





"Where one door shuts,  
another opens."  
--Miguel de Cervantes,  
Don Quixote, 1605.

## Editor's Introduction

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

Seems like the great tug between repression & freedom goes ever on. The names of those who try to repress, & those who try to free, change from year to year, century to century, but the moving lines remain ever drawn, ever breached by either side.

Consider the works in this volume beautiful works of Art freely expressing in countless pieces what grey repressive fists would squelch. They do not, yet. Faith bides in the belief they never shall.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'RS' or similar initials, followed by the date '5/00/03' written in a cursive style.

Raymond Soulard, Jr.  
Editor & Publisher  
Scriptor Press New England

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# Scriptor Press Sampler

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## Car Parked Uphill

It's a steep hill; he has pulled the brake  
on the Corolla and sighed again.  
We've gotten out and locked the doors.  
I've turned my ankle in these heels,  
and keep apologizing

even though he isn't angry, just tired,  
or angry with himself, the alter ego,  
and at the parking meter  
for which neither of us has any change.

We consider forgetting the concert entirely,  
the one we were both so excited about,  
clarinets and oboe, the whole brass section.

I go to get back in the car, in tears,  
and the door falls back on my leg.

I'll have two bruises now,  
but anyway he is at the door  
in a flash because he's almost always kind  
to me. *You've hurt yourself*, he says,  
*let me see. It's nothing*, I say,  
*nothing, really. Let's just go.*  
*We are out of money, and already late.*

He takes a long look at me,  
in my new dress, a slinky, low-cut affair,  
and shakes his head.



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We bought the tickets, we're here,  
and you look beautiful, he says,  
as he selects a curly cue section of my hair,  
pulling it to tease me.

He draws me out the door again,  
and, smiling, leaves a note on the car  
for the parking attendant.

This hill is too damned steep,  
is all it says.

\* \* \* \* \*



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



## Dream Raps

*Ink, you enchant me,  
drop by drop,  
holding the traces of my sanity and my madness,  
like a long, barely-visible scar,  
while the body sleeps in the discourse of its destructions.*

— Pablo Neruda, “The Blow” 1969 (Translation by NDH)

### I Never Wanted to Buy New Clothes Anyway

Anyway, it's kind of like I never wanted to buy new clothes anyway. So you could say I got what I deserved that day when I walked into the clothing store, & it got held up by these strange robbers you couldn't possibly imagine. One was very short with a long coat covered in epaulets, handlebar mustache, some kind of pirate's hat, & the other one was even stranger, even shorter, she looked like a tiny little black and white panda bear—

And I don't even know if they were *actually* holding up the clothing store. It seemed to be some kind of confusion with the guy behind the counter, who looked like he was smoking some of that wacky green stuff day & night (by his red-rimmed eyes & his mad **CAKLE! CAKLE! CAKLE!**) begging: *don't rob us please, don't rob us please (in a weird sort of upside-down accent, like he was speaking backwards)*.

I don't think they were robbing them, but it got confused, & finally someone pushed down a rack of clothes, & someone hit the lights, & I just decided *the hell with buying new clothes today, I never wanted to buy new clothes anyway—who cares what my roommates think of me—*

So I managed to crawl into the back room, & out the emergency exit—*whoop! whoop! whoop! whoop! whoop!* went the alarm, but I just kept going & I found myself at a crowded train station pretty quickly, & I thought, *well, in the movies, the guy who is fleeing the scene of whatever always runs down those stairs into the train station, leaps the turnstile, & then the door to the train opens just in time, or not just in time, depending on whether or not he's going to get caught, according to some script or other—*

I missed it, of course, & now I stand there, & the platform's empty, which I find really strange. But you know, here's the thing, I looked way down the track, & see two individuals sitting at a card table, & it's the robbers & they're sitting there, & they're playing cards. An empty can of Gin-Ginger Ale next to each of them—

Now I walk down there, & nod to them, & they don't know who I am, & they're not paying attention because they're engrossed in their card game. They're playing with a card deck that has different sizes of cards, & different shapes of cards, & some of

the cards are thick, & some are thin, & I notice the bigger of the two with the mustache actually starts to chew on a couple because perhaps they are tasty cards too, at least some of them—&, well, they just look too busy for the likes of me, so I figure, *well, it's maybe it's the fact that I didn't buy new clothes—look at the rags upon my back!*

So I walk to the far end of the platform thinking, *eh, I'll stay way down here*, & I start to think about my expenses, & the reason why I didn't want to buy new clothes is that I owe a lot of rent, & I don't have a lot of money. Old-timey bookstore jobs just don't pay well, & I spend too much time composing poems with sand-sticks in the earth.

