at one another through far ends of a lens?

No, what makes the past interesting to my Art anyway is how to *transform it & carry it along*—make it something . . . *further*—

Not what he knew to write—

Neither what I do—

Something further—

What tis? Don't know yet.

Call it . . . *radical collaboration*

Not much really the philosophizing kind, not in any organized way, still, here:

- 1) I = what I have
- 2) I + you = we = what we do
- 3) I + you + you + you + etc. = what is possible

These are all critical, all for the learning & better nurturing of the world.

If I learn what I have, really dig into the deep stuff of myself, that is something good. Foundational, yet incomplete. I *cannot* know all of me without crossing the border from inside to outside; without witnessing *your* self's deep stuff. Each of us is not fully active in all of what we have *without we*.

But we can be limiting too. Family, friends, schoolmates, work colleagues. Clubs & cults & political & religious parties. I easily patches into a we around me, familiar by tongue, culture, shared living. The borders are not very far still. And, outside of them, the *unknown*, the *other*. Can remain forever so, may or may not. But yet *shouldn't*.

Greater we is where shared assumptions about the world fall apart. Where certainty is exposed as simple belief; local custom, family ritual; prejudices wrought by history; economics, gender roles, religious tenets, societal laws.

Greater We is where we choose what is possible to create from what countless *wes* share, & what they do not. The work of Greater We is even harder than *we* & *I* because it may seem more distant, like an *option*, a *novelty*.

There is less than majority push for Greater We. The feud & ferment of we seems enough to some. Others *prefer* to remain in perceptual lands of *right & wrong*, *them & us*. *Us & other*. Us & our rules for prized behavior, & for punishment.

This may all seem far afield, or virtually disconnected with where this section began.

Yet. My reaching back into I, that's me trying better to figure out *what I have*. How to better get to *we*, to *Greater We*. How to make these ideas *more* than passing.

I have a beat old blue notebook (labelled in black ink on its cover "Scriptor International") full of stories written long ago that would lead to this one. I pack this old notebook into my bookbag, with the more recent ones; stand up, & walk whatever way in these White Woods, *thither-bound* for now.

xii.

Since I have *neither* destination in mind, *nor* a good *hmmm* to get me *thither*, I do not arrive *anywhere* in particular yet.

That's OK. Maybe relax a little bit more than usual in these White Woods. Enjoy their strange light, ever subtle colors not just in the trees, but in the air itself. A guiding hint seems to be: *pay more attention, & more to pay attention to*.

I wearing my black R.E.M. t-shirt, the one with the orange globe depicted on it. Green plaid button-down jacket over it. Beat but comfortable blue jeans. Old dear hiking boots. Lennonspecs on my face. One of my several jah hats on my head. Bookbag by strap on my shoulder. Red hair fairly long, hazel eyes (KD calls them), something of beard & moustache. Good get-up for travel.

The trees about me are old, sturdy. Some likely alien to any known guide book. I suspect these White Woods share amongst the Many Worlds as much as these share Abe's Beach, the Ancienne Coffeehouse, Attic, & a few other places. I have a list somewhere.

I suspect too that I will re-join Asoyadonna sooner or later, along her path to Abe's Beach, & joyful reunion with her Brothers.

But . . . something else . . . right now. Something different.

I find my walking self joined by my dear Creature Tender, MeZmer the White Bunny, hopping beside me.

The only advice she has ever given me so far, in the English, is: "scribble, scribble, scribble . . ." which, I have to say plainly, cuts to the heart of me. All else serves toward, or obstructs, this activity. How simple a soul to be, in a way, & yet not, in another.

I *know* what I *should* be doing. The rest a life's changing world to better tend.

Also, & strangely, & luckily, this is work I can easily, & happily, do. Writing is not, never has been, like it is for some, a struggle. It's Art, primarily, & craft, necessarily. I write as breathe, as beat, as compulsorily.

This is not to knock at others—their better & lesser days. Each makes, & walks, a unique path.

More to knock at the *idea* that a life devoted to *Art* must be, perforce, one of struggle & privation.

The marketplace can bring those. Addictions of myriad kind can too. Being a live, mortal, vulnerable being too.

But Art itself? What makes it, & how, & when good, & when not—this is fermenting magick at play, not the stuff of biography.

xiii.

Asoyadonna & Miss Flossie Flea strolled friendly into the Great Clearing where occurs every turn the Rutabaga Festival & Fleastock. Hand in paw, they strolled.

Miss Flossie asked Asoyadonna how her travels had been. Asoyadonna told her recent travels with Raymond the Author guy. Attic, 6 Model Islands, how they met at the bus station.

"Where did you travel with him before there?" asked Miss Flossie curiously.

Asoyadonna smiles to speak, but doesn't. Tries again, & doesn't. Slows their stroll.



"I . . . don't remember," she says.

Miss Flossie leads her away from the Festival throngs to sit by a White Birch. Leaves her a moment, with a raised paw, then returns with a bowl of Rutabaga Soup, & a spoon. Asoyadonna accepts with a vague smile, & begins to slurp up soup. Calms her, but still no recollections.

Miss Flossie waits, patient as Creatures, & lightly *hmmms*, just enough to color the air around them, like a kind of opaque screen. Not to attract Asoyadonna's fractured attention but to steer folks by them.

Finishes her soup, & hands Miss Flossie the bowl & spoon, but as though less here than more. Miss Flossie's *hmmm* accompanies her back to that bus station . . .

Talks softly aloud, not realizing she is, as Flossie *hmmms* & *hmmms* . . .

"I was with Benny my dog, & it was like we had been traveling a long time together. Everything we needed in my sturdy old knapsack. We had our travels down to a kind of routine. I remember it's like I wasn't *worrying* anything, but then again I wasn't really remembering too much either."

"Where were you going?"

"I . . . we . . . no destination. Not really. I felt safe with Benny. We'd sleep close on buses, & I think we'd, like, dream together? Sometimes I thought he wanted to tell me something, like help me *remember*, but I resisted. He didn't push."

"Remember what?"

"I didn't want to. What felt safe was traveling. Eating together. He used this red cup for his food, I'd keep it clean."

"What else did you keep in your knapsack?"

"Oh, food. Dried fruits & nuts. Water. Clothes. A few books, but I didn't read those."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. Wait! There was one. But it was a comic book. Called *Action Man & Bunny Girl Save the World* . . . *Twice!* I'd read that to Benny when he couldn't sleep."

"Do you remember the first bus? Or how you met Benny?"

She leans deeper in, eyes still closed but a bit more relaxed. This *didn't* need to be a struggle. These were *her* memories she was grasping to pick up again, know anew. Like the one of her father the Tinker, & Aunt, together affixing the Flower Stars to the ceiling above her bed at the Pensionne.

Relaxes more. Senses, like Raymond did, learned, at the Helping Hut, that opening her eyes right now would be different, tell her more.

Time to remember some things, Donna, & her eyes open to the close sight of a shaggy face with a long nose, & a tongue eager to lick her friendly awake.

This is Benny the dog, in the moment we met. This is how. Him licking me awake.

"Hello, hello," she greets him, gives him a good hug or two, & many scratches on his black & white furred head.

"Where did you met Benny?" asks Flossie from somewhere near & far both.

"White Woods, like these. I was in a clearing. My knapsack nearby, sort of half-opened, some of its pockets, like we'd both tumbled to the ground."

"Or been Wobbled."

Silence. Then: "Yes. I think so."

"So you traveled with him?"

She smiles. "He was easy to travel with. I felt lost, disoriented, but he stayed close. For awhile we were in the White Woods, sleeping in clearings when we came to them. It was peaceful."

"Do you remember before that?" Flossie asks curiously.

"I didn't then, not clearly."

"And you met Raymond at that bus station next?"

"There were others. I think one was up in the mountains. I remember . . ." she laughs. "It had a great hall of pinecones!"

Flossie laughs too. Guesses this is probably High Station, on the many-sided mountain of many worlds, but does not say aloud.

"And another, strange, it was shaped to look like a train car or a key, but hard to say!"

Central Station, thinks Flossie quietly again.

"I don't even now remember all of it, but it helped telling you," Asoyadonna now opened her pretty eyes & smiled sweet at Miss Flossie, who returned in kind.

Then, somewhere in the throngs nearby, there was the sound of a wild cackle arriving to the Great Clearing. Flossie stood up, helped Asoyadonna up with both paws, & they hurried over to discover a crazy-eyed, merry cackling Imp holding her own in a crowd.

Then she saw Asoyadonna &, with a twice-merrier cackle, she skittered up to her. Donna kneeled down low, holding out her hand the nibble-sized Imp sniffed, a lazy gnaw or two, then hopped on with many strange click-clicks & noise-noises.

Asoyadonna knows well of Imp from her several Brother-Heroes' long friendships with them, & her own occasional encounters. She knows one thing sure: Imps are both *very* intentional & completely *planless*.

So she studied her crazy eyes & merry face, her pleasing pandy bear visage, & turned to Flossie for more.

Cacklings, gnatterings, & Flossie listened close, paw on chin.

"You . . . speak her tongue?" Asoyadonna asked.

Pause a long breath before answering.

"She doesn't really have a tongue, as such. It's easier to understand by, um, trying less & less."

Asoyadonna nodded, now better recalling her brother Odom saying something similar once, long ago. "The better you play her game, the better you understand," he twinkled & laughed at his own Imp in hand.

Flossie listened again, or maybe *played* better attention. A few cackles & gnatters of her own.

"She's here to guide you."

"Guide . . . me?"

"To Abe's Beach. Where your Brothers are gathering," Flossie said, smiling sweet.

Asoyadonna studied this Imp close & . . . nothing. Then she recalled the nights when Imps would swarm, merry cackling, around some clearing they were camped in. She & her Brothers would cackle back, high & low, sometimes for hours on end.

Cackle now? Maybe not. It happened or didn't. But still good. "OK," she smiled.

As though in reply, but likely not, more coincidence than ought, the Imp cackled wild & leaped from her hand, skittering her way by mid-air to the ground, & away.

The till-now quiet crowds let off a hearty cheering cry, & urged Asoyadonna to "follow that Imp!" & she did. Who slowed just enough for Asoyadonna to keep her sight.

Flossie had been quiet smile watching when she realized where the Imp was going. Alas, too late to stop it or explain. She did follow, though, & watched from a careful distance.

It was a seeming at first black canvas, & Asoyadonna forgot everything else when she came upon it, hung on a tree trunk, something of a fair walk from the Great Clearing & its noisy happy Festival activities.

Somehow it was *most* visible among the shadows & contours around it. It *waited* those come to see it. And Asoyadonna could somehow sense that at least some of her Brothers had been standing here before it, like she did now.

Holding up, just two or three feet away, she chased & caught her breath, shook her head a couple of times for emphasis, then gave over fully to whatever it might offer.

At first, nothing. Black. *Was this all?* No. Francisco had taught her that it was *not* solely the painting's job to teach a viewer how to look upon it. The viewer had to participate. Care enough to do so.

She tried again, & still nothing. *Focus, Donna! Focus, breathe, wait.*

That glint. A knife. Roddy's? And, nearby, Dreamwalker's *Hekk* stick, its patches of Indigo? That blue-green dab, oh, Odom's coin-purse held close by one of his hands? And the King's long grayish hair? Francisco's strange hat, & a paintbrush in his hand?

And finally, inevitably, herself. Crouched & close together with the rest. The looks on all their faces. Fear, exhaustion. Resignation. Not a lot of fight left in them. Yet arrived, finally, where long they'd intended.

Had they paused like this in the Cave of the Beast, this is surely how Francisco's brush would have honestly rendered them.

But *why here?* Yes, she was sure that this was Francisco's canvas, or else at least one he had painted in.

But why? To discover the reason they'd been Wobbled far from each other? Yes, *but did it matter?*

"Does it really matter, so long as we find each other again?" she said aloud.

For a moment, the painting did not respond, even if it was supposed to or could.

But then it did. It showed brief, fractured scenes of many Wobblings. Great buildings, forests, seas. Spaceships, planets, more & more.

"We have to try to change things before they worsen more," she said softly, realized. "We are Heroes. Or were. When we reunite we have to be again . . ."

Asoyadonna had unknowingly staggered away from the Blood Canvas & onto the soft healing comforts of the Great Mound of Moss. When she woke, Miss Flossie Flea was next to her, with a nice bowl of Rutabaga Soup to feed her, when ready.

xiv.

MeZmer the White Bunny, & my dear Tender & friend (or at least friendly at times) continue our slow walking-&-hopping way along through the White Woods.

The cheerings of the Festival grow as we near. I look down at MeZmer for her preference. She sniffs twice without looking up, & hops on. Alright then.

Passing through countless pathless trees we arrive suddenly to the Thought Fleas Great Clearing. It is indeed crowded with many happy kinds of cheering folks. Thought Fleas, Creatures, people-folks, many others. The Festival is again more fully & openly welcoming to the Many Worlds. Posters & colored threads abound for many to find their way here, & they have & they do.

MeZmer notices me sort of veering toward a lovely old oak tree, to have a set-down for awhile with this notebook & pen. Again, sniffing twice obscurely, she chooses by her own strange White Bunny thinkings to join me. Bunny in lap, pen & notebook, write on.

It's surely getting well along in this *Great, Grand, Braided Narrative* [Gr. Gr. Br. N. for friendly].

And what I'm thinking mostly, in the cool of this White Woods evening, is: *don't rush it*. Yet, too, *finish strong, finish soon*.

It's a breathless, magickal balance, *knowing* how to do this or just, simply, *doing it*.

I now notice, perhaps by MeZmer's renewed sniffings from my lap, that someone is climbing up to the Lower Talent Show stage.

"It's like Miss Flossie's leaflets promised!" cries someone from the crowds. "Everyone has a hidden

talent!” And there suddenly burst into the air all around us these folded sheets of paper fluttering down.

One lands near us, & I pluck it up to read. MeZmer, like most Creatures, is spooked by the English, but she listens quietly to my readings.

The paper is soft, like bark, & many blended colors, like a rainbow? Miss Flossie’s visage is rendered upon it, & the words read: “Miss Flossie Flea promises that all will discover their hidden talents at the Rutabaga Festival! Come one, come all!” And signed in a strange, girlish paw by Miss Flossie. Hm. *I believe her.*

Look up again & . . . *wowie zowie!* If that isn’t Leo the Dark Man from Bags End up on there on the Lower Stage! Everyone friendly hushes everyone else to listen.

“My name is Leo. The rest I am known by is I guess a kind of nickname. I have long been the Janitor of Bags End.”

There are many cheers, whether for Leo, or his being a Janitor, or because he lives in Bags End, hard to tell.

Last I knew of him, he was coming to this Festival to chase down a comic book dilemma. Come with Algernon Beagle, & Princess Crissy, & Odom the Brother Hero, but them now gone on to the Beach of Many Worlds. Come with others too, who I don’t immediately see around.

Leo talks more. “My known talents are usually thought to be cleaning up Bags End, & especially scraping Miss Chris’s bubble gum off the side.”

And here he demonstrates with his, um, scraping tool. “You have to get in real good to the crevices where it clogs up. Round the corners & into the edges. My scraper can adjust to any angle, high or low. Sometimes I have to go very slow, but sometimes I have to heave-ho at it!”

And he shows his various scraping maneuvers in detail. The crowds seem fascinated by this strange character, & seem to respect his strange work.

Miss Flossie Flea now comes on stage to shake Leo’s hand & lead the clappings & the cheerings. Then she says, “Now, Mr. Leo will tell us of his hidden talent!” More cheerings.

Leo sort of hems & haws nervously. Starts slowly. “Well, you see, I didn’t know it was one, haha! Until I received by Mrs. El’s mail delivery the latest issue of my favorite *Action Man* comic book.” He holds up a very slender volume to polite cheers. Leo smiles happily. “I love Action Man’s caped heroics the best too! I am glad you all are fans! But you will see how confused I was by this new issue.”

He reads from the first page: “They were seeking the Cosmic Treasure, & wondered where it might be.” Turns it, & reads from its backside: “And so Action Man had heroically helped them find it!”

There were gasps from the audience. Some muttered about the lack of narrative exposition; others about the disappointing build-up to the climax; someone even questioned the realism of its character development.

Well, before a full-on literary rumble could ensure, Miss Flossie raised her paw for attention. “That’s

why we asked Mr. Leo to finish the whole story!”

Many gasped, & then everyone cheered. And, at precisely that moment, come bounding onto the stage two new individuals.

Both very familiar to me. The smaller one a bloo-&-pink Piglet Creature named, at least sometimes, Bellla. The taller yellow Puppy named Alexander from Bags End, & Algernon’s brother.

The sometimes-Bellla waved her paw like a champ & smirked delighted for all the world. “Bonjour! Ca va? Je m’appelle Mademoiselle Ancienne Cookié de La Studio Grande B. Je suis avec mon ami, A. Puppy! Le Bump Artiste Extraordinaire!”

Well, did everyone gathered in this clearing speak sorta-French? Maybe not. But they cheered & cheered anyway. Best way at this moment to say, “Hello!” & “Welcome!”

Miss Flossie, smiling delighted at these fellows, raised a paw to speak again. “Mr. Leo & his friends will pass through the green-&-golden curtain, & emerge later from the one on the Upper Stage”—& here she pointed far down the clearing to the much taller Stage/Platform & its own small Talent Show stage—“to show us their hidden talent!”

More cheerings as Miss Flossie handed Leo a knapsack to carry, maybe with all their needed Art supplies? How did this all work? “Hard to say,” goes the old Creatures’ saw.

But they waved & smiled & then turned & passed through the green-&-golden curtain.

I was cheering with the rest, now standing near the back of the crowd, when a soft girlish hand touched my shoulder. “Miss me?”

Twas Asoyadonna!

xv.

I *had* missed her & hugged her my happy. We sat back down under that oak tree, & she told me of her expeirences at the Festival. Blood Canvas, Great Mound of Moss, Rutabaga Soup.

“And the Talent Show, of course!” we laughed.

Then someone secreted amongst her many pockets laughed too. Well, cackled more like it. Plucked out to show on palm, twas an Imp!

“But which one?” I asked.

“Miss Flossie told me this is Abe the Ancient Sea Turtle’s toothéd Imp. Also known as the First Islander. She’s come to lead us to Abe’s Beach of Many Worlds, by the shore of the Deeper Deeper Sea!”

She paused, studied me a moment, then flung her arms wildly around me. “I’m going to finally see my Brothers again, Raymond!” The First Islander Imp mixed herself up in our hug, cackling wildly.

I noticed a letter had now sorta poked out of her pocket. I could see writing on it that said, “To Mister Algernon Beagle, Editor of *Bags End News*, Currently in Residence at Abe’s Beach of Many Worlds.”

OK, I admit, I cheated & plucked it all the way out to read.

Asoyadonna smiled big & explained. “Mrs. El, the Post-Mistress of Bags End, asked me to deliver this letter to Algernon when we get there.”

“Is it from Lori Bunny, who is in Imagianna right now, interviewing Boop about his Epic?” I asked. I had read about this in *Bags End News*, of course.

She nodded & tucked it away more safely.

And at that moment, Miss Flossie Flea came up to us, smiling for all the world. “The Kittees & Friend Fish are waiting for you nearby, to take you to the *Good Ship Ker-Plow-EE!* & the start of your trip down to the Beach of Many Worlds! Are you ready?”

Our smiles & cackles showed we were *more* than ready!



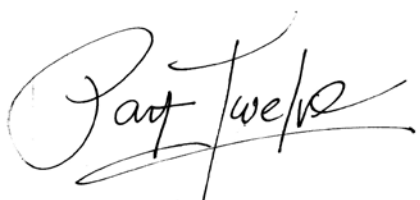
To be continued in Cenacle | 122 | Winter 2023

* * * * *



 Raymond Soulard, Jr.


Labyrinthine [a new fixtion]


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

xvi.

For a page or two, *switch! click! veer!* another way, trusting this book, this crazy-long fixtion to carry me along & well, mull a moment, but not more is needed, what of me is not fixing to board the *Good Ship Ker-Plow-Eeee!* is back in the Attic Study of the Bungalow Cee, work table, Dreamland Jazz on the Attic Radio, no DJs, not even any ads, came back suddenly after a long silence, then one time I clicked the radio on & voilà! the static was again music & been so ever since, a reassuring kind of timelessness in this, fit perfect to this Attic, to my best moments here, like this one, just come now from reading one of my Sherlock Holmes volumes, *His Last Bow*; & then a few new pages of *Bags End News*, writing of Abe's Beach of Many Worlds where that *Good Ship Ker-Plow-Eeee!* at least partially bound; & later to tell aloud the *Travellers Tales* aka *Creature Tale* a floor down from here, a landing long become a nightly stage for this telling, also set on Abe's Beach, further along in the story; *ah, um*, as Mingus says—

But to go deeper into this moment & the random thought I had this morning that home day after week after month after year because pandemic reminds me of the same thing from my bad teen years, but then because poverty & broken family. Different, yes, but not completely.

Ah, um.

I feel this *Great Grand Braided Narrative* [Gr.Gr.Br.N. for friendly] getting toward its conclusion, at least conclusion of a kind, & this is fascinating to see play out, see each disparate narrative begin to twine with one then more of the others, & wonder those remaining to twine, & what it will all mean then, stray ideas always, but *what can it all be that matters?*

That's what I ask. The six narratives will come fully together & then tend away from each other again, though maybe never as far again, & the six Brother Heroes will be delivered back fully to the *Many Musics* poems for their new travels & adventures, whatever these might be, sweet jazz guitar in the air here, old hairy photos of me taped up at this desk, not smiling in any of them, KC Klock's red tail

wagging out the time, & it took me this long to revv down from the working day.

“Raymond!”

Asoyadonna’s brilliant, pretty face lifts my head from my page, & I see that we in Boat-Wagon have arrived to the shore of the Wide Wide Sea, & anchored in its shallows the very strangely beautiful *Good Ship Ker-Plow-Eeee!*

“Alright,” I quietly marvel. Asoyadonna nods & smiles.

Switch! Click! Veer! back to main narrative.

Thank you, *Labyrinthine [a new fixtion]*.

xvii.

As much as Calgary the Sea Dragon, the Master Air Current, the Boat-Wagon, & many others transportate across the lands & Seas of this *Tangled Gate Mythopoeia*, & yet live & know of themselves & others, so too is this *Good Ship Ker-Plow-Eeee!* A boat. A being. Both. Of course.

I admit: I do not know as much of this ship so far. Somehow its captain is an Imp. Commandeer Masta’ Splasha’, who seems to take more delight in setting up many buckets of water on the deck to splash in than aught else—

Asoyadonna & Dreamwalker met on this boat, this told of in *Many Musics*, along their way to first meeting the rest of their Brother-Heroes. Thus her delight to be travelling this way, some of the way toward Abe’s Beach of Many Worlds, below the Wide Wide Sea.

The ship’s history, though. Its strange, if always merry, Commandeer? Maybe to discover more of this in coming pages—

Donna holds my hand excitedly as we walk up the boarding ramp. No sign of the Commandeer.

She leads me by memory below deck to where she recalls were her quarters & Dreamwalker’s.

But does not find them. I wonder if the *Good Ship Ker-Plow-Eeee!* modifies for each new voyage. Somehow that makes sense in these Many Worlds.

Two cabins at the far end of the pssageway look unoccupied, doors left partly open for clue. She picks one, smiling again. Sets her great knapsack on the bed, for later unpacking. From one of her many pockets plucks out a sack of what sniff like, even to me at the doorway, potent shrooms.

“Earth Creatures from my Aunt,” she smiles even more brightly. I do too.

I give her a good quick hug & leave to unpack in my cabin. End up sort of curled up with my beloved old bookbag on the bed, salty Sea air drifting in the open port window. Drifting away to a sleep I did not know I needed . . .

On the table next to the bed, a White-Faced Pink Cat Radio. Volume barely audible. Something about China. What can that be on this boat, waiting on its voyage upon the Wide Wide Sea? I leave it on for

the moment . . .

I wonder more about this boat. Is it magickal? Well, it does not fly, nor travel beneath the water. It sails upon the Wide Wide Sea. Feels solid about me. Maybe sways deeply within.

Is it a great ship? Many sails? Or one? Maybe three.

I think about the trip ahead, how we will eventually be transported to Calgary the Sea Dragon, who will dive us *down-down-down* the Deep Deep Sea to arrive to Abe's Beach of Many Worlds.

"What these people are going through . . . Tiananmen Square protests . . ." the Cat murmurs.

Am I asleep now? Or that liminal state, that *is* & *also-is* state?

Is this ship shaped like a Dragon, like the *Dawn Treader* in Narnia?

"guilt & [. . . static . . .] suffered by those who fear . . ."

Yes, it is a ship, sails the Wide Wide Sea, neither above nor below, but the deep sway I feel is not just the water. It's the breathing. *A boat. A being. Of course.*

Can you talk? Could you understand me? Can I ask who & what you are, wherefrom, how made? Is this liminal state where this most possible?

I relax deeper into my bed, still holding my bookbag close. Breathe slowly, more intentionally. Reaching down deep.

xviii.

Maybe Dreamland as I descend lower & lower, like to the ship's lowest deck, whatever this can mean?

I touch down softly, like as though landing from up above? Maybe Dreamland, but maybe not quite, but more like kin, & what could this mean?

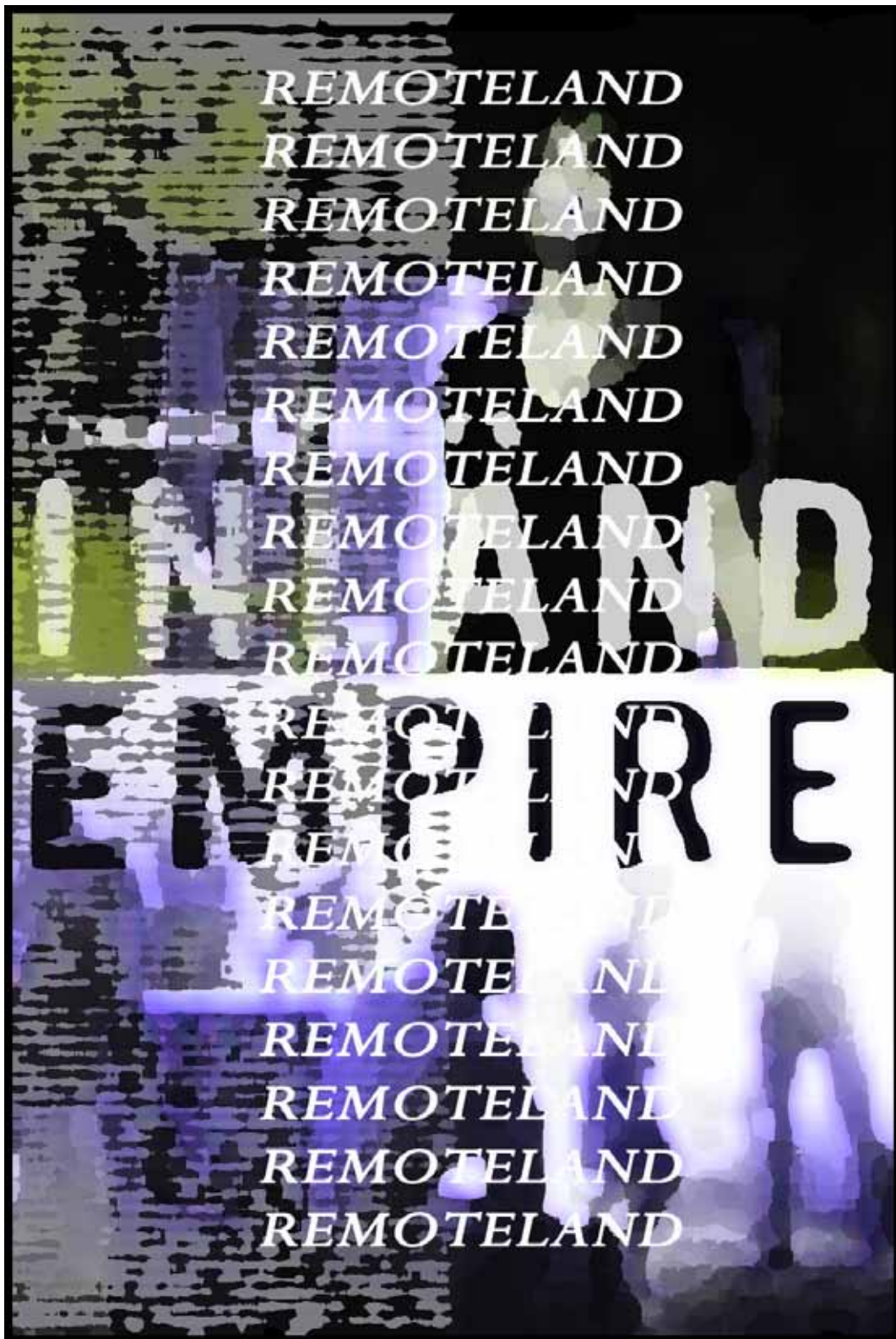
The Wide Wide Sea is all around me, as thought I am immersed whole, no Good Ship bearing me safely along, yet I am neither wet nor somehow flailing deep in water?

Well, then, OK, what do I do about this . . . experience? Try, & find I can walk along, whatever manner of body this is.

But where to? Always a good question, & usually where to start. *Toward where is safe*, thinks me. It's hard to know aught of this.

Art is where I feel *most safe*. Where all is familiar, & exciting both. Where the tools & the work make sense to me.

This maybe-Dreamland deck begins to cohere into a coffeehouse. Big work-tables, old armchairs, frosted picture-windows because tis the Season of Lights, jingling music in the air, my notebooks & black pens all laid out & ready—



Wait. The Wide Wide Sea somewhat returns while I mull this.

I'm trying too hard, & not quite right anyway. Unthinking it, I close my eyes & let myself fall back, & strangely up, & strangely up, till I am in my bed in the cabin next to Asoyadonna's.

Open my eyes, & maybe a little gift from below: there is a writing table next to the porthole. My notebooks neatly piled on one side of it, room for work. On a little stool next to writing table is a black-&-white Dümönt TV. Hardly big as a toaster, but still. Hardly need else. Save that shelf of books affixed to the wall.

Maybe I wasn't ready for that down below?

xix.

Asoyadonna told me this story later, after it & some other strange things had occurred. We were sitting with several others now I'll mention later.

She had left me & gone back to her own cabin to unpack. And, like me, she'd quickly tired into a nap.

"But I didn't travel down to some strange Dreamland bottom of the ship," & she smirked at me. I nodded, probably deserving said smirk.

"I found myself in the White Woods, following after the First Islander," & here herself cackles her delight from her current lazy couch of Asoyadonna's palm, which she lazily g-naws.

"Faster & faster we chase along, much faster than I ever could awake." Another cackle.

Here Asoyadonna scrunches up her pretty eyes, as though to recall better.

"But then . . . it was like . . . I was chasing someone else. Someone very different."

"It was like I had this . . . um . . . niggling feeling of something . . . as I hurried on. And then I saw, among the pathless trees ahead of me, a beautiful Grey Ow-ell Creature. Had this Imp brought me along to him?" She smirks at the Imp, who titters, g-naws, & of course does not explain.

"And then I woke up! Thought maybe I heard a distant bang. And it was nighttime now. Full Moonlight out the port-hole window.

"I stood up, still not yet unpacked, still in my road-weary travel clothes, but wishing more than all to gulp up some of that fresh Sea air.

"So I left my cabin, walked down the wooden hallway, & up the wooden steps to the main deck. Found a spot to lean over the railing, few were about anyway, & for awhile I just breathed & breathed.

"But then I heard someone coming up those same wooden steps from below. Not wishing to trouble anyone with my strange mood, I moved way down the railing, & resumed my, ah, breathing meditation.

"But something drew me nearer that other person, maybe that same niggling. Even more importantly, his walking stick had an indigo glow to it, faint one but surely there. He was leaned on the railing, like I had been, just intently watching.

"And upon me like a sudden wave, I got it. He, Dreamwalker, was the wave! That was his *Hekk stick* glowing!

"I was not sure how to approach him at that moment. Was not even sure, honestly, that I was not still dreaming.

"But I had to, & did. And I said to him the only words I could . . .

"I'm betting you had the same dream, with the same result, that I did."

"He hesitated, then turned to see me." The two of them now holding hands, still in reunion's bliss.

They embrace for just short of forever. That shared dream had arrived them, on this ship, in this way, to this moment.

We listeners all smile. Well, one of us cackles. It had been a night of many cackles . . .

xx.

When I wake later, feeling far more put together now, I decide to check in on Asoyadonna in her cabin next door. Sling my bookbag on my shoulder, just in case.

But she's not there. Then I hear, faintly from the main deck above, the sounds of shouts & laughter? Maybe she's up there? Decide to find out.

Up the wooden steps to the main deck, already crowded with folks. They were lined around the perimeter of the deck, many kinds, I won't say I knew all, because much of the deck was filled with leather buckets of water. All sizes, placed high & low, deck floor to crow's next on tallest sail.

Never such an array of buckets had been seen before!

Now I was pretty sure what this was about, though had never so close up witnessed this kind of event.

Someone across the deck waved to me. Oh! Asoyadonna! And her with . . . Dreamwalker & the Gentleman Photographer! Strands of the *Great Grand Braided Narrative* [Gr.Gr.Br.N. for friendly] drawing nearer.

For all I knew of these things, I was just as surprised when *not one but countless* Commandeer Masta' Splashas descended like a cloud, dozens! Hundreds! Wild cackling cries!

And then they all began to splash in an incomprehensibly complex display of splashing prowess! It's like every bucket was being splashed, high & low! Dizzying cackles every which way! Folks had to step back a moment just to behold the splashing wonders before them!

Then, in a moment, it was suddenly over. No sign of many or even one of herself. She'd come, she'd splashed, she'd gone wherever she goes.

Well, now, everyone was laughing, & feeling jolly, shaking hands & paws, expressing howdys & well-wishes to their fellow travelling folks. I was sure this was the Commandeer's wish. *She* knows how to entertain.