But then again, I thought, *if I get a new job with new clothes, maybe I'll be able to pay rent, or just move out of that place anyway. My room doesn't even have a real door, just a kind of a courtesy curtain as they call it. Courtesy curtain!*

So what happens finally is I just sit down on the platform, I think to myself, *go don't go, what difference does it make?*

Then a man comes up to me, & it's the clothing shop owner, but he looks all mod now. His hair's slicked back, & his clothes are far more expensive & fancy & weird than the ones that were for sale in his store. And he says to me, *dreams are just fragments of reality (CACKLE! CACKLE! CACKLE!), or like tiny bits of unchewed food.*

\* \* \* \* \*

### Some Will Not Like How This Story Continues

Some will not like where this story continues, but this is how it continues. I was waiting for a bus at a street corner after my latest shift at the old-timey bookstore, & the bus pulled up, & the door opened, & I got on board, & I paid my fare from a little blue-green coin purse. And look who is driving—but none other than ex-President Clusterfuck himself, Donald J. Trump!

Yes indeed, he's the driver. He's dressed up in a driver's uniform, & he kind of looks like Ralph Kramden from that old TV show, *The Honeymooners*. He has the hat, he has the formal jacket & the pants, & he's friendly to everybody. He's talkative, having a good time driving the bus.

I sit way in the back, but I can hear his voice booming in the front. People get on, people get off. A lot of people sit toward the front because he's telling funny stories. Apparently, years after he was driven from the White House in Washington D.C., he lived in the outback of Australia for awhile, lived with the kangaroos. Named them too, some ribald names. Stinky, Swallers, Big Mama.

*I had me some funny names for them kangaroos that I lived with out in the outback, all alone. Just me & the kangaroos!* he cries, & the bus shakes with everyone's laughter.

So I'm sitting there listening, but eventually my attention drifts to my feet, my boots. They've fallen apart, I can barely walk in them. Sometimes I forget this for a while, but then they sort of come undone, & they're flapping in a way that feet don't like. Now I'm thinking: *I've gotta go see someone.*

So I get off the bus near the Square, because I see a sign for a certain shop that says: **Shoe Fix-er! Shoe Fix-er!** It's a funny sign & I think *OK, I'll go to the Shoe Fix-er! Shoe Fix-er!*

I wave goodbye to ex-President Clusterfuck, Donald J. Trump the bus driver,

& he says, *you take care, my brother, peace & love to all & yours.* I say, *you too, ex-President Clusterfuck, Donald J. Trump.*

I get off the bus, & I sorta wobble-waddle-limp my way to **Shoe Fix-er! Shoe Fix-er!** Inside is a man sitting on a little stool. He's a blonde man with a very intense look on his face, but I've come to realize that's just how he looks even when he's calm.

I say, *aren't you that famous ex-movie star?* And he looks at me with that fierce look & he says, *yes sir, I am that famous ex-movie star, but this is what I do these days.* So I take off my boots, & he starts to fix them.

He looks at me quietly a long while, & says, *how are those sessions you're having with Webster Hill?*

Um. I ask him, *Who is Webster Hill?*

He says, *why, he's your psychiatrist. He's the one you write about in all your journals, & you haven't decided yet if he's a man or a place, you haven't decided whether you're sane or not sane.*

*Tell me, sir, look at me in my fierce & famous ex-movie-star eyes, is all that you've told about in the last few minutes real? Does it sound real, or is it just some kind of a weird dream?*

\* \* \* \* \*

### I Have This Teacher That I Admire a Lot

I have this teacher that I admire a lot. My class with him is at night, the one weekday night the old-timey bookstore gives me off, & I wish I could have a drink with him, or something, pick his brain about all my worries & thoughts about the world, & whatever. That's his phrase, he likes to talk about *the world, & whatever.*

But I don't want to take up his time, so I ask him, as he's packing up his knapsack, *how long is your drive home?* He says, *oh, about 90 minutes.* He's all packed up, & sees I'm lingering. He's smaller than me, only in stature, & he leans near to me, & kisses me on the shoulder, quickly, affectionately, & then he leaves without a word.