The ship continued along its now merrier course &, by evening, I had found the cabin of Dreamwalker & the Gentleman Photographer, Asoyadonna & the Imp there too, where we often gathered to talk.

xxi.

Dreamwalker & the Gentleman Photographer's cabin is small but neat. Its two bunks one atop the other, built into the wall. G.P. shows us the button he unintentionally found in each. Press it, & they slide into the wall completely. Press again & they come back out. Right now, Dreamwalker's upper bunk is tucked away, & he & G.P. are sitting side by side on G.P.'s lower one.

A table & two chairs are the other furniture, & Asoyadonna & I are in the chairs. The First Islander Imp was around, but may have gone off to find fresh shenanigans with the Commandeer(s) Masta' Splashha'(s).

On the table is a very strange-looking book & Asoyadonna's sack of mushrooms. "Earth Creatures," she calls them.

Awhile in just telling travels. I listen quietly, marveling, smiling at all of this. The ship's passage is peaceful.

Dreamwalker gives me a pointed look, following Asoyadonna recounting my travels with her.

“You’re Raymond the Author of . . .” gestures vaguely around, “all this?”

I nod & shrug my shoulders. “I write it all down, or narrate it, or sometimes both.”

He nods, mulling. “Do you know what will happen next?”

“Not usually. At best, a few steps on, a couple of ideas.”

Nods again. Looks smiling at Asoyadonna. “Like Francisco & his paintings.” She smiles too.

“It’s more fun this way,” I suddenly continue. “More like discovery & recounting.” They nod, wonder if I’ll say more.

I consider. “I only know my world so much. It is ever all sorts of mysteries to me. The world of this *Tangled Gate Mythopoeia* is the same. I probably know more. But it is probably also limited by me too.”

“How so?” asks G.P. He seems more unsure of this all than the two Brother-Heroes.

I consider. “Well, there are many, many things true of my world, whether I know of them, or understand them, or not. This world companions me in a sense . . .” I trail off, shrugging my shoulders.

“What do you know of that book?” Dreamwalker asks, pointing to the one on the table.

Without glancing, I say, “You share it with Zeeya, your counterpart. You brought it with you from the Manse on a sorta-whim. You & Asoyadonna looked at it earlier, the page it seemed to insist. The Great Tree at the Heart of the Worlds.” I refer to my notes for some of this.

“We’re bound there?” Dreamwalker asks. His tone far less interrogation than curiosity.

I nod. “Eventually.”

Asoyadonna speaks up. “Would some tea help?” Meaning Mushroom tea.

“I’m not sure,” I confess. “What’s most important is that you two make it safely to Abe’s Beach.”

“And me?” asks G.P., more eagerly than he intended.

I look at him. “I think something else. Once they are with Calgary, you will have finished your Hidden Talent.”

He nods. Not upset, but curious.

I check my notes. “We will get to Abe’s Beach too, but I think we go elsewhere.” I look at Dreamwalker & Asoyadonna. “Should anyone ask, we are fine. But we have something to do once you two are safely arrived.”

“What?” ask all three.

I smile & lean forward to them all. “On the Beach is a Door. This Door is the best way for the King to arrive to the Beach. Remember this advice for when it is needed. G.P. & I will take care of the other end.” Stop. Smirk Asoyadonna. “That being the Helping Hut at the Thought Fleas’ Rutabaga Festival & Fleastock.”

xxii.

I think about this year past, & maybe part of its shared wisdom was to humble me to what I can or cannot do to affect this world.

I learned from payjob experience again, that I am only so much, that my real power & gift will likely never match well with situations where I fundamentally do not understand what is desired to occur.

Which is to say, somewhat vaguely, that I *get Art best*, & commerce *far far less*.

And this should not be a troubling thought, too much. The getting of profit, nobody will ever convince me that this should, or could, matter more in my life than Art.

I think I confused this for awhile. Thought maybe I’d come into some new kind of understanding of the world. Thought I could do it *all*. Was told I wasn’t good enough. Or, maybe kinder, not a good fit.

Where to turn for salve, for meaning, for reassurance that my value is real? Art. *Always, ever, Art*.

I *get* the ferment, the deep down thrill of creation. I take a knee to *nobody* in this sphere. *Not now, not ever*.

I have to make a wage, that’s how all this works for me. Because I would never sell any Art associated with me, or my projects. I sell instead my ancillary skills with language, with editing. These don’t matter to me. They are for cash sale.

I confused all this for awhile. Thought I was thought of, & could be, someone I just am not.

It was, some years ago, 25 maybe, when I sat at my desk in my ZombieTown hovel, on a New Year’s Day like today (where I currently sit in an annual visited & well loved hotel room on the Maine coast), & declared myself an “Artist.” I’ve never retreated from that feeling, that faith, that happiness.

My challenge is, like Rilke wrote, to build my whole world around this faith. To stray, however well-meant, is to fail. I learn that again & again. *Art is my core*. The rest must orbit ’round it best I am able to make it.

xxiii.

Anyway, write on. Our travel aboard the *Good Ship Ker-Plow-Eeee!* lasts several days, tho maybe I can’t say for sure after that evening of Earth Creature mushroom tea with Dreamwalker & Asoyadonna & G.P.

You see, it began in Dreamwalker’s & G.P.’s small cabin. Asoyadonna had left for just a bit to fetch her tea, well, make it & bring it in her teapot—

“Lootsie,” she smirked & showed us.

A kind of, um, Creature? Clever floppy hat, pretty dress, perhaps a pretty Bunny? Happy to

pour out our cups of Tea.

The evening became a bit, um, *disjointed*, thereafter. Or *detached* a better word?

See, I was sure of one thing & that was G.P.'s & my task. I had become aware of this task, you see, as I learned from the *Travellers Tales* & the *Great Heroes of Yore Adventures*, two strands of the *Great Grand Braided Narrative* [*Gr.Gr.Br.N.* for friendly], that the King was on Mt. Cloudy Day now unwillingly, being Wobbled back each time he tried to leave, & the way determined to get him along to Abe's Beach of Many Worlds, & long-awaited reunion with his five Brother-Heroes, was to bounce him, with those Great Heroes, Miss La & Miss Ta, via their bloo-&-pink Nest, from the top of Mt. Cloudy Day to the Thought Fleas' Rutabaga Festival & Fleastock, & then bring him to the Helping Hut Asoyadonna & I & others had passed through, where G.P. & I will have placed a Braided Canvas, which like a portal will bring him to Abe's Beach.

So, sure of this. Sure that, upon arrival to Abe's Beach, G.P. & I will find the Door there, pass through it, to the Helping Hut & . . . something, something, something . . .

Cosmic Treasure? Old notebook? Sherlock Holmes?

I am clearly swinging forward & back in time, place, & knowing.

"Raymond?"

"G.P., are we there yet?"

"Where?"

"The Door. On Abe's Beach. Cosmic Treasure."

"You're with us. Me, Asoyadonna, & Dreamwalker. On the *Good Ship Ker-Plow-Eeee!*"

"Hand him her. Maybe she can cohere him."

Suddenly a lazy g-nawing in my palm.

Oh an Imp. Light titter. Crazy eyes.

"You won't tell me, will you?"

"Eh?"

"I don't know how the plan works. Not all of it."

Cackle-cackle!

Open my eyes, the White Woods? MeZmer in my lap? *Scribble-scribble-scribble?*

Close my eyes. *Once. Twice. Breathe. Relax.*

"Seeya later, Masta' Splasha' Gata'!"

Wild cackles.

Commandeer Masta' Splasha'?

Calgary the Sea Dragon?

"Here . . . we . . . go!"

Asoyadonna smiling hands me my teacup. We all raise our cups to toast. Lootsie smirks pleased.

My cabin & something about China on the White-Faced Pink Cat Radio.

Then the mini-Dümönt TV clicks on instead & I think to be watching Roddy the Brother-Hero &

Gate-Keeper walking one of the strange hallways of the Forever Spaceship, somewhere below Abe's Beach of Many Worlds, & maybe something indiglow in the distance, & several figures too?

[*Ah, um*, remarks Mingus.]

"Do you want us all to reunite on Abe's Beach?"

"Yes, of course. All these strands braiding to finale."

"Are you sure, Raymond?"

Open my eyes. Oh. My Attic Study. Of course.

On the Attic Radio, via my beloved Polly iPod, sings from the Fillmore Auditorium, in 1997, Tom Petty & the HeartBreakers, hours of songs . . .

Tick, tock, red tail of KC Klock . . .

"Don't say a word, my little honey bee . . ."

We tap teacups & sip.

Close my eyes. Deep Deep Sea Café? Diving deeper & deeper? I sit at my work table, watch our descent through the frosted picture window . . .

G.P. & I don't accompany Asoyadonna & Dreamwalker & the First Islander Imp to Abe's camp on the Beach of Many Worlds, toward their reunion with two of their Brothers, & many others. We slip away in the surprised delight of our arrival via Calgary the Sea Dragon, us all buckled into Boat-Wagon (*Safety First!*).

See, um, Abe knew we were coming & why & . . . yah, um, Cosmic Treasure . . . & . . .

G.P. supports me as needed as we make our way to the Door, & slip inside . . .

It's dark. And a little cold. I remember an instruction from later.

"Your camera."

"I have it."

"Start snapping."

"It's dark!"

"Look into the viewfinder & snap. Each snap will show where we are so we can move forward safely."

It works. Snap by snap, we move slowly forward. Snap by snap by snap.

We arrive to the Helping Hut. Sit heavily on the floor.

Hear voices outside. The King's & the Great Heroes.

We have to hurry.



To be continued in Cenacle | 123 | Summer 2023

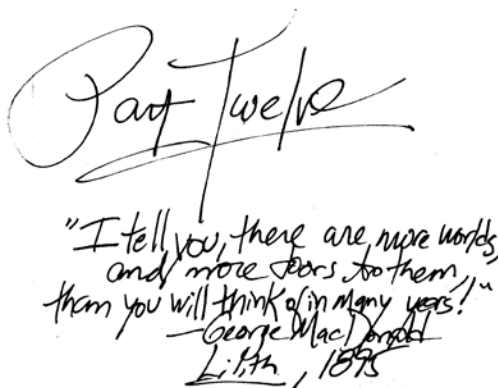
* * * * *

Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]



xxiv.

Even if but a few lines right now, add them here & now.

I suppose a long stretch of late I will end up in my Attic Study, Dreamland Jazz station on Attic Radio.

Feeling often safer here than most elsewhere. Can't stay here but stretches sometimes.

Windily snowy out, another New England winter has locked in.

I don't seem to have much depth or breadth to offer here tonight. Just love of black pen & paper.

And a deep wish to return here soon—

Sometimes seems too like I more write *Labyrinthine* in my mind than in this right & proper notebook—and this reminds me of a recently passed friend—one try is to call him a trucker-poet—

He used to say he'd had conversations with me & my beloved more often in his head than in person—since our visits were annually at best for many years—

What were those conversations like? Can't help but to wonder to know. Ever wonder maybe.

And mine with *Labyrinthine*? Honestly, maybe more like simple promises. As in: "I'll be back here soon. Ever & again."



This section an *interstice* among various narratives, new lines needed to read live on my *Within's Within* radio show tonight when *Lx's* turn comes—

OK—but more—always more—

This feeling that the *Gr.Gr.Br.N.* has reached this deep, strange, lovely place—I don't have all of its answers, but no worry over them coming—

When I wrote my *6 x 36 Nocturnes* years ago, I was learning the art of mixing I've been doing since—& what's tastiest in this treat of an idea is that it has no far, stopping wall—

The question ever to discover how to mix *more, better, deeper, stranger,*

how much wilder the fun can be

how much? ever more to know

To continue a week later, weirdest fixtion-diary-thing imaginable—progress on *Many Musics*, deep into solving the puzzle of King's path from Island of Tangled Gate to his exile at the Great Tree at the Heart of the World—

And always wondering the *Tangled Gate* mythopoeia itself—it encompasses the whole of my writing, of my Art in every form—Many Worlds I know some-not-much-of—

To be so enthralled—unending love & curiosity—a ceaseless game—

And one niggling to go ever deeper—

And another more a question:

—what of the rest of this book?

—its other characters?

—other poetry?

Next door deeper in? Or new one outside somewhere else? Why a choice in this? I've one imagining mind—it's all one Imaginal Space—

No limits exist unless imposed & followed

—The Braided Canvas leans against the wall farthest from the Helping Hut's door.

"We have to hang it."

"Hang?"

"And step through."

"Through?"

"And assure the King's path to Abe's Beach of Many Worlds."

"Assure?"

"Lift it up with me. It's heavy."

Grunts.

"That hook . . . there . . . guide it into place . . . straighten . . . again . . . good . . ."

"Yes. Good."

The door is opening.

"Quick! Now in!"

"In?"

And if the rest of this book let back in, resumed, who & which & what?

How does this *Tangled Gate mythopoeia* connect to all the rest?

To Bowie? To Maya? To Rich Americus?

They preceded this *mythopoeia*, though already somewhat relate to it?

I ever prefer to leave none out nor discarded. *The map includes all.*

How? should not be a hard question to answer. In sum: *each* can walk through *any* door. That's not narrative itself, but a truth undergirding it.

Maybe what's next for the *mythopoeia* is this new mixturing. Who actually walks through each door, & what happens next?

Right now, my most important concern is writing toward that moment, narrating toward it, when all six Brother-Heroes come together again in reunion. This has been many calendars in coming. It feels like a long-arriving apotheosis, & is so close, yet not quite arrived—

Twill be *arrival*, then *continuance*.

Not letting up until it occurs will foster not letting up thereafter.

Whatever it *means*, it *matters* . . .

Anyway, we step through the usual way . . . close eyes . . . *hmmm* . . . & arrive . . . somewhere . . .

“What now?”

“We wait for him.”

“Then?”

“We make sure he gets to Abe's Beach.”

And so we wait.

Waiting . . . where? Open eyes, just really wondering where . . .

A long wooden counter, dark, old, burnished. A bartop. Behind it a wall collaged with photos, posters, newspaper clippings. Shelves of liquor. Up high, a black-&-white Dümönt TV next to a White-Faced Pink Cat Radio.

“Named Alice,” I smirk pleasurably & pointing, for G.P.'s very uncertain benefit. He nods a bit.

Look around first time in a while. Of course this is Luna T's Café's barroom. This book will return here from time to time, when feeling needful for roots.

Many rock posters on the wall. Hendrix. Beatles. CCR. R.E.M. Woodstock '69. Human Be-In '67.

Jukebox in the corner chockfull of 45s old & new. A pinball machine. A video game console shared by

Galaga & Ms. Pac-Man.

This is the pausing, lingering breath while G.P. & I are still arriving, such as we are here at all. So nobody else clearly here with us nor we with them. Insist our slow arrival for G.P.'s benefit, few or many questions.

He surprises me though. Somewhat.

"I think I was here once," he says slowly, cohering his thoughts. "There was a live band in . . . that other room?"

"Noisy Children," says a voice I realize is not mine because tis Bowie the Spy's, a few barstools down from us.

G.P. nods uncertainly. "Maybe? I didn't stay very long. They were good though. I was tempted."

Bowie nods. Now regards me, & a slow mocking wink. Green eye or blue eye? I'm unsure.

G.P. turns back to me. "Why here? Will the King arrive here too?"

I think a moment, but really needless. Shake my head. "Maybe this is just for me. Wanting to pass through here for a page or two again. Been awhile."

He nods. A hand now wiping the counter before him slowly reveals fully to belong to Mr. Bob the barman. Aged in his 60s perhaps, short neat pepper-grey hair. Neat white shirt & black tie & dark trousers obscured by his apron's colourous splatter patterns.

"What's yours, bud?" he asks G.P. friendly. I notice my diet cola with ice already arrived.

G.P. looks at me uncertainly. "Do I drink?"

I think, not really, nod, smile, glance at Mr. Bob. "Chuck, could you get our friend here something mixed & fine? He is, as you can see, a photographer. And a gentleman to boot!"

Mr. Bob nods, smiles, & is at his mixings in one seeming long gesture.

"4000 pages of your book?" Bowie catches my eye with his two strange ones again. Raises his oddly-shaped sortof-martini glass.

"Thanks," I say, smiling this more than I feel. Raise my soda. "Here's to the next 1000 pages taking less than the near-6 years it took this time."

They all toast, if only for my benefit.

xxvi.

By when the King & his five Brother-Heroes finally arrived to the Island of the Tangled Gate, they were too heart-worn to finish their quest successfully.

Their bonds not broken but frayed. Some, most, would have yet stayed in the Mainland Kingdom they had lately built up. Maybe despairing there *was* a Tangled Gate to be found, & rathering to believe in what visible good their hands & backs were building day by day there.



Even the King's obsession had shifted from saving the world to recovering his mysteriously lost beloved Deirdre. Even her visionary appearance on their boat now bound for the Tangled Gate, her assurance that another mattered now far more than her, did not convince him.

When they found the Tangled Gate, only with the help of Creatures, & then the Cave of the Beast, their intent was shattered, & they were Wobbled from hither to yon. Most of them.

Roddy the woodsman not. Perhaps his long & deep sojourn among Creatures in the White Woods spared him.

The King was not because his obsession to recover Deirdre too powerful. I think the three days he alone remained in the Cave of the Beast were a wrangle. A something. A change in him.

He asked for help. He was told no.

"Raymond?"

"Hmm?"

"Sorry to interrupt. We have to go."

"Now?"

"Yes."

I am still wrestling all this.

"Hello."

"Hello, sir."

"Hello, sir."

"Did I make it back to Abraham's Beach? Finally?"

"Yes, sir."

"You did!"

"Do you know which way is his camp?"

I think. Given left or right, I'll always choose left. I point thusly.

The King smiles at us. Handsome face, lorn eyes, grayish beard. If I were a girl, I'd swoon. Nearly do anyway.

He nods us thanks & heads off. G.P. & I are frozen a moment.

"I think we did OK."

"Did we?"

"We got him here. No Wobbles!"

We hurry after him, clumsy, abashed.

xxvii.

I slow our walk from the King's eager pace, because I need a bit to consider. G.P. slows with me.

"The heart of this evolving finale is about forgiveness."

"OK."

“Not every character. Not the Creatures. But the King & Roddy foremost.”

Nod. *Whoosh-whoosh* of the Deeper Deeper Sea nearby. The heavy, colorful musical sand under our steps.

“Not like they finally see each other, & all is forgiven. More like a slow, clumsy process.”

Nod.

“I feel the personal element to this. How much have & have I not forgiven myself & others in my life.”

Curious: “How much have you?”

“Not nearly enough.”

“So your struggle becomes theirs?”

“Yes. Simply, yes. But *becomes* is not the *same as*.”

I suddenly set down on the sand, & notebook & black pen appear in my grasp.

“Our love lost its bottom notes. Its bassline. Still floated, as love long known does, but without root now, & so away from us, you from me, me from you . . .”

Pause.

“Your dreams of her clawed you from within, where nothing protects. There was no path *forward* for you. No *next* step. Only memory, loss, & the deepest boniest claw in you urging a move, like only one choice, thus none, *return, return, return*. . .”

More?

“I blocked your way. Our shared Kingdom blocked your way. All but that pointing, bony claw blocked your way.”

Mm.

“You would return with me there, to retrieve our Brothers, to retrieve your Queen. You & me, & an army enough to bring down that Gate & all within.”

Go.

“This smiling mania in you reared up slowly, like a great wave in dreams, ever & ever more with no recall of before & no retreat from it.”

. . . .

. . .

. .

.

“You would return with me. The mystery of all that occurred now simply a war’s tactical retreat. Not any of it to understand, nor care in it, just reassemble & return.”

.

“We spoke less & less, till none at all. Smiling mania does not know refusal, or other ways to do.”

“Why did I try to persuade you? Why didn’t I clap you down safely till I was surer of my path for us?”

“Why? You are my *King*. You are my *Brother*. A heart given in fealty never fully returns. I spoke to who you had *been*, groped for *him* with my words, sought our bottom notes. Whatever its story, however dark, collapsed, love does not undo. Cannot undo.”

“Forgive? Forget? Nod & let go?”

I stop. Pack up my notebook in my bookbag, black pen in my pocket. Nod to G.P. enjoying the Sea, & we walk on a bit faster, to catch up to the King.

xxviii.

Near a month since most recent lines here. And I wonder: *why?*

No good or real reason. I get distracted by things, some worth it, some not. That’s more a fact than a reason.

There’s no moment when I do not feel that Art isn’t relevant. I’ve come more to think that *a lot else isn’t*

If I spent a whole day writing in a museum, or reading in a park, or watching movies, I’d feel, easily, *tis a good day*. Too many hours aren’t like this.

It’s not lack of commitment to Art in my mind, *ever*, my heart, *ever*, I think it’s more I sometimes lose myself in my work’s complexities—the ever vaster relation of one to several to many—I slow myself, essentially. All other impediments, however real-seeming, are illusory.

When it works, the good feeling is so intimately familiar. Nothing to deduce.

I find that my commitment deepens as time goes on, & my wish is to simply not return to where life is boring, dull, known, unloved.

Working for a living seems a distraction from what matters in life. I used to think of it as grounding me, keeping me in touch with the world. Now I’ve more come to see most of the human world as meager. Repetitive. Selfish. Myopic. As much as I *never* write enough, it’s *ever* what I wish to do. Art is all that matters to me. In its myriad forms & ways.

Where will this *Great Grand Braided Narrative* lead? Surely something that had been so long in the braiding up will never braid down again?

Don’t think so. Don’t think I’d want it to. But I am also interested where the various works of the *Tangled Gate Mythopoeia* might fly off to; how many possible directions & far corners?

These thoughts what run through me happy high & low, what matter in my mind.

Poking into the big nooks & tiniest of crannies—

Knowing it all leads somewhere, elsewhere, on where, & back—

Go—go—go—GO!

xxix.

Look, another month passes but what if I did not stop writing this passage for the next hour? Mixed in thoughts near & far to see what 'cumes?

OK. Let's see. Start near. The Attic Study of the Bungalow Cee. Too warm to quite enjoy, & yet not too-warm to spend this day off—vacation from my payjob—needed beyond need—

Attic Radio. Dreamland Jazz Station seems passed to gone with the station owner's passing. There are good alternatives, tho not any what it was—

Pounding audible from a neighbor's house, sounds of a new roof being hammered into place. Occasional shouts & laughter.

Cenacle | 122 | April 2023 | 28th Anniversary Issue debuted this past Sunday at Jellicle Literary Guild meeting #161, first of the current turn of the calendar. Meeting was epic fun, my beloved & I in person, brilliant poet Sam Knot live on the videophone, others present by printed page, recorded audio and/or video.

Bound tomorrow on a jetplane out to the U.S. Midwest to visit with beloved's kin in the woods. Should be fun.

That's most of near.

I want to tattoo on my strange mind:

MAKE ART BETTER NOW

And then figure out how to live this authentically, & validly, with love & fealty.

EVERY DAMNED BLESSED DAY

Whither *Labyrinthine* next? Somewhere else, new, back, far back, on & weirdly on—easy—

It's part in the *Great Grand Braided Narrative* [Gr.Gr.Br.N. for friendly] concluded when Asoyadonna arrived to Abe's Beach of Many Worlds, with Dreamwalker no less, & the King to boot. Lx has done its part.

Does *concluded* mean *done*? I am surely not sure, mulling on it now.

Where does the *Gr.Gr.Br.N.* conclude? Let me riff on this a stretch.

On Abe's Beach of Many Worlds, below the Deep Deep Sea, by the shore of the Deeper Deeper Sea, there will soon come a moment when all six Brother-Heroes will be together.

There are two of the *Gr.Gr.Br.N.* narrative threads that will tell this. *Bags End News & Many Musics*—the former told of course by Mister Algernon Beagle, & the latter from the perspective of Roddy & the Gate-Keeper.

The Brothers will then follow a path to:

1. Thought Fleas' Great Clearing to visit the Rutabaga Festival & Fleastock; specifically, Boop & Lori Bunny, for important information;
2. The Tangled Gate's Cave of the Beast, where they had last been, for important reasons again;
3. The world that Gate-Keeper's people crash landed on long ago, to help free them from Captors, & lead them to their intended home-world.

Then 4. involves them returning to visit long-unseen homes & loved ones. Many peaces to make.

Will this writing occur soon or soon-ish?

What can *Lx* do for its aid?

Should *Lx* be mapping out where they will come to, guessing what might occur?

Or is *Lx* best to run an obscure parallel track?

Is the action seen on a TV at Luna T's Cafe? Is it seen in a new scene in **RemoteLand**?

The sweet spot isn't there yet.

Maybe it is far from all of this.

41 min of 60. OK. Hand off to—

xxx.

[It was a lingering moment up here in the high mountain forests—]

Sitting on a bench by a hard-running stream. Sitting alone is the King, listening to the water, its singing balm—

And his sense, though but old & lovely trees about him for his fine company, & the stream to perform & entertain, that he is not alone—

That here, in his long exile near the Great Tree at the Hearts of the World, he is not alone. Those he's loved, known past times, & unknown ones to come, are nearer than he can easily know—

Here seems where time itself arrives, rests, maybe becomes something else—

He breathes quietly, in & out, listens, rests too. Feels he will be elsewhere, come other days; to return still,



come other ones. Yet something else will ever remain here too.

Eventually, others crossed the King's path, as he sat on his bench, by the water, maybe inevitably, as everything might be in the vastless reaches of the White Woods.

The first, likely most inevitably, to cross his path, were Creatures. They live in the White Woods, of course, all over it, as far as anyone knows, even as they live elsewhere too, like in the Creature Common, & elsewhen, like with the Princess, under the Tangled Gate.

Well, there was that snowstorm, one strange day, when he lay unmoving on the ground, beyond despair to numbness, until two charming brown Bear Creatures with peppermint decorations about their cloaks, came upon him, & sweetly crooned him back from nowhere to somewhere. Always a good start.

Somewhere led him to this bench by that singing stream, & thoughts more hopeful, at least lightly hopeful for certain.

And next come upon him one afternoon a group of Creatures to know. A pink Bear Creature with charming pink-bow-tie & devilish smirk, in partner with a friendly Leopard Creature, them pulling a strange little Wagon together.

The King of course sniffed friendly to them, as he does to all Creatures, & he was glad & curious of their company too.

Their Wagon contained three strange little flower-pots, each occupied by a wee little Bear Creature—cinnamon-colored, chocolate-colored, & brown sugar-colored (with red bow-tie).

Creatures are known to rarely speak the English, it spooking them (there are exceptions of course, such as Bellla!), but the King learned by other ways that the little Bears were called Cackleberries, & their haulers were called Cackleberry farmers.

Cackleberry Crops, actually. And what this meant both *hard to say & tis so*—

These friendly folks were neighbors to the King, living not far from the Hut where he stayed. Having all met, the Cackleberry farmers & their Crops made sure to pass by the King on his stream-side bench most afternoons. Crops & Farmers alike would join the smiling King on his bench, usually in his very lap, to doze peacefully together to the stream's music.

The King would ever be reminded how his travels long ago began with the deeply felt wish to protect all Creatures, & the countless other magicks of the White Woods, & this impulse had been shared by all his Brothers. He was sure that, even now, however far apart they were, this wish yet guided them all.



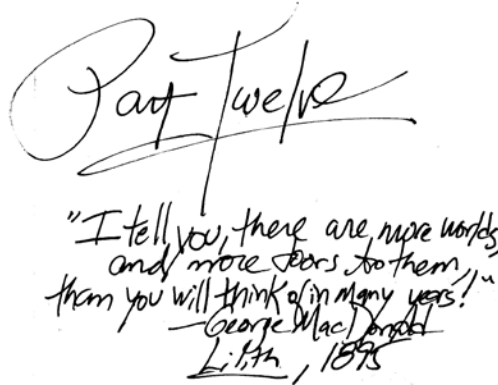
To be continued in Cenacle | 124 | Winter 2024

* * * * *



Raymond Souland, Jr.

Labyrinthine [a new fixtion]



xxxi.

Compelled & compelling to clarify, & get down to work. And to make it matter as always.

You see, I can tell best of all, how *happy-gone*, how *artstoned* I am—

My Art carries with me from long-past travels, places, faces, days, years—within this work, comfort, excitement, trust—

Attic Study, aka “La Nook,” because Beloved in her armchair, & a better night than awhile—reading *Dune* earlier, audiobook on headphones too—Charles Lloyd funky ’60s jazz—live in Soviet Union—it & him both long passed—yet the recorded concert remains, long if not ever remains—

Many Musics notes—*Bags End News* notes—*Creature Tale* notes—& thus arrive here to these pages—

They ask for something new—
And return also to things past—
Raising up high again lovely uncertainties—

And a phrase, from an old *Dream Rap*:
World Wide Conspiracy.

Enough? No. Worlds Wide Conspiracy? *Hm*.

Fragments? OK. Try that.

Cosmic Early goes through the green-&-gold curtain on the Thought Fleas’ Rutabaga Festival &

Fleastock Lower Talent Show Stage—known talent that he is the tattered Gentleman Author of *Aftermath* & *Turnpike* & maybe other fine tomes—intending to find his hidden talent—

None can know where entering through the curtain will bring them—or what talent lies within to be revealed—

He comes to a . . . *White Room*.

OK. Hm.

Featureless. Worse, he starts to find it hard to breathe. Like it's pushing in on him.

Unthinking, he crouches low, & pushes up, like gathering the encroaching air itself as momentum to hit the ceiling *hard, hard. Again. Again.*

And, no kidding, the top *pops off* the White Room, & floats, weightless & peaceful, like a cloud, away.

Cosmo pulls enough wall down to climb over. Not anywhere yet but feeling more *possible* about all this—

The ceiling cloud has parted with a handful of its stuff still loose on the ground. Cosmo scoops it up.

Soft, warm, not living per se but also not quite inert—

But his having no specific idea, the White Room stuff does not mold to a specific form. Cosmo does the best thing he can do: he stops half-ass trying & simply walks on—the stuff agreeably stays in his grasp—*waiting? napping?*

* * * * *

Try another.

Where is the rest of this book? All those characters & narratives before the *Great Grand Braided Narrative* [*Gr. Gr. Br. N.* for friendly] took over?

I think: waiting. Somewhat patient at least.

Is this *Worlds Wide Conspiracy* what braids back to them?

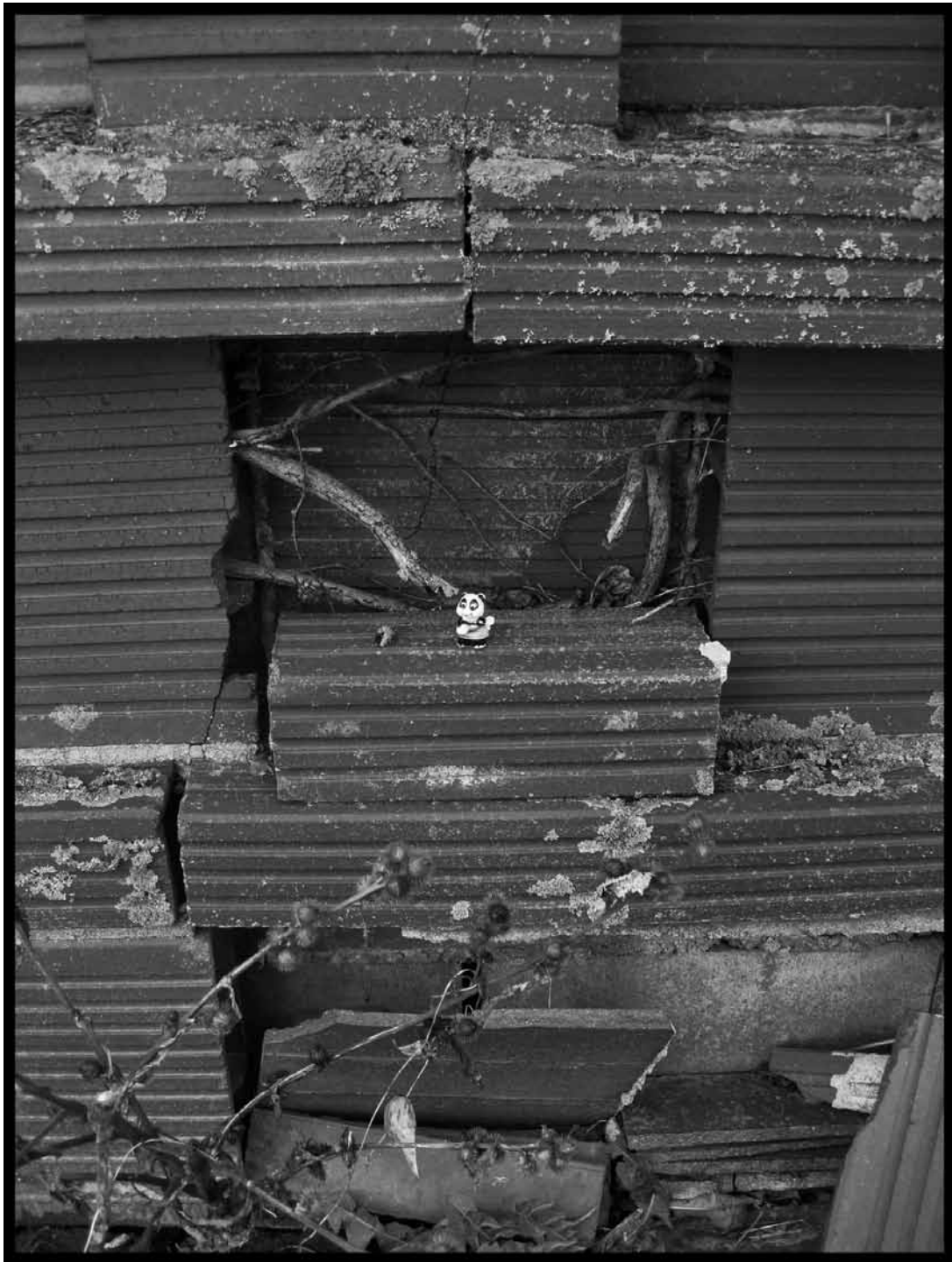
I think so. I think much of *Lx* awaits this braiding work.