I feel touched specially, sweetly, & so I walk home. It's a long way, & I have lots of time to think about this & that. I look up at the stars, & sort of bounce them around in my mind, & I remember that time I traveled down south to the Free City of Mumakesh. I ended up at a brand-new bookstore, a tall glass structure, with bookstalls outside, & cups of wine & juice available freely. Inside there was so much to see. Very mazy, vast & wonderful.

As I'm walking through the complex array of aisles, I realize I'm naked. But nobody troubles about me, nobody criticizes or gives me a hard time. Someone shouts to me from a distance, *hey Websta! You'll love their LPs!* And the vinyl LP section is a good one. Three different colored vinyl versions of James McGunn's *Sco'u'land*. There's an old portable phonograph to play records on if you're careful.

So that is the story I thought about as I was walking home with my teacher's affectionate kiss still on my shoulder, still hovering like a feather, like a whisper.

\* \* \* \* \*

## In a New Century

In a new century, the bald angry man pulls open his shirt to reveal a superhero's picture on his chest. But at that moment, a woman much taller than him is burying him in popcorn. She's probably three times taller than him, an aberration of the new century. As the popcorn buries him almost completely, you can hear him cry from deep in his superhero-picture-covered chest, *you can't bury me, oh!*

*What the hell was that? Oh, here now. Look around.* There's a Ducky Creature, sitting peaceably in the lap of my new beloved, by the shore of the magickal mythical Island. They look quite peaceable together.

But then, at that moment, comes roaring up a big & metallic machine, intent on getting them & everyone else off this magickal mythical Island, clearing it off, sweeping it dry, everything. My new beloved & the Ducky Creature run to hide at the far end of the magickal mythical Island. She's a quick runner.

But, in the middle of the magickal mythical Island, there is a big Ducky Creature, a BIG Ducky, & he won't go. He looks at this great metallic machine approaching him, smirks friendly, & says, *we won't go, you will go.*

\* \* \* \* \*

## Me Looking in a Trashcan

See me looking in a trashcan, in a bathroom, in a house I lived in back when. In the trashcan are yellow pages from my notebooks, crumpled & thrown out. Well, some of the pages are from my notebooks, some aren't, but I'm shocked. I don't know what it means. I stand up with my pages, fold them carefully, put them in my inner pocket of my green plaid jacket, & I walk out right out the door.

I find myself walking on the side of this road where they say strange things happen. At one point, I walk into a kind of a restaurant, called Blue Dog Eats, & they don't have counters or booths, they have old-fashioned school desks. I sit at one, & look at the menu, & the waitress comes over, frazzled, hurried, leaves again, not rude but just frazzled, hurried.

Someone else places an order, salmon, toast, other things, his list seems to go on & on, & how can one man even as fat as this one eat that much food? And there's no one with him to enjoy it.

Tiring, I leave, walk on, & find a stump at the side of the road to take my rest. Gather together a sharp-pointed stick, & some colored sand, & I just start to write words in the ground between my feet. Not sure how this is working, but the letters are glowing as I write them.

They almost seem to seek into the earth, become words & something else too? I feel myself slip into the sand-stick, into the sand it composes into the earth, like becoming as one thing. Man, stick, sand, earth, words . . . a *hmmm* raises & runnels through all this.

A noise, the runnel snaps. *Oh, here now.* Here in my lap is my Creature friend, MeZmer the White Bunny. A dear friend, & my Tender for times of worries & trouble. She is now wearing the beautiful necklace my new beloved put on her, & she has a bowtie too. Creatures charm with just the smallest touches.

We nap together awhile. Then I have to get back on that road. MeZmer gives me a friendly bright-eyed sniff, & is back in the White Woods in barely a hop.

I'm bound somewhere. I have friends that I'm remembering now are waiting for me down this road & *they're saying come with us, come with us, we want to visit the Rainbow Wheel that unites the Six Islands. Come with us!*

\* \* \* \* \*

## Laying Abed, Still Dark

Laying abed, still dark, it's the last little stretch of the night when it does not seem possible that there is indeed a morning coming. It is as much night as it can possibly be. And to be awake at this time, not because you stayed up all night, but because you woke just about now, is a mysterious thing indeed. Yesterday's finished & tomorrow hasn't yet begun, so it's sort of a forever now, even though it's only for a little while.