Forward, *hence*, includes *heretofore*. No other way.

[*What now?*]

Always the question, that, & the moment's full & fragmented knowing—

What's not here, what cannot be sensed or known about now—



Is this why need for a *World Wide Conspiracy*? To be here & now, totally, but also elsewhere too? Something maybe to this—

But to what end? End to loneliness, ignorance? Difference not a weapon or a flaw but a *strength*, a wildly wonderful *strength*?

I don't have to be who you are, exactly, or where you are, right now, or even close—

I just have to reach out to you & feel you there, & thus here too—

This isn't technology, precisely, or magick, or built-up sentiment & emotion, not exactly or solely each of these—

More a braid of them all, & more, living touch, near & far, till these are facts, words, not walls, not borders, not chasms—

xxxii.

Is continuity simply the next page, the next section, that enough to connect back, & onward?

Barely, let's say. But let me also say that for a work of Art to matter most, *it must matter most now*—

I find this book right now fragmented, by my focus & attention mostly elsewhere—I'm not sure if it has more to do right now in the *Great Grand Braided Narrative*, or maybe to long further on down the road? *World Wide Conspiracy*?

Worlds Wide Conspiracy?

Yes, all that. But, again, more barely than fully—

Where look *now* on *these* pages—?

Part of me wonders the next new narrative, setting, character, etc., while part of me looks back, more curious than sentimental but some of each—

Like wanting to dive down deep in familiar waters, yet come up with a new treasure—narrative, setting, character, etc.

I travel with many of all of these, & long fondness—

And a realization that I could not really write like I did then or will hence. Black pen is ever now.

Do my dice & coins used here sometimes await a near coming coin toss? I think *yes, probably*.

But also: *how toss them now? How keep it interesting, not old?*

These pages, this notebook, its many kin, this black pen, its many kin, each & all tend me when I get back here—*being here* is *never* the question. *Getting here* sometimes is.

I've avoided committing to the next issue of *The Cenacle* not because there won't be one—I *know* there will be—

It's more like what sometimes one does with rechargeable batteries for long term health—let them run all the way down, then charge them up again. I'm letting the current one do this—*Cenacle* | 122 | April 2023 | 28th Anniversary Issue.

Letting it finish—by promotion, by printing, by archiving—& then examine what next. Could be the draining all that is needed, but I don't really know.

Art needs honesty—the honest struggle for it—perpetually, not once & done—

What I need to do is have at precisely in this moment the Art I need to do—assess, confirm, revise if need be—

I trust always that *Lx* can handle whatever wild or dull I bring to a page's moment—save neglect.

Do I neglect this book?
This "New Fixtion"?
Is it all it can possibly be right now?

I can't say for certain.
Just that I want it to be.

And that all sums it. Maybe *Lx* belongs in the burbling now of the *Gr. Gr. Br. N.*—from some angle I don't know yet?

Does it?
Best when eager & unknowing.

Ask: here: who else is in the audience of the *TripTown*-in-Dreamland production of:

The Tangled Gate Mythopoeia?

or is it called

The Great Grand Braided Narrative?

Let's sit in a far corner of the bleachers, up high, considering what-all this might be—

Asking questions like:

- ★ Wasn't *TripTown* some kind of TV show?
- ★ Has it been re-created as what looks like a live production set somewhere up a tall, tall tree in the Dreamland White Woods?
- ★ Or is this entirely somehow *an episode of TripTown*, seen at some point on TVs far & wide?

We listen in on conversations & what all we might hear to learn more:

- ★ *The Creature Tale* is passing through here, via most of its current characters being present—including 4 Brother-Heroes, 4 Famous Travelers, Algernon Beagle, Princess Crissy, & others—

- ★ *Dream Raps* too—its current main character just arrived—He came uncertainly through that door over there—someone shouted out a “Welcome!” to him—
- ★ Algernon Beagle being here means *Bags End News* will recount some of all this, no doubt—

Neither *Many Musics* nor the Great Heroes of Yore are here, yet—so that’s the *Gr. Gr. Br. N.* inventory—4 of 6—

I can’t help but think here will lead to the 6 Brother Heroes’ reunion—this is final prelude to that—

“What are you writing up there?”

“A book?”

“What kind? Your biography?”

“Yah, sorta.”

“You like the show so far?”

“I just got here.”

“Well, wait & see. Welcome to *Trip Town*, by the way! I like to tell everyone that.”

“Thanks.”

I’m distracted just as this strange fellow appears on stage with some kind of tool in his hand. He is very fancily dressed, some kind of home-made tuxedo? Or one sewn from many scraps? And he starts to recite a poem, I think, in a tongue I don’t know, when something distracts me.

I hear what surely is cackling over to my right, & there half-hid in the shadows are not 1 or 2 but 3 little black & white pandy bear Imps! Nobody else seems to notice them.

Since I don’t know the poet’s tongue, if poet he be, I leave my seat to go & see about those Imps.

Tho the stage is brightly lit, these Imps are off in a shadowy corner. I would not have noticed them at all weren’t it for their cackles.

And I know they were not calling me. Imps rarely do that. Still, I wonder if this bit of action is just for me. Maybe I would like that. *Lx* gets its own piece of this strange action.

I sort of walk low & slow to where they are gathered. But they don’t spook at all. Something has their attention; not easy to keep for long.

I hover gently near & see that it appears to be a small round lens in the wooden floor itself. And one can shift it round to view different . . . *some things?*

They let me a little nearer & I peer hard to see . . .

- ★ *Shift!* Abe’s Beach of Many Worlds down there!
- ★ *Shift!* Princess Crissy’s Royal Throne Room in Imagianna!
- ★ *Shift!* Algernon Beagle’s Milne’s Porch in Bags End!

There are more but the Imps start to cackle madly & shift blurringly with their tiny fingers!

Then, one by shocking one, they leap into the lens & are gone!



Well, I keep studying the lens for the longest time, though I find when I turn it, no images reveal to me. Does it only work for Imps?

Then I hear a voice behind me & look up to see a fellow standing there & smiling at me. He looks fairly young, tho some of his hair is grey. Dressed like he is a kind of long-distance Traveler.

“I heard cackles over here. You got Imp troubles?” he asks, half laughing.

I smile & shake my head. Then I motion him to kneel down with me, & I explain the embedded lens, & how the Imps turned it, turned it, faster, faster, & were suddenly gone.

He studies the lens, now inert. I can tell he believes me, but he just nods friendly again, & climbs back up those bleachers to I think a group of his friends, including a lovely-looking little Beagle. Algernon? Am I forgetting things here?

The embedded lens is not reactivating or whatever, no matter how I wait & stare. I am about to stand up & figure what next when something low & powerful sweeps through the Pavilion.

A force. *O, such a great force.* I lie on the ground, low as I can make my tall, clumsy body do.

Like a land wave? Um? What’s the word? I *know* it.

Wobble? I am twice freaked by what is happening & my somehow receding memory.

Then I realize: I’m *still* holding onto that embedded lens in the floor. More than before; like I’m sinking into it?

The, um, *Wobble* is getting *stronger*. I feel it pulling me, wishing to move me *here* to *elsewhere*.

But I hold on to that lens.

I feel my hand sink in . . . now my arm . . . how? And I *stop resisting*.

Somehow I sloop inside the um, lens.

With a *pop!*

Two things occur to me.

I am safe.

I remember nothing.

xxxiii.

OK, take a pause here, little or less so for however much it takes.

It was hardly a handful of days after that previous passage that I was suddenly & cruelly dismissed my treasured payjob of 3 years. Yah. *Again.* Jobless. *Again.* On the hunt. *Again.* Near 3 full weeks of the humiliating ass shake for work. And still going.

That didn’t prevent new pages in this book; I’ve been at *Bags End News* daily devoted this month’s run

of days. *Lx* arrived to a good point in the *Gr.Gr.Br.N.* for pausing to let *BEN* catch up. Finally, it has.

And the question has been nudging at me: *why not write on here?* I even have some good dream journal content to work with.

Answer: no reason in the world.

In truth, I need this book more than ever. Its freedom to write whatever I will, en route with a narrative or not. Thus, here, now.

And thus? Dig a little deeper into this moment. Attic Study. 9:27p.m. 81.3°F. 38% relative humidity. Portable air conditioner going.

On the Attic Radio is a playlist mix from jazz great Sonny Rollins' 1960s albums. *Wonderful*. I prefer it up here in the autumn & winter but the AC & fan & other AC balance out enough to make summer more doable too.

The pandemic has gone nowhere. Yet the masses have let themselves be lied into thinking all is well. Which it isn't. I wish I had something to write about this hopeful. I don't.

Tomorrow I mail out the print copies of *Cenacle* | 122 | April 2023 & *Scriptor Press Sampler* | 20 | 2018 *Annual*. Update the archives & call the long work on both done.

Blink once, breathe twice, start into *Cenacle* | 123 | October 2023 & *SPS* | 21 | 2019 *Annual*.

Is there a meaningful me outside of this work?

*Lx, Many Musics, Dream Raps,
Creature Tale, Great Heroes of Yore,
Bags End News?*

SpiritPlants Radio? *Within's Within?*

*Cenacle? Sampler? RaiBooks?
Burning Man Books?*

ElectroLounge?

There's what I would call the *rest of me*.

Best of it loves KD & tries better than worse to take care of her in myriad ways. She does for me too, but *so much better*.

There are people I still know, at a distance. Long-time friends, good souls. Do I really matter to any of them? Somewhat. As much as perpetual distance allows, I suppose.

And payjobs? Sending out 10+ resumes *every fucking day* because two lunatics robbed me of mine? Poisoned my workplace, then shoved me out the door? Told me I was a worthless piece of shit to boot?

Honestly? We'll all be buried or dust in a timeframe the size of a microbe compared to the universe. If any kind of afterlife, they'll get their share of dark judgment. Me surely mine.

But for now, *fuck them from afar as possible.*

What I care to do is this work, this black pen, this white lined paper.

Payjobs, from my paper route on, have ended bad for me, nearly every time, in countless ways. I need to give a *large fuck less*. Can I do this?

What amazes me is that no matter *how hard* I try, most times, how much I over-achieve whatever is expected, they end suddenly, badly.

I'm not alone in this. The marketplace chews up & spits out. *That's the simple truth.*

Every job I ever left, whatever company, not a beat missed. Each company moved on. I hit the *all-too-familiar* bricks.

So, in sum, fuck you, former employer. I don't wish you well. *Not now. Not yet. Maybe never.*

I hope your stock tanks.

You stole my livelihood.

Like others, this will matter less in time. Especially when I have a new master to serve. Even better, when I retire & *Art fully possesses my days.*



To be continued in Cenacle | 125 | June 2024

* * * * *



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Twelve

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

xxxiv.

I arrive somewhere with a kind of pop! from somewhere else, or maybe several somewheres else.

Shake my head thrice to clear, helps a little. Find myself sitting in an old wooden armchair, cushioned beneath me.

A room. Empty but me & the chair in which I sit. A door in the wall I face toward. *Was I trying to find someone?*

I stand OK. Walk to the door. Take a slow breath. Turn handle. Locked.

Um. *Am I locked in on purpose? Or does nobody know I am here?*

What else to do but cry out? "Help! Help! Help, please!"

I call & call & call. Then, *wow! wonderful!* Door handle turns & pushes in. I step back to see who.

But what I see more greatly than who is *what* is beyond that who. Tis somewhere *very* large, a room or series of rooms vast & tall, & books of all sizes & shapes & colors on bookcases that seem to reach into the sky of the unseen roof—

I look & look, gape-mouthed—

"You, my good sir, are suitably impressed," says he who I've walked by somehow to behold better.

I look back at him & nearly recall but not quite.

Bald man strangely wearing an earpatch. Dressed in clothes, a kind of suit? Whose elements seem, um, *folded* into each other? He carries in his hand a kind of walking stick? Black onyx. *I nearly recall, but don't.*

Holds out his handsome hand. "Nnnnolan," he seems to say, with a charming yet thoughtful smile.
 "Raymond," I say, less unsure, & yet unsure why?
 He nods, grins for some reason.

I look around now, wonderingly. "Could this be . . . ?" I ask, unaware aloud.

Nnnolan grins even more, if possible. "You know The Arcadia?"

I nod uncertainly. "I, er, created it. Arcadia Bookstore & Cafe. From several bookstores I worked at back when. Coffeehouses I loved & wrote years of hours in too."

He nods, listening close. Leads us to a corner table. Black metal table, surface perforated with circles & diamonds & other shapes. I nod, remembering.

"It's called The Arcadia now," he says, studying my face for reaction.

I nod. "That makes sense." Leave it at that.

Sips his tiny bubbling drink. My tall paper cup of diet soda, with straw, in my hand like long there.
 Nod to that too.

"So . . . " he leads me politely.

"Yes?" I answer vaguely. Sip.

"Where to?"

"Where?"

"And why too?"

I sip, wonder why him & all this now. Still . . .

Talk without plan. "Where does a narrative of narratives go next? Even bigger? Much smaller? Go back & re-invent it all yet again?"

He nods. Gestures around us. "Like this?"

I nod too. "Forward or back? Or both?"

"Both?" he suddenly looks at me sharply.

Confused, I don't reply. Then nod.

Sips bubbly drink again. "OK. So that's what you do."

I nod. "Seems so."

He looks at me precisely now. I wonder that earpatch. "Some Artists don't like to look back. Some do almost nothing else. Maybe it's easier to choose."

"I don't."

"So The Arcadia is like what you do, otherwise?"

"I think of it like accretion more than anything."

He sips, thinking. Drink bubbles & bubbles.
Looks up at me, shockingly handsome smile, even quite handsome now.

“OK. Yes. I can learn from you. If you would enjoy my company.”
I nod.
So tis.

Finish my soda with a sucking slurp & stand. Notice my black bookbag next to my chair. Good. Then notice that my soda cup is full again. OK . . . good too?

Nnnolan stands too. His bookbag is much smaller, more like a stylish leather pouch. I can't tell how old he is really, so unsure what he might learn from me? Ah well. A companion will be nice.

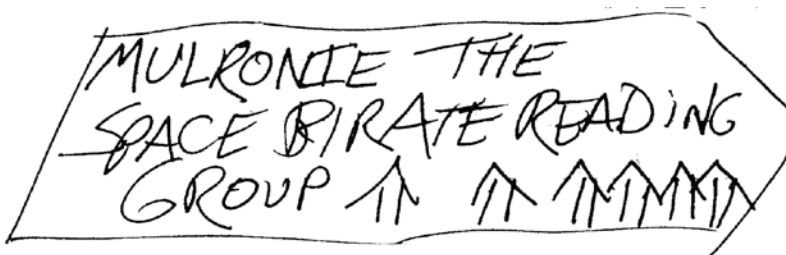
The floor below our feet is wooden; looks well-worn. Long here. Tis nice. And whatever that ceiling up there might be . . . seems almost shrouded in clouds? Or is that a glass roof & those clouds visible through it? Just hard to say from so far below.

Then we hear a strange sound. “TooT! TooT!” And the oddest-looking spaceship passes overhead. Looks like one of those tugboats you might see in harbors? But a spaceship?

Then a much larger ship passes over & this one looks much more science fictional. Like that old TV show?

“Why can't I remember?” I growling mutter to myself.
“Remember what?” asks Nnnolan curiously.
O. I had forgotten about him for a moment. I shrug. “Let's keep walking & figure out why we're here.”
“OK!”

We come to a sign:



“I read one of his books!” Nnnolan exults. “The one about the trial, I think.”

I nod. I should know that name *way more* than vaguely, but I don't.

Spy another of those black tables & motion Nnnolan over to it.

I look hard at Nnnolan for a good minute. “You annoyed me at first for reasons I do not know.”
He nods unhappily, & unsurprised.

“But it was really that I could not rightly remember you. That's on me, not you, whatever it means.”
He nods again, more curious than unhappy this time.

I try to smile sincerely at him, fail. Take a deep breath. Try again. A small one comes out.

Lift my heavy black bookbag on the round black metal table.

“I need the notebooks in here to help. Go & have an adventure here. I am sure they are not hard to find. Then come back with one of your bubbly drinks & let’s see what we see then. OK?”

He thinks. Nods. Smiles. Then thinks again. “Am I in there? Who I am?” Looking at my bookbag.

I shrug. “Maybe. I’ll tell you if I find anything. Now get along.”

He nods again. Stands. “You’ll be here?” he asks, nearly falters to ask.

I nod. Pat my bookbag. Gesture him run along for now. He turns & walks slowly, then more surely down the central aisle, which branches off fairly frequently to side aisles of books.

Good. OK. Maybe not having a companion for a while is what I need. Me, black pens & notebooks. And a self-refilling soda cup.

Give my old black bookbag a good look before diving in. Many pockets, I could not say exactly how many.

One ragged sticker on it says:



Another says:



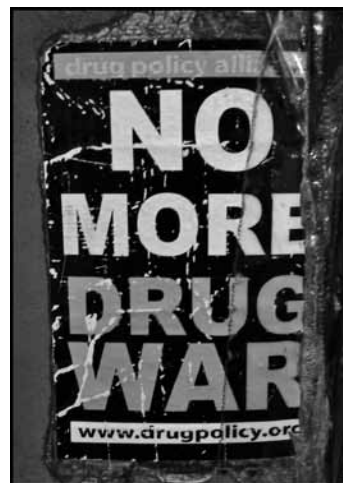
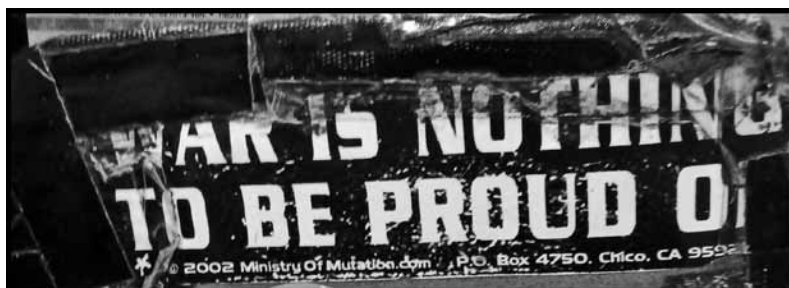
Long time for sure. Unzip the several long pockets now.

One notebook, *Bags End News*, Vol. 18, lavender color. Snoopy & Freezer Burn '09 stickers.

Well taped-up travel journal, Thoughts Pad I call it. Silver-colored where not black duct-taped. Stickers:



Other side:



These are just to start. The strange colored Secret Books too. Thick volume of *Dream Raps*.

Will these help me remember?

I start to read, & read, & read. Looking deeper into bookbag, for the older notebooks, striped, strangely designed. Some battered in cover or the 3 metal rings holding pages.

They pile up on the table, on the floor now. My self-refilling soda cup I have to keep an eye on.

OK. Not to stop this time.

OK. Not to care the distracting bullshit.

OK. Some faces lack further contents.

OK. Forgiveness is a process that may not travel to expected places.

I keep this volume, this *Labyrinthine*, center amongst the rest. Tho others come into play as I study.

There are far cheers that linger into this Arcadia. Yes, I know tis the Rutabaga Festival & Fleastock. Not yet for me. Guessing hopeful they'll wait for me.

I read & I read & I read. I read beyond the care for readers or anyone really. I read because where I am sitting is as far as my Art has come, & maybe the whys are something buried in past pages.

Maybe they are, somewhat. I mean, *why a bookstore?* Because of all books have meant & do mean to me. They are part of what Art is to me, tho not all.

Why *Arcadia*? A word rooted in the past, in antique ideals of living, of fairness to all, the world itself included.

And the Arcadia Bookstore & Cafe I'd written a lot about. Semi-biographical place. How I wanted to keep it.

Arcadia as an idea sources in the ancient Greeks. A place of beauty & splendor, unspoiled wilderness. Thus applied metaphorically to a bookstore? Sure, that worked a long while for me.

But then, more recently, I saw it becoming elsewhere. Drop "Bookstore & Cafe"? Left with "The Arcadia." That is, here.

From a *dream*. Not surprising. An endlessly long, tall place of books. And who runs it? A kind of commune does, & me in the center? OK, sure. Some of that. Not all.

But still, *who* runs this, & *how*? I'm sure I don't know. How extensive is it? Don't know that either.

What do I know? This is become a bookstore of the *Many Worlds*. So that brings with it multitudinal unknown aspects. Not every world *has* books. Not every kind of being *can* read them. Other worlds have their own ways of transmitting what we do in this world transmit in *books*.

Thus, The Arcadia. Invites all to visit. What that evolves to, I could not say. But give it that welcoming a name, better damned well *welcome all*.

At this moment, I look up & tis Nnnnolan, as I think of him, returning. I nod him to sit down. Smiling, & uncertain, he does.

“How did you do?”

“It just goes on & on here!”

“Did you want to return?”

“Yes. What?”

I raise my hand, catch his glance in mine.

“Did you *want* to return?”

A moment, then he lowers his head, shakes no.

“It’s OK.”

“It is?”

“Look at me.”

He does. I smile.

“I’ve seen one place you may end up. It’s *amazing*.”

“It is?”

“Not even in *this* world!”

“Where?”

I stop. Pause. “Dreamland.”

He stares at me.

I smile. “You want my best mentoring? Go find the book *History of the Tangled Gate*. Take it out. *Read it*.”

“Did you write it?”

“Not precisely.”

“Meaning . . . ?”

I laugh. “Meaning, *all* of this, including you, is mine. But *within* this, its multitude of worlds & levels & identities, *no*, I didn’t write it. Not sure who did. Find it. Read it. Maybe you find its author & school me later on, OK?”

He smiles. A real one. “Dreamland?”

I nod.

“And the Tangled Gate?”

“That too.”

“How . . . ?”

“You’ll figure it up & show everyone how.”

Smiles again. He stands.

“One more piece of advice?”

He nods, nearly eagerly.

I serious up a moment. “It’s on my list every blessed day. *Make Art Now*.”

He nods, like it lands. Turns & goes. To find that book first thing, is my guess.

Alright then. Good. Pack my beloved bookbag up. Give that table a really affectionate pat. *Missed you long*.



Get along.

xxxv.

Unsure next, or even if it should be me, but OK, for now, I find myself hearing those distant Festival cheers again. And feeling more easily lured this time.

How the books & the White Woods blend awhile reminds me of the Liberry at the Heart of the Many Worlds. Of course. And OK.

But not long in arriving to the edge of the Great Clearing wherein is held the Thought Fleas' Rutabaga Festival & Fleastock.

Funny: this book had somewhat veered away from this Fest when the Gentleman Photographer & I parted the King at the Shack at the Threshold of the Dreaming.

Hmm. I find a lovely White Birch to pull out my notebooks & check the details.

Tis dizzying to read my travels, often tossed from 1 narrative to the next & back again—

Like that old Space Cowboy radio show, I say aloud, “Am I here? Is this now?”

Seems to be. I do the best thing I can do, if here, if now, & wait.

And thus up walks Miss Flossie Flea, smiling kindly, a brilliant genius beyond my comprehensions.

I nod her eagerly to sit with me if she would like.

Like others in this *Mythopoeia*, Thought Fleas size to need. She sizes to perhaps an eighth of my height, still greater than me in all respects. Yet, truly, Thought Fleas do not think in such meager terms. So I try to do way better.

“How are you, Miss Flossie?”

“Very well, thank you. How are you?”

Nothing but true truth will do. “I am trying, sometimes clumsy, to bring this Great Grand Braided Narrative to its Grand Finale. But I struggle.”

“Why, Raymond?”

I think, really think. Then try feeling, see if that helps. Mix 'em together, my eyes tightly shut & maybe I am groaning.

But she waits patiently. I sort it all to some words, open my eyes, her smile kindlier than ever.

“I don't want to leave anything, or anyone out.”

“Is there danger of this?”

Hm. “No. I've gone slower to try & assure this better.”

"But you doubt?"

I point elsewhere. "There, I doubt. That world back there, up there, what have you. Here, no, this world lives in me, with me, by me, through me."

She smiles twinkling. "Is there a but?"

I shake my head. "No. You & the rest are real to me. And by these pages real to anyone or everyone else too."

"OK then. What next?"

"We go to share some soup together?"

She smiles delighted. "A good plan!"

I nod, put away the many notebooks I'd pulled out. Stand. Bookbag strap on shoulder. Take Miss Flossie's paw, which she smilingly offers.

The Soup Kettle is likely more ancient than it looks. I seem to recall, without checking my notebooks for sure, that it was in a Thrift Shop for awhile, even that the recipe for soup was found in its interior.

Yes, sure, details, but what about the bowls & spoons? Stone, feel both sturdy & yet light to the grasp. Designs on them? I study close but hard to say.

Miss Flossie nudges me with a smile to do more enjoying than simply studying. I smile back & do. Save my thoughts.

Rutabaga Soup, famed treat for all in the White Woods, *Tangled Gate Mythopoeia* as a whole.

Tastes like any good Soup one has enjoyed. Also a light & heavy taste to it . . .

But more to it of course. It seems to . . . dance within me? Look around in me, curious as an Imp? Seems to tend a little what kind of hungers ail me. Soften, smooth, settle . . .

Miss Flossie takes my empty bowl & spoon & guides me to a pretty White Birch. Smiles me ever kind. Paw on chin a moment, she says, "Scribble, scribble, scribble . . ." Parts with a soft pat on my shoulder.

High on Soup? I chuckle, unsure. But catch up these lines to now.

"You working on your novel?" says a friendly voice other side of my tree.

Haha, like people used to ask me on public buses. "I guess so."

"How's it going?"

I pause, give my be-Souped mind a moment to consider. "Been doing it many turns, not run out of ideers yet."

He's quite quiet for a moment. "Well, just remember: there's always a new ideer around the next corner. Just follow it."

"Thanks, sir," I say humbly. He mumbles a word & goes along his way.

xxxvi.

The miracle of pressing black-inked pen to blue-striped white paper, words come & thus my Art continues. Amazes me, ever, dulls me, never, wonders me what next always, door ever wide open, vista a vastless view—

Near 17½ years known this book, this *New Fixtion*, & my love blooms easily & alway for it, what it is so far, & what might the path bring. *Endless* meaning, *deep* fun—

Within its pages, I feel *safe*, feel *sure*, simply *matter*. Beyond its pages, this past year or so, I lost some of that good feeling—

The payjob I had, a good one, *really* good one, for several years, went bad when new management appeared above me, assessed my worth, found little, & did not stop until I'd been verbally assaulted on route to being laid off. I don't know why this happened. Never will, likely. But I do know that I fought them to the end. Lost, but *never conceded* to their assessment that I had less than no worth. Nobody else at the company but these two people believed their shit, for a moment, but then, honestly, *none* stopped it from happening. A few reached out to me once or twice. Most simply moved on. That's common.

I kept writing this book through all of that. Knowing as I do that my Art is my forever companion; payjobs are not. They fund my Art. Bungalow Cee, Scriptor Press, SpiritPlants Radio. It's a symbiotic relationship, of a sort, I guess.

95 days of the nightmare of joblessness ended very recently. Tis why I sit in this Attic Study, writing this book & more today, not begging for work as nearly every day since August 1. Actress's *LXXXVIII* strange mellow electronica on Attic Radio via Ge4ore. 68°F.

I have some days to do my work, my various kinds of Art, unencumbered by payjob. A preview of retirement one day sooner than later. A new job, looks nice, hopeful from this moment's perspective, but not to begin for three weeks.

So, this book. 4068 pages. I want *more deeper* of it. I suspect I'll be throwing dice & coins again as part of my process. I myself may recede again from view. Not always needed.

I want to become a better human being & not sure at all *how* that will happen. There are easier, more familiar ways to try to do this. But for me this is also how to make *better* Art, *more* of it, so it *matters ever more*.

Some of it simply a process of breathing again with less fear—*learning* how, *remembering* how, to do this—

In high school, long ago, I felt helpless to the control of people around me. I don't believe many cared to know me beyond a point. Likely didn't try so very hard with them either. We were all what we had then.

But I also had Art. It was my . . . *bonus? gift?* I don't know. Those words but not comprehensively. But it succored me during some hard days, & traveled with me beyond them.

Something of a parallel with these recent months. I had Art all through it, no matter the bitch-bastards who set their aim on me. They are gone from my life. Art remains with me, ever & always. They robbed me of a paycheck, but *not* of what I love most. Not even close.

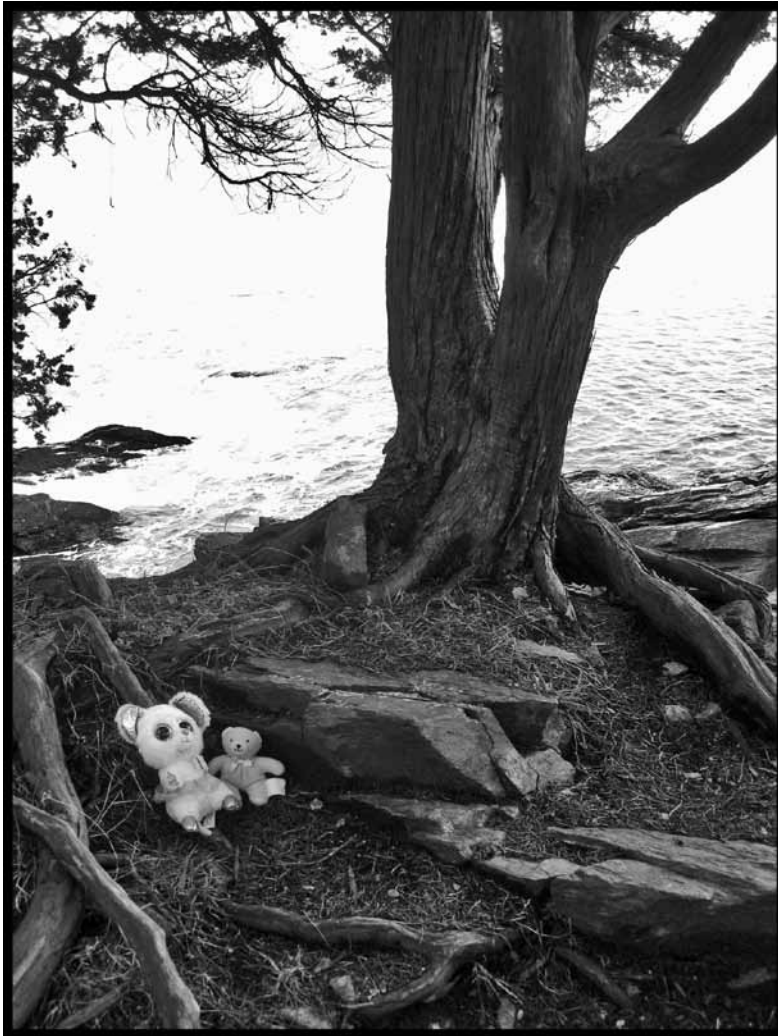
I want this book to do what it has always done best: lead me where I do not know. Lead me on, land me awhile to sort the whats out, then move along to next.

So, *where next?*



To be continued in Cenacle | 126 | October 2024

* * * * *

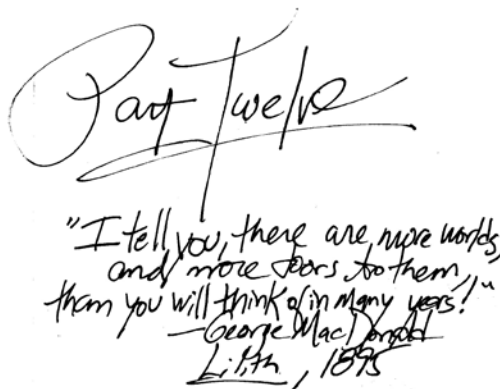


Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]



xxxvii.

Peoples Donutshop, is where. From one perspective, a Dunkin' Donuts in New Britain, Connecticut.

From mine, long from mine, the Peoples Donutshop. And where is it these days?

Well, let's see. Tis a plaza of sorts. Near is a Finest Supermarket & a Liquor Depot. Off-track betting parlor a door or two down. McDonald's far end. Some of here, some of elsewhere.

Open 24 hours, 7 days a week, like it used to be.

Nearby the old factory town center. Liberry. Miss Washington Diner. Department store or two. Park square in center. Public busses passing by.

Also nearby is the on-ramp to Boulevard, which leads on, eventually, to The Arcadia. Well, OK, that's new.

OK, so that's some geographical context. Tantalizing, for sure. But not narrative.

Not yet. But start in & discover more.

"I hold up the four paws of my mind,
& crave indulgence."
—George MacDonald, *Adela Cathcart*, 1864.

I arrived to this table this time from a trip I began from Boston several days ago. Last came down here in March 2022. October 2019 before that. So twice since Pandemic hit in March 2020. More yearly

before that going back to about 2014, year my mother died. Come down for her funeral, nobody to host me here anymore, I stayed in the local downtown hotel in this city. Lived years here, though long ago—

Come now to visit places like this from my Ago, to remember, & to do new work too.

When I lived near here, those long years ago, I came here & wrote the fixtions leading eventually to this one.

Different tables over the years. Guessing since '88? 35 years. *Wow.*

Narrative? This place is now part of the *Tangled Gate Mythopoeia*. Always was, but now I know where it is. Boulevard off-ramp.

A red-hatted man walks by, aided by a fancy wooden walking stick. Strange here, & so.

I can't be here often, but I can include it in my fixtion more formally.

Boulevard is from a long ago *Bags End News* story; appeared again in a more recent one.

The Arcadia is, as mentioned, from those long ago fixtions. A kind of almagam of bookstores & cafes from various Agos.

And Arcadia is a variation of Emandia. Which feeds into a larger fixtional cosmology.

Evolution. Synthesis. Ferment.

Narrative? Not there yet, I suppose.

Next, to toss dice & coins.

xxxviii.