And I lie there, next to my new beloved, thinking about the ex-President Clusterfuck, Donald J. Trump, & how he hated what people said about him back then, hated all those mean nasty things, & he'd've make them all *shut the fuck up* if he could've. He really would've. Wonder what it would be have been like to have another President after him. But we didn't. Probably for the best. And now he drives buses, smiles, & tells his off-color jokes to general delight.

It's good to be back at the old-timey bookstore, It's been a while, I'm glad they rehired me. I now work the back counter best I can. There's two registers, & always a lot of customers. They've got shopping carts full of things, like big five-pound bags of ChocoSmax, & I think: *why are people buying ChocoSmax in an old-timey bookstore? What what kind of place is this?*

I wander away for a moment, not sure why, maybe just discombobulated with the whole thing. Still thinking about ex-President Clusterfuck, & his hatred of all people *forever & ever, & he'll get them all in the end.* But now he's the happy jokester bus driver.

Watching my colleagues rush over to start attending those long lines I walked away from. And they decided maybe I can't handle them, so they settle me in with an old, old man they call Refund Man, because he comes in every day for his refunds.

He's got the frayed remains of scraggly dreadlocks, & a crushed old scrap of a weird hat, & his eyes don't really match each other in color, one green & one golden, don't seem to be either of them straight. Nose is a little bent. Did he ever smile much?

No one exactly explains to me what he gets his refunds for, but he's got to fill out the form & bring it to the front counter, where he'll get his refund.

He's got to put in his name down on the form, & he's sitting in one of the many armchairs over there in the oversized *History of the Six Islands* section, with his smells from the White Woods, & smells from the cellar of that ancient mansion he squatted in awhile. He's saying to me, *which name am I gonna put down this time?* He looks at me with his crazy green & golden eyes, & he says: *which name?*

*Webster Hill?* I suggest.

Starts, studies me a long moment, seems to agree, & he puts that name down, & I point him toward the front. *Events accumulate,* he mutters back at me, by obscure way of thanks.

Still night, still dark. Still forever now, for a bit longer. *Drift. Drift. Drift.*

\* \* \* \* \*

### Little Bear Creature

It was a strange thing. Somehow that little Bear Creature had swallowed the original Secret Book, & some of the little Pine Cones, & he was very upset about this. We've been traveling together for a long time, a long distance, & I know this little Bear Creature does not sleep well, has troubles & worries, & so I think that this may have happened because of that. He may have sleep-swallowed the Secret Book & some of the little Pine Cones.

But what's to good to tell is that eventually we work it out. *Of course* we work it out. There's no way that I, as Creature Coordinator, am not going to work out a crisis involving Creatures, especially Creatures swallowing other Creatures by accident. We call in MeZmer the White Bunny & Tender to Cluster Dream with us, & recover everyone safely. Much happiness. Much dancing.

So we continue traveling, now with the Kittees, wearing their special occasion long blue top hats, & driving their famous Boat Wagon, to another of the famous Six Islands. A big Village. Vast coffeehouse & that great new big glass-walled mazy bookstore I love. It's quite an Island, lots of fun.

I remember standing in the Square at about 2 in the morning, the Fountain shouting beautiful rainbow-colored glowing water into the air, like the Rainbow Wheel that now unites all Six Islands.

But my little Bear Creature friend still has his troubles & worries, & I think they're affecting me too because we're in a clearing that night, drifting toward sleep out under the Full Moon, & there's fog rolling across it, heavy clouds, & I look up, & see the Imp in the Full Moon. And it looks like her head's fallen off! I panic but she just laughs & laughs & laughs. Like this: **CAKLE! CAKLE! CAKLE!** And I just don't know what to do about it.

Sit up now fully awake, & I look at my also fully awake little Bear Creature friend & I say, *you know, my friend, we're worrying too much.*

Then someone in a tree nearby says: *if you worry too much, you've got to go to the Floating Island in the Sky. Wash all your cares away.*

Being trusting sorts, we ask the voice, *where is this Floating Island in the Sky that will wash all our cares away?*

*Well now. The two of you go back on to sleep & I think things will take care of themselves.* And there was something in that voice to trust & my friend feels it too. And so we curled up, blankets & pillows, all clustered together, good friends, fell into a Clustered Dream, *& up! & up! & up! & up!* to that Floating Island in the Sky.

And that voice was right. We returned sometime before morning, woke up in that clearing, & our worries had floated away.

\* \* \* \* \*

### We All Take Buses Now

It was inevitable—we all take buses now. Nobody drives in cars alone anymore, like we used to when you'd see the highway filled with cars with one passenger in each. That's long since passed. It was the environment's crash, was always coming. Did President Clusterfuck, Donald J. Trump, listen? *Did any of them?* Now he drives an electric bus & tells dirty jokes.

I guess there's still some cars, but they have to be filled, you can't travel *anywhere* alone without risk of fine, even jail, unless your car is filled. There are no commercial planes anymore, either, those big jets that used to fly people & burn who knows how many thousands of gallons of petrol. No way. *You want to get somewhere far, you're going to be on the buses.*

It's taken awhile, whole culture changed, slowed down, probably better off for everybody. And so you get to talking to people, because what else is there to do on a bus traveling long distances, if that's what you've got to do?

I'm sitting next to this old, old man. Says his name is Hill. Crazy misshapen eyes looking around in about ten directions at once. I don't know if he's talking to me, or talking to the seat, talking to the air, talking to his memories, but he starts talking in this very soft voice.

Hill says, to whom-or-whatever: *seems long ago I was visiting this pretty girl, long dark curly hair.*

Looks at me & says, *was she Irish?* I shrug vaguely.

Hill continues: *she was sweet & intelligent, & pretty, all three. I take the big chance, & we kiss, & then there's many kisses. And I don't remember her name. Do you remember her name?*

Hill looks at me hard. I shake my head, feeling like I don't know what part I'm playing in this anyway.

*And I ask if she'll be mine, if she's decided. She says, Mary Gall will decide. And I don't know what this meant, I don't know who Mary Gall was.*

Long pause. Another long hard look at me.

*I still don't know who Mary Gall is & you know, I'm still waiting for Mary Gall to decide. Events accumulate.*

\* \* \* \* \*

### I Get Off That Bus

So I get off that bus & I'm looking for a kind of smoke shop I've been in before, a sort of magickal place I'm trying to find again. It was sort of a smoke shop, but sort of not even really a shop at all. And I'm trying to figure out where it is, & what stop did I get off at last time? I really don't know. I start walking faster & faster, like you do when you're lost, as though maybe you'll get un-lost if you walk fast enough. It just never works.

I walk into this one place, & they're selling computers from the future. Yeah, one of *those* shops. Oh, they come with all sorts of guarantees, like if you buy this computer from the future now, you'll be covered later if you arrive to a moment when in the past it was broken. *Possibly Double Your Money Back Too!* read a lot of the banners on the wall.



So I'm sitting at this computer monitor. It's not really actually a monitor, it's more like a wall, & I'm sitting there in a chair facing the wall, & there's a square like a screen drawn on the wall with a black marker pen, one of those felt kinds.

And I'm drawing on the screen with my finger, & there are others doing the same thing, drawing on the wall with their fingers, & it seems as though there's sort of a collaboration going on between us, among us, & we start drawing in synchrony, on our computer screens from the future, sort of a rhythm that becomes kind of a melody of sorts.

But then I just stand up & walk out of the computer store from the future, because I don't have time for guarantees. I'm looking for something *better than a guarantee*.

Now I'm walking down the street, having given up on the smoke shop, & given up on the computer store from the future, & I'm thinking about the idea I once read about of adding water to something to make something else. I think now maybe that's what you need in life—you need to add something to something else to produce a third thing.

And this sounds simple but, really, there's some way you can go about it where it's not simple. Like, for example, what if you didn't know one of the two things & you just sort of ad libbed, & this seems strange, because I mean, really, *you can't do that, can you?*

I don't know. I start wondering if maybe it's possible to have a big question mark plus question mark equals three. *Why not?* That's what I say. *Prove me wrong!* I declare, as I'm walking down the street waving my arms around.