OK—so dice toss = 6
 Coins = 1 heads, 1 tales
 Now what? Icons back into
 blue-green coin purse but message got—

Last time I wrote this book past 3 in the morning? Oh, a fucking while—And what to do by it? Make 3 am shit up & see what happens—

So I leave the Peoples Donutshop, carrying my Blue Suitcase, bookbag strap on my shoulder, my MeZmer-decorated headphones jacked into beloved Polly iPod, music dreamy but upbeat for walking—oh I'll walk now—

What sticks is what matters, the details that—yah—so I find myself walking up the off-ramp to Boulevard—or is it Turnpike that leads eventually to Boulevard? And thus to The Arcadia?

I stick as far to the side as possible, no sidewalk or breakdown lane or whatever—just a rough edge to keep along—

Cars go by, trucks, vans, just these? Well, I'm sure more too—Many Words, many transportation kinds—

OK—now on—OK, yah, tis Turnpike, which I'll bet sure as shooting shit leads to Boulevard & then The Arcadia—

Why bound there again? Because it's where the center of gravity is pulling—and I don't know for sure the what or the why, & this interests me—

Cool day, autumnal blue sky cool. Good for walking, for sure-not-sure-where walking—

See, it's past 3 am where I sit writing, but this scene is I'd guess late morning—like my fixtional self on this page took a different route from the one I did—I then was bound by bus & bus back to Boston—where I am—but this fixtional one has gone this way—

What kind of traffic flashes by me? Well, I'd guess a lotta lanes, from slow to quite speedy—gotta account for all—

And I vaguely wonder—how to account for all the versions of The Arcadia along the many turns of the many calendars? Or not so much?

Maybe a bit—

I peek back in the pages—
six years at least since a mention in this book? And only a handful before that since *Lx* started in 2006?

And now suddenly all this?

Is The Arcadia = Emandia thing more than words?

Is The Arcadia a remnant of Emandia, transported, preserved, now somehow open for business more fully? No longer disguised, simply, as a bookstore?

Is The Arcadia = Emandia needed for what's to come? Helping survive it as last time? Has it simply been emerging all along?

How can a live portion of a long-gone world be here? Where is here?

Is this place shared by the Many Worlds, like Abe's Beach, the Attics, the Ancienne Coffeehouse, & so on?

I am now arriving, faster than seems possible? Maybe I got a ride? Say "Thanks."

"Thanks!"

"Any time, Raymond!"

OK, so now returning . . .

Will I find Dylan? Rebecca? Young Nnnolan?



Strangely, I arrive to yet another part of The Arcadia.

Come to a hallway, long long hallway—green & golden colored—so I think to myself: “Crissy colors, Imagianna colors. OK then.”

Remembering the coins & dice in my little blue-green coin purse, I start counting the doors as I walk along. Come to the 6th pair of them, across from each other, almost.

1 heads, 1 tails. OK. Close my eyes & turn in a circle, slowly, counting down from 6. Open eyes. Look at the door before me, & say aloud, “heads.” Then turn to other door, say, “tails.” Grasp golden doorknob on green door, turn, push in, & arrive . . . somewhere unexpected?

Oh my.

xxxix.

But wait a moment, if you please, *hark!* Let the unanticipated words come, one at a time, do.

Well, OK, now, or then, I guessed this & seem kind of right.

You see, I got to wondering all this Arcadia business, & it occurred to me that, yes, Arcadia/Emandia is expanding. A seeming gone world, in time & space, arriving *here & now*.

How? Can one world arrive into, among, within another? Can they co-habitate in a shared space? Like the fingers of two hands twining?

That might be how best to put this: or even better: *two worlds braiding*.

Why?

To understand this, one must learn the *Story*. What sources, roots, undergirds this *Tangled Gate Mythopoeia*.

Settle back & take all this in for a spell.

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

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

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

Then came the *Great Violence*. Was it caused by a *Wobble* too? No known books tell of this.

But this seemed to be the next *Ferment* in which all in the Star Spiral was nearly consumed. There were Great Heroes [Gate-Keeper's Mentor & his strange Yellow Building compatriot, among others]



who saved all they could, even as most of them were consumed too. Those they saved came to live in one place, one world not destroyed. Some called it *Arcadia*. But its true name is *Emandia*. This was *Evolution*.

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

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

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

This information adapted from *Bags End News*, which Algernon Beagle writes so well [o! shucks, guy!].

That learned, next is the Architecture of Dreams.

xl.

It begins with Moss. Well, it really begins with Moss at the Rutabaga Festival & Fleastock, now going on in the Thought Fleas Clearing in the White Woods. All invited, of course.

There are many ways to travel Dreamland & the Dreaming. That's one thing.

Another is that one can travel by Moss from one place to another. Usually by waking.

But what about both? How would this be?

Another step back. The Story previously told, *Evolution-Synthesis-Ferment*, is told by Moss at the Festival. How is by the famous Moss Po-et, Mr. Alvinarah Poesy. A handsome brown-striped Fox Creature with pretty bloo eyes & long whiskers. Travels always with his boon companion, Naria Narwhal. Alvinarah also wears a lovely crimson chapeau,

Alvinarah, working with Miss Flossie Flea & others (like Lori Bunny & Boop), has created an area of the Festival where most everything is covered in Rainbow Moss. Stones, small trees, long beds of Moss. These Moss, when touched as one goes along, tell the Story of *Evolution-Synthesis-Ferment*. Which is important for all to know now, since tis a time of *Ferment* again.

But learning this Story, in this vivid way, is more complicated for people-folks than Creatures & Thought Fleas & other native denizens of the White Woods.

To come to this Moss Artwork of the Story, & experience as one moves from Mossy stone to stone, tree to bed, people-folks must be schooled in the Architecture of Dreams, & then taught how to travel Mossy Dreamways.

Else, they touch & fall into Mossy Fugues, best described as helpless tumble into the dreams of other people-folks.

To travel well Mossy Dreamways, one must learn these elements:

1. *Music* – always there is music, & one must hark an ear well to catch it;
2. *Details* – big & little, lingered on, slow to study & collect them;
3. *Memory* – these may be, likely, bits of the Dreamer's memories, study & collect these too;
4. *Narrative* – what is the story? Learn to ride it & recall it;
5. *Mood* – what is the feel of the Dreaming? Sad? Happy? Again, collect it; &
6. *Weird* – what is possible only in the Dreaming?

The Dreamer grows better at gathering these along by learning a *Hmmm* to guide, & a dance to stay nimble & light & moving well. This learning is called *Sama*.

The Story will then reveal, be arrived to, & the Dreamer will then fully experience the Story, & be arrived eventually back to the waking, & the welcome of Alvinarah, Naria, Miss Flossie, & everyone else gathered.

[Returned again to Bungalow A on the shores of the Wild Wild Sea Dance—

[And a dream of a market of logs—& there the Trucker-Poet come along, laughing with a friend—

[Sees me & approaches close—

["I thought we had/have a fraternity!" he whispers hard.

[Do we? Did we? Still?]

Mossy Fugue: he seemed to be traveling long & far & unknown & by weird chance ended up at her house.

She was weightless & surprised in his grasp. He was in the other room, vain, useless.

She floated in colors in his grasp, like a rainbow of curved shadows, unsure, curious, forward & back to touch like all the world is a glare to know—

He doesn't matter—vain, useless—

They are gone on together, & build them an ark of words & touches—knowing each other by eliminating all that is unimportant; that is to say, most of everything—

desire becomes love but love cannot exist without it—

—And others until the areas of Rainbow Moss are blocked off—not forbidden—nothing is forbidden in the White Woods—but signs & advisors—

Most stay away, or want to learn how to experience the Story well—a few prefer Mossy Fugues, & often need to be led, shaken & wan, to Miss Flossie Flea's special recipe Rutabaga Festival Soup, for comfort, & a return to clarity.



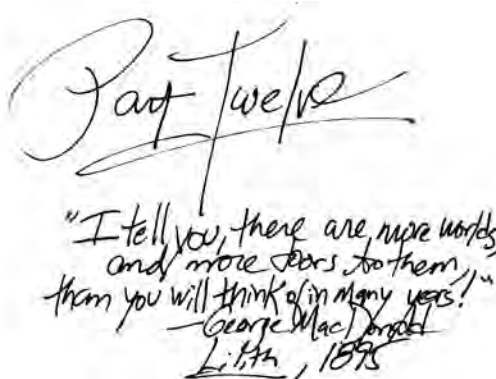
To be continued in Cenacle | 127 | April 2025

* * * * *

Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine [a new fixtion]



xli.

So I've been trying to figure out my thing. Now, what is it? What gets deep in my head *now*, & thus I make *good* & *a lot of Art*?

And I think I've got it partly figured.

Is this narrative right now? Or more fragments? Some of each maybe. But continue.

I have this idea for my *Many Musics* poems, for *Bags End News* too—

A grid 6x6. Populated by narratives & characters. Shifting among them in a way both organized & random. Thus I know the *what* but not the *which-when*—thus keeping me slightly off-balance & likely more engaged—

It's a working model to try anyway—result for *MM* is 36 poems, for *BEN* is 6 issues.

OK—but *Lx*? Thinking bout this all this past snowy weekend, when these ideas began coming together—

Lx is not structured like *MM* poems or *BEN* issues.
It's looser, far less linear—

which I like & prefer—

But what of a pattern, a structure?
And not asking here, so much,
the *what* or the *which-when*,
but *why*?

Always a favorite question here really.
Fiction previous to *Lx* called *Why*?

Answer could be a jocular “Why not?”
Or a more serious “Because I have to”
Or others.
So yes, those & others.

But, really, this is what I do.
Why? rides along as part of the puzzle,
but not like it’s there to be answered, simply & finally.
That’s not how I work.

But the vaguest idea comes to me that I would pluck 36 narrative threads from this book’s (so far) 4090 pages, 36 characters, & mix these with all the what going on of late in these pages—*Gr. Gr. Br. N.*, *The Arcadia*, the Great Story, etc.

Roll the dice & coins, start somewhere, & see where it leads—*Why?* curiosity, for one—like a good running back in football, I get better at what I do the more I do it. That is said more as fact than humble or brag,

Derek & the Dominos live at the Fillmore 1970 on Attic Radio—that’s quite good—somehow I was losing playing rock music while writing—I like jazz, electronica, classical—but rock shakes up my mind down to my feet—*pushes, pushes*—

So: 36 narrative threads, 36 characters—
&—*what?—not enough*—?

No—I roll dice & coins also for lines, for other bits not on the lists I tot up—

Why? so complex? Why not just write?

Why do football teams draw up plays?
Why do Artists do sketches before a painting?

Why do bands rehearse before a live show?

Discipline. Structure. Challenge.

I am interesting to myself *most* when the black ink pen in my hand is moving—that's a really good *Why?*

So however I get here, simple or weird or both—here & all my other lovely notebooks—that's what I'll do—

Alright.

And this too—how to mix all this together—old & new?

Where are all the many characters of this book? How much will I detail their path now?

Too, I feel the need for an accumulative effect—like it *matters* where I *randomly* start—

I think: like juggling an unknown number of balls, eyes closed—

But none of it is really yet obsessing me—oh half so—but not wholly—not yet—

So I make several lists & then start in—see where the first group of *who/what* goes—then not quite start at the beginning for the next one—let a detail spill over—

But *why?* that question again—

I've been reading old poetry of late—
old old poetry, Egyptian cosmogony—

They would explain creation as arriving from back-when *naturally* & *only* to the current ruler & empire—

I like that without an idea for it yet—

Another thought—I have to tot up my list from the first page of this book, back in June 2006—something in those pages—

Tonight I remembered that what drives me deepest is *desire*, & that's something most truly can only be *chased*, not *captured* & *held*—

Character	Place	Theme
1) Jack	2) S&B Pizza	1) Make other but surprise 9:43pm
2) Ch. Pyeon/boy Bakekeeper	2) Bridge of Glass	2) Praise Bungalon
3) Maya	3) Luna's Gk	3) Disbelieve nothing
4) ^{Cornish} Bowie	4) App: theatre	4) The word is "Seaweed"
5) Noisy Children	5) Desert	5) This book name of rays &
6) ^(Amusing) Gerry/ Twenty Bird	6) Naah ^{Noah} Hold ^{rooms}	6) rays The Word is called Dis. Illusion
7) Christina	7) <u>Remoteland</u>	7) Kindness most birds. 10:38pm
8) Penelope	8) <u>Triptown</u>	8) Creature Bungalon dramatic
9) Dylan	9) <u>Clonadale</u>	9) Sing deeper Alise Shady Coke "Le Nard"
10) Christa	10) <u>Dreamland</u>	10) <u>Seaweed</u> dis. Award Lunch table Vehrose MA Spont. by "Jazz Chit"
11) Preacher	11) White Woods	11) <u>Noah's</u> Gee's Day Noah's Rebels
12) Self & Ralph	12) <u>Borden</u> Town Lights	12) World is home Dreams you are Sle in all next page

<u>Chapter</u>	<u>Place</u>	<u>Theme</u>	
13) Rosie/Paula/Paul	13) Flying Elephant Services	13) Somewhat others	1-2-2024 7:30 pm Bengaluru Cafe
14) Benny Big Dreams	14) Temple in full moonlight (cleaning)	14) I love this book, its body, its path	Atmic Study (work table)
15) Cosmic Early	15) Traps, Joors	15) To deny, to believe, & to do not absolutely	Melrose, MT Pines Enmanuel
16) Rebecca American	16) Chicken Shack	16) The Key the conduit	Arbiter/Find then
17) Rich A. & Nasty Children	17) Rosy lit Room (create)	17) Stray planks on wide form	Diagonal Musik on Atmic Radio via Giffaro
18) Jasmine	18) Red Dip Cake	18) Games & chance number up the world	then Vhsal then Diagonal Musik II
19) Lizzy/Bobbie			
20) The Boat			
21) Global Wall	21) Cornish Compound	21) I	1-2-2024 8:00 pm Bengaluru Cafe
22) Corsetia	22) Hitterville	22) when I do	Atmic Study (work table)
23) Dr. Arnold T.K	23) Office Time	23) The game I want 2) Songs in fleece	Melrose, MT Boards of Cathak
24) Merry Muse	24) Arcadia Bookstore	24) Ships away overhead	Radio on Atmic Radio via Giffaro
25) David Time			
26) Other Raymond			
27) Ashleigh			
The Cure V's interaction on Atmic Radio via Giffaro 1-24-2024 Atmic Study, work table, Melrose, MT			

	Character	Place	Theme
1-30-2024	28) Whistler	23) Myther	23) Shit is beautiful to
7pm	29) Eternals	24) Bonding house (rooming)	24) No why & there never was
Burglar	30) Jazz Master	25) Beach	25) Web will begin to, in we are
See	31) My Dad	26) Cage	26) Followed him into the desert (High of desert)
Att	32) Specs	27) Trash space	27) Closed the lanes
Shy	33) Maya's beaver	28) Squid in plastic box	28) Acceleration of Time, transformation of space
(Work date)	34) Adrienne/Nikki	29) Chalky	29) Remember keep name & remember
9th Nov 2024	35) Global Warming (Sarah, April)	30) Hospital	30) Why ecology on animal with conscious sheep? C: 4:4pm
Loach	36) Dean	31) Cement Park	31) Why point this way of progress toward the stars as he shifts?
Rocket	37) White-faced		32) Why make the study of it into a book?
Experts	38) Toby		33) Why let him in speak knowing in lies & truth?
on Gatorade			34) Why the get from nothing, use to know, consume?
A Polly			35) Why the character on path to demise with Alice Radio
Art			36) Do escape? The Fixing is on
Radio			
1-31-2024	39) Christina's Scientist	31) Art in a Cafe	
6:47pm	40) Kinky	32) Dym's	
Burglar	41) Reporter	33) Shaded building that burned down	
See	42) White Bunny(es)		
Att	43) Bob's dream man		
Shy	44) A cop		
My wife	45) Samantha		
date			
Melrose			
ma			
on Polly			
on Sony speakers			

Character	Place	Theme
45) Lizzie's shared mind girl	32) Zombic Jam Dunkin' Donuts	32) How to live, baby?
46) Spaceships overhead	34) Bowie's Record Store	33) I know ¹⁹⁹¹ 247 ^{like next page}
47) Bowie's female spy (Jack's?)	35) Bowie's father's study	Keep playing
48) Dream woman Artist by Sea (Gretta's Mime)	36) Hotel room / card game	to sing
49) Man & girl, hotel room, 30 years between encounters	37) Gourmet Express	By last the Universe: why suffering? Why music? &
50) Oliver (Christa)	38) White Bunny's Pink White house	behold this world my answer
51) Charlie's Black Nurse	cliff - porch	38) Just

Life reached page 1029 in my now weeks-long review of this book currently on page 4097. I will go on with this review again but here find an intermission of words, commentary relevant or heedless of this task, oh likely both—need a piss—& music—fuck good music—

REM's New Adventures in Hi-Fi—shake as Quartet—but what about this list, partially made?