But nobody cares to prove me wrong. People, in fact, only care to give me a little bit of leeway as they walk by me, seeing me wave my arms, shouting to the skies, *prove me wrong! Question mark plus question mark equals three!*

Then I just walk into this old movie theater. Well, it might be an alley, I'm not really sure. But I see this flickering screen projected on a brick wall. Maybe it's like that wall that was in the computer store from the future, I'm not really sure, but there's a movie telling a story about a leader in Russia, a popular young leader, & he & all his family are red-haired.

They're playing on the Palace lawn, & they're very popular even though they're czars & matriarchs & things like that. And there comes a Memorial Day, & the popular young leader says: *we will all now take a knee in memory*.

So I do too, standing there in that alley watching. I take a knee now in memory of all the things that have occurred to me recently. Take a knee, then sort of settle comfortably onto a flat piece of cardboard to watch more of this story.

And when I wake up, I'm on that damn spaceship overhead again.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **I Spent a Lot of Time on the Road**

I spent a lot of time on the road back then, & most of it was boring, some of it was strange, & a small bit of it absolutely wonderful. This one time I'm traveling, I come to a sort of campsite. Even has some kind of a country store, you know those stores that sell just a little bit of everything out in the middle of nowhere at three times the regular

price. Most of it's expired, but you're out in the middle of nowhere, & they're selling it.

I make a new friend. He's a nice guy. Sometimes I look at his face & he looks really young & fresh cut, right out of the grinder, & sometimes he looks like an old, old man who hasn't seen the grinder in a long *long* time. He's got a tent, I've got a tent, sort of a tent. *It's tent-ish*.

So we start gathering firewood, & I tell him about the ideas I've been coming up with over time, because he seems like the kind of guy that'd keep his ears open to such things.

So I say, *we should build a big fire, & we should maintain it always. We should draw people to it, from our travels hither & yon. We should build it big enough, & have it always going, so that the idea of it starts to infect others. They come & they visit the bonfire, & it causes them ideas. Maybe they go off & build their own bonfires!*

And he, carrying along his firewood, big armful, strong guy, he suddenly cries out, *shamans! & fire!* He cries out, *shamans! & fire! Events accumulate!* Alright, alright, I like this guy.

So I picked this small area among the trees to put up my sorta tent, & I thought it was out of the way, but it begins to fill with people who come over for various reasons. Maybe they hear about my idea, though there's no actual fire built yet, it's just an idea & a wonderful way of talking about it. *Shamans! & fire!*

And my friend, he can't keep his eyes off this long rainbow-haired hippie girl who's come over, & he's staring hard at her, though she seems nonplused, neither disturbed nor complimented. Smoking a long cigarette, I do think it's tobacco. And we start to build the fire.

I say to the long rainbow-haired hippie girl, *come over here, help us*. She says, *sure man, sure man. You gonna build a fire?*

I look at my friend who's bashfully digging his toe in the sand, & I point at him. I nod, nod again, *here's your big shot, Romeo*, & he shouts to the sky, & to everyone, everywhere:

*SHAMANS! & FIRE!*

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Empty Playhouse**

In the empty playhouse of my mind, the stage is filled with faces that never met & places that were not adjacent to one another, & moments that did not occur. And I'd like to introduce Friend A to Friend B but it would take a thousand miles & several years, some kind of temporal wire to do it. And I'd like to reach my elongated hand across to all of your hands, so long untouched, & I'd like to tug gently on those hands until they begin to arc over the mundane & the impossible both, & arrive here.

I'd say to you, & you, & you, I couldn't tell you then the words I can conjure now, how I love you, how important you were to me, how you stayed in my mind-car as it sped away, as you sped away, other directions, other places, other times, to be gone toward.

And if I could get you all on the telephone, all you faces from hither & yon, so long unseen, the old telephones with the wires attached to the wall so that we're all unable

to walk outside under the stars or sit in shopping malls or pay attention to four things at the same time.

I'd say, *it's a clear moment, comin' & goin', it's a clear moment. Go to your window, look up at that Imp in the Full Moon with me now, here, there, then, wherever you are, look up at that Full Moon, I'm bouncing my kisses, my affections, my sadnesses off it, onto you. Like a feather, like a whisper.*

\* \* \* \* \*

### **I'm in a Bedroom in My Mother's House or Apartment**

I'm in a bedroom in my mother's house or apartment, & the long dark curly-haired girl in the tight sweater comes over. It's one in the morning, but I'm sure glad to see her. I'd known her back in high school, but not really, never really looked at her.