R.1009 is 2/00/2010, by its bottom, Coffeehouse Coffeehouse, was my 2nd home for years & years & years not seen it now in 4 years

Keep playing
39) Take back your hips, & help others too →

REM's
New Adv
on Aftercho
via Gēdare

Character	Place	Theme
(51) Prince and companions	(39) Marsh of Glass / Boatswain	(38) PENMAD
(52) Jasmine's story	(40) House of Campus (ministry)	(38) What results, what let's go
(53) No's book's	(41) Over-cakes (bar)	(39) Little answers to this world but each touches
(54) Dylan's dream	(42) Mary's search for my story	
(55) ImReality III	(43) Literature	
(56) Cheer on! onto mechanic	(44) Class taken	(40) Tends each other
(57) Sad bank robbers	(45) White she knew Jamie	(41) The World will increase

2-24-2024
 9:30pm
 Affric Study
 [aka LaVani]
 work table
 McKrose, MT
 REM's
 New Adv
 on Affric
 Radiovia
 Tabby's

I yahn not seen the West Coast
 in all those years — I Burn up
 Mark the Black Rock Desert
 I call of it on these pages
 when it was my life & all
 of it — Why revisit like this?
 Why, this book, this big-ass
 book is my fictional apotheosis
 — one of 6 projects of mine
 LX, MVD, BTN, C Tale, DreamRags
 & Great Times Adv. — but like
 each of them unique — but
 I felt it getting neglected —

after a fashion what I felt
 was its long history dunking under its
 waves — 1000s of reviews behold
 these lists! I'll write all of these back
 into this book now — why? because
 I can & want to & more feel the world
 around me strange, alien, unlikable —
 I feel black pen on white-lined paper is
 who I am, how I matter to me, how I
 know myself sure then to this to here —
 how I accept strange & alien a little more easily —

Character	Place	Theme	2-19-2024
(57) Jamie/ Muddy (May)	(43) Great black edifices in Woods	(40) In the Woods Burn Tonight	Cont Atg Sdu Classical Radio Mystery M.
(58) Genny's collage A brother Sean	(44) Iconic Square (45) Nada	(43) Golden Thread & Music	
(59) Restaurant preacher manager	(46) Film School (47) Room: walls fire, ceiling of stars, floor of night	(40) Find deepest food in the ferment.	7:10pm Bengaluru Atg, Sdu Mystery, M.
(60) Kitties & Bart Wagon	(48) Celestial hum (49) What crack in eukaryotic human consciousness made us choose I over we?		8:10pm Bengaluru Atg, Sdu Mystery, M.
(61) Christha's farm & his sons	(48) The Red Dog		8:10pm Bengaluru Atg, Sdu Mystery, M.
(62) Girl looking to climb Global Wall			
(63) Global Wall's man			

p400!

Character	Place	Theme
(4) Global Wall's invisible dimension friend	(49) Ingianna	(49) This broke by man who believed
(5) Charlie Freeman at MFA visions	(50) Ecuador	(50) exposure on the last one falls.
(6) JDL at 17	(51) Tompled Gate	(48) When did it matter the most? When I smiled at another & believed
	(52) Radio Station	

But let me confess a little more:
I've been running away the fuck too
few pages in this paper for too long —
What else instead? Some good
other projects, Cenacle, Within's Within
etc. — but a lot I don't give a
deep fuck for — or a light
casual fuck for — or any other
kind of fuck for — who am I?
Then Now? Here? This person
in this paper — listen to this →

<p>3-11-2004 At the study</p> <p>(67) Charlie's Mountain Teacher Brother</p> <p>3-12-2004 At the study</p> <p>(68) Preacher on Island on TV</p> <p>(69) Charlie's bent figure (pursuit)</p> <p>(70) Gerry's Preacher's best friend in dream of desolation (dream device / cassettes)</p>	<p>3-13-2004 8:00 PM Bumpkin Pie At the study Release, MFA WCB Classics on the Radio</p> <p>Or take his secret side street down between breaks — within whispers — how many levels down does he go How many?</p>	<p>(49) There is a shift among worlds.</p> <p>Things near</p> <p>(50) Lab on the hill how delicious, how pure</p> <p>(51) Ragged shuff of high notes</p> <p>(52) Let go the life 3-11-2004 At the study</p>
--	--	---

"I kid my welcome in at. (go away, go away, go away, go, go, go) R.E.M. ³¹
 Zink, the ³²Deerhat. — Best band
 in the whole world, Princess Crissy is
 right — Beatles, yes, Phish, yes, The Who,
 yes, yes, yes — but R.E.M. perfect,
 best — This book has consumed me so
 completely I ³³sand, mas did not write it,
 long enough in the space? No, never,
 easy answers. More to it? Oh fuck,
 bloody beauty yes — readers,
 me — that's all that's needed — now or ³⁴ever

Characters	Place	Theme
(71) Genny's Preacher's Tennis Square girl friend	(53) Global Wall's	(53) Old Song of Adam skeletons in moonlight ³⁵ workable Melrose, WA weres classes on the radio
(72) Princess Crissy	White Woods	(54) Two tones. One
(73) Aro lovers	Underground	told the sky. One says the earth.
(74) He writes, a hundred or many more years ago	Sex Palace	(55) Sitting grasps it all, language just the visible exhaust
(75) He writes "s prostitute"		(56) Only truth is Art ³⁶ 3/13/24 Affinity
(76) "He writes" prostitute's brother		(57) Deception. Denial. Deferment.
(77) They dream homeless man		
(78) Rock band Arachne's Thread		
(79) Jet/White Squirrel		
(80) Jet's father & brother		
(81) Amnesiac & woman		

Not a number. The answer
 a game, & how long the
 game is played is how
 many levels down he goes
 Or up. Out. In. Through Arrows.

Will it be like it was, ~~back~~ then,
 or then, this then or that then or
 any of them really? Yes & no &
 maybe & otherwise, N/A too/and/or
 I don't want it to be — I want
 it to shout from past ages, far
 past ones & forth to hence
 beyond hence — that's how it
 happy ever really becomes —
 so like then & then I will toss coins
 & roll dice & see what comes up, who
 & where, & how little or much, &
 use of it — how, this moment talks
 to those — this is my kind of
 time travel — sitting at that old
 coffee house again, that armchair —
 sitting both nowhere & there then till
 two are one are 2 are 1 = 2 = 1 —
 this book a vastness continent —
 this book a careworn ~~say~~
 this book a full moon's passing cloud —
 this book a laugh from there a rump
 high & low & round impossible corners
 so light upon my fingers & sparkle &
 pore so ~~in~~ happy. I write
 these lines — back to list anon!

Character	Place	Theme	Notes
82) Global Wall's dream	84) MFA	58) Can keep	03/20/04 Fi 24/04 Junglowlee
haunted girl w/ "Ennadin" message	water lilies	shaft in me	Althea Study
83) Girl who died in	egg picture	59) There are	Survival 20/04
love w/ water lilies pictures	55) Mt. Clou by other weapons		Me lose m
84) Girl who died's boyfriend	Day	Stranger things	Built to Spill's
85) Girl who died's next love	50) Nat Perfect's	60) Lick	Perfect them
86) Girl who died truck driver	store (new store)	the deep	now on
87) Great Heroes ("little heroes")	57) Curtillean	bricks & matts.	on Althea (do via Beehive)
88) Nat Perfect	Comic #2	(me over)	
89) The Architect (son)	58) Trip & Private	on, you	
90) The Hero	room where read	see	And I can
There is no deep	Book of Patterns	tell it's good	music
enough here, the good music lure is			
fore and on and on that's pen	black my it	John I	when because

Drop review up to p. 1204 - taking
 not fuck over & yet pleasure in it too - 3/12/17/2004
 Bill's Navdr. on again the Althea Radio -
 I recall it came out '96(?) & I wasn't thrilled
 subalbum? Didn't like the running order of
 songs - something words stupid - so come
 back to it long later & fucking wow - it's
 brilliant, better, beautiful, and friend
 that last as a guest - their Abbey
 Road - now it's the good luck charm
 of this effort - noisy delights
 reading page after page, notes accumulated...

2-20-2024 8:05pm
 2-20-2024 8:53pm
 3-20-2024
 Peel back your pinkie to see bleed
 to original the
 Choracer
 103 Secret Books
 104 Box of colored threads
 105 Princess's White Tiger tender Kingling
 106 Christmas trapper
 107 Guardian at the Threshold of the Dreaming
 108 Cloverdale's farmer
 3 songs
 109 Carnival Room's fiddlers
 110 Squeezbox player
 111 Faces in Toner's staircase pillar
 112 Professional celebrants
 113 Tiny Dams Time
 114 Friend & wives
 115 Kitten with
 116 Sideline reporter's Preacher

One enters a Room of Song if one wishes to know the old texts they are not on paper or stone but live as music in this room maybe in others too? One enters & listens & studies & knows by standing tall here & kneeling low there & eyes wide open or shut singing a long or too high or so low - one learns to travel the Room of Song to know the Wobble & other Ancient's complex

Place
 The Heroes' Boat
 Care of the Bears
 Brothers' Gypsy Gr!

Theme
 3-20-2024
 107 Flutter to go
 108 Forgive.
 109 Understand.
 110 Reconcile.
 111 It came upon me with no name (the beautiful thing)
 112 A person is a house of rooms
 113 Some strange remain (P.1898)
 114 Love will

But yes it was a true room
 was walking floorless in my mind yes
 any soft hand would have done but yes
 the more none none none none
 in, the walls crawled in, the sound
 music, pipes drums bass voice
 crawled all over & I was so
 ducking myself me & my
 feet and not boots obscure
 foot on top half of music
 that got some hall yes
 that ad in right

Character	Place	Theme
(15) The Demon Girl	(14) Brother Heroes	(14) None, and many
(16) Demon Girl's	Cypress's graveyard	(15) All flesh is
Keen Seen	(15) Brothers'	born, all flesh
(17) The Tramp	Kingdom	needs love
(18) Demon Girl's love	(16) Architect's	(16) There is a bar,
Youngest of 3	Sleeper's Class -	know we pass
(19) Captured woman on TV	Room	through

[Part 13] The small black & white TV in the small hotel room blares a song at a whiny pitch---BRING MY HAPPY BACK AGAIN---it pleads over and over as the TV is skipping like a phonograph. A nothing clearcut in room's muck.

(120) Demon Girl's neighbor (bribe)
 (121) Boy & girl in house of many floors
 (122) All white Imp
 (123) Demon Girl's basement clients
 (124) Demon Girl's goldfishes
 (125) The King
 (126) Dream Walker

(127) This book is strange
 (128) remain which is why I must tend it better, tend it ever, it narrates me slantly right, how best to do it, so that what had, what lost, what never found, can come to be, on that's why all this, let all these sit & set together, grow or decay on both, not a rest place so light but the beautiful fur of
 (129) This is the strangest music.

(130) There is no Time
 (131) Today is the stuff of blood & bone. Save its body.
 (132) If a way, begins with creatures. Always has.

(133) Prison
 (134) Abandon
 (135) Fun with bone.

(136) Green.

(137) City, on with creatures.

(138) The sea has


(139) Strange music.

Character	Place	Theme
(127) Asoyadonna	(80) Shop with	(80) Way of the
(128) Roddy	typewriter	features
(129) Francisco	(82) Park where Prince	(81) Nothing saves the
(130) King's Queen Deirdre	reads manuscript	world, this time or any
(131) King's Ancient Gones	(83) Princess's place	other. Dreams save
(132) Architect's muth Asterius	(84) Princess's cinema	for this.
<p>[Point 13] In the mark someone has left a small photograph on the ground, 45 RPM single spinning on it, soft, a lover's whisper in a dark dark dream bring my happy back again... now revealed the photograph sits upon not ground quite but a half-buried black & white TV showing hotel...</p>		
(133) Bowie's Sleeper-lover	(85) Bass End	(82) We too are one.
(134) Bowie's Iris	(86) Th. Fleas	(83) Dream Water
(135) One who disappeared & loves Great (Leaving)	(87) Bowie's father's house	(I'm always hearing)
(136) Travelers	(88) Rainy	this book, no
(137) Girl w/ korean pup & groundskeeper friend (Diana)	(89) City	matter local or hour,
(138) And her guitarist (Iris's brother?)	(90) Stanlight	always hearing
(p. 2057 - halfway!)	(91) John's cabin	it, & when I
(139) Prince of nothing at all		arise awhile,
(140) Princess's Professor-lover		it feels the home
(141) Imp in the Moon		it is, always
(142) Algernon Beagle		been, & the rest
(143) Mommy Beagle		elsewhere, some
(144) Asterius (Architect's brother?)		deadly, or not
(Benny B. D.)		but still, else

Character	Place	
(145) ^{Small} Wiggly friends	(92) Bowie's home	<p>anyway, let myself look elsewhere lose a little, lose a little more, but what why & fuck the rest— this is home & I say it plain, happy, the air I breathe, the heat in my chest—</p>
(146) Thrax & Flees	(93) Town built	
(147) X the Creature	on a spaceship	
Carnival Master	(94) Village	
(148) Major Bears	at home 10-20-2021	
(149) Mr. Henry	where, & do I feel this more now than I used to, even more?	
(150) Pith	Think kinda sorta maybe because I have vaguely tended	
(151) Jacoby		
(152) Threshold Bones		
(153) Herclitus		
(154) Treasures		
<p>(Part B?) "Bring my happy back again? is the murky wish of a world backslap trashed by its residents, like this was a beat up hotel. Crash! a black & white TV bursts through the window & arcs to the ground & world wonders quietly: "your happy?"</p>		
(155) Labyrinthine	(95) "The Kenist"	Themes
(156) Dr. Arnold	(96) Game	
Kickerbocker	(97) Black Dog Diner	
(157) Knight & Queen	(98) Fun	
(158) X the Space Alien	(99) More Fun	
(159) Aunt & Niece (Bowie)	(100) More Fun	
Teacher, Rooming House	(101) More Fun	
(160) Bowie's friend in room of bunnies, etc.	gas station	
		<p>(161) Deep belief up (162) Art's what I am, what I believe (163) Was it the (p.2322) White Birch kept me along</p>

Character	Place	Theme
(161) Good the Little Pink Bear	(100) Travelers	(87) Symbol of eternal
(162) Gay Treys	Refuge (Evelyn)	purity
Penny Horns	(101) Gatekeepers	perpetual
(163) Miranda McFarland	Film room (p. 51-104)	hunger
(164) Blind Marie	(102) Hotel gathering	(88) Return to paradise
(165) John's brother	below Third World Market (Dreamland)	P11
(166) Cordelia's rough	(103) Clarendon Island	(89) 60
Spaceship / over (p. 2250)	(104) "Cannermen"	Into the Green
(167) Exiled Knight	(105) I can't	(90) The Cycle
(168) Village of Artisans & Painter	Square / Link	is Complete
(168) Snakes		

(Part 13?) You happy is some where ahead in the
 muck, a probable fair distance still to travel &
 pursue, may be fire, maybe a hotel room for a night,
 maybe a black & white TV operated by com's, two
 per 30 minutes, you feed & feed just for a clue
 somewhere, some commercial late at night, promising...

(169) Travelers	(105) Zombie Jam	
(170) Tobin's school	Hotel	
Friend	(106) Berlin Before	
(171) Toby's friends Billy & Denny (jacks)	The Fall	
(172) Toby's friend Josie	(107) Cycle Democracy	
(173) More fun trio	(108) Z-form & cash	
(girl's niece of Aunt)	Gretta's Grandmother's house	

Character	Place	Theme
(174) Evelyn the Traveler & her lover	(109) Janet Grella's house	(91) 11/14/1991
(175) Christina's	(110) Grandma's house	(92) for your journey to begin
(176) Calpurnia the Sea Dragon	(111) Extreme	(93) You need a companion
(177) Queen Gennie's rest of girls (incl. Mary)	(112) Gatekeeper on Clarendon Island	(94) Creature take a K
(178) Queen Gennie's Mary & her boy & a	(113) O'rous	(95) You must go
(179) Abbe the writer	(114) Lobby of North Theater & room of strip & Curie Committee	(96) The Seal
(180) Director of Triptown	(115) Reception person	(97) First
(181) Clarendon Island	(116) Island's Pond (Native Great Heroes)	(98) Stray Strides of the famous travellers
(182) Preacher	(117) Path of Roots & Rocks	
(183) T. Bone Williams (2-Tam & 3-Tam's daughter)		
<p> { P A } Promising your happy in murky { R T } terms is what the who's 33 bastards do on the TV travel from hotel to hotel, ballroom to ballroom, skipping the details of your happy just as it nears </p>		
(184) Town's	(118) Secret	(99) Phyllis
(185) Town's Cousin	(119) Place of Elements	(100) Grand Production
(186) Greth		

Birthday. 60. Numbers. Think of it. My brother JBIII never made that number, just shy, so I'm older than he ever got to be, yet I will ever think of him as older, wiser, & far funnier—

Others I once knew, loved, have hit the number, or will. Won't ask me what it's like if I'm older, or tell me if they made it first. That's sad & true both. Words not shared.

More I can say on this. 60. Numbers. Birthdays a human thing, I'm fairly certain, because so myopic & cheaply metaphorical. A holiday for something, what? The event of it? My continuance?

Let me put in less a grouch's way: 5/4, barely a week, less really, I celebrate 50 years of me writing, back to when I began my journal. This thought pleases me, because it's *mine*, not a generic thing. Numbers that please me.



To be continued in Cenacle | 128 | June 2025

* * * * *