We hug. We're supposed to work together on something. My mother's around too. I am friendly to her, but I don't really want her around. Her house or apartment is long, its hallways deliberately narrow. I like this girl a lot, try not to blow it. *Should we do our work now? Or lay close in the darkness?*

*Something something.* Suddenly I'm in that or another room alone, sitting in a chair, it's dim, & I turn to face the mirror. An old, old man with someone else's weird eyes, someone else's face. I cry out, terrified. *Wake up!*

*Something something something.* Suddenly that room or another, with someone else. We were prisoners, we'd try hard to escape using a Polaroid camera. Pictures in front of the sensors, complicated process, it may not work. It involved a map of a baseball diamond as well.

*Something something something something something something something something something something something something.*

Still in her house, don't know how. Now that long dark curly-haired girl is sneaking in to leave notes on my typewriter. I don't see her anymore, but I see the notes. Don't understand it. How does this work? *How does this work?*

Finally I just move out. I just leave, walk through the door, & down the stairs, & out onto the street. I don't bring anything, I don't bring anyone, I just keep walking until I come to the White Woods.

I feel deeply bound to go to these beautiful Woods. Keep walking till I'm exhausted, & slump down against a tree. Nearly doze but then a really pretty scent wakes up my nose. Stand up, walk around this tree, & there is a woman smoking a really really fat marijuana joint.

We nod & smile friendly, & she says, *hey brother, wanna share a smoke?* So we start smoking, passing it back & forth, & she tells me this story, which I've never forgotten in all the years since, even if they've only been days or possibly weeks.

She says: *my grandmother, Beatrix Wordsley, ran a poor folks' clinic, late in her life, after retiring from schoolteaching, & she was being put to death as a kind of symbol of the State's power to crush anyone. It's unclear, though, that this was the actual effect. The clinic remained open. There was even a room in the clinic for selling vinyl LP records to raise money for her defense.*

*And I was there, & I said to them: you gotta put posters on the walls to really attract*

*attention & funds. My favorite was my Nana Beatrix's poster that read: Don't You Know That Dreams Are Real?*

*And there was this cop named Daniel, used to be a ball player when he was younger, who would help her with her clinic sometimes. He'd speak to his superiors on her behalf when needed, felt connected to her. He said he'd help protect us all, even when she's gone.*

*Day of her execution, he's crying, he's crying, he's crying. Big handsome man crying like his world is broken & won't be fixed no more. God damn, let's smoke another joint. Events accumulate.*

\* \* \* \* \*

### **I am an Old Monk, in Robes & Rope**

I am an old, old man, a monk, in robes & rope, looking across the street at the burnt temple. I fall to my knees, weeping, at the remains. After a long time, a car pulls up. All the holy men & their devotees come out, & they fall to their knees, & they cry together, & they say to each other, *he tried to warn us.*

Then I step forward, & they learn I broke into the temple, last night, & I took all their sacred treasures, & I hid them away. I've made sure, however, it's seemed as though when the temple burned, *everything burned.*

One of them asks me, *what is your order?* And I reply, *one day long ago, I woke 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 the White Woods, & I had no shoes on my feet, like you see me here now, & I had on only this robe, & I left everything behind to walk into those White Woods, & I fell down to my knees that night too, & I looked up & around & I said, take me & let me be your servant. Let me serve the world. Let me help.*

I look around at all of them listening to me in their fresh grief over this violence, even though I saved their trinkets, & knew that what I saved was not what really mattered. *(Events accumulate.)*

Then I continue to walk away.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **When You Travel By the Long Distance Bus**

When you travel by a long distance bus, you'll meet a lot of people along the way. And, if you listen to their stories, I think your perspective of the world is going change, a little.

One time I was traveling a very crowded long distance bus, & I sat next to an old, old man. He told that back when he was a young man, he'd lived in a cabin out in the White Woods, & every morning, when he looked out his window, he could see beyond the clearing around his cabin, up near the trees, a rainbow-colored snake.

After a while, it appeared every morning. It wouldn't stay long, but it was there. He got a pair of powerful binoculars to watch this snake from the window, so as not disturb him or threaten him or anything. He noticed that the snake when it rose up &

moved, it flowed along on tiny powerful feet.

Eventually the snake noticed him, but didn't run, didn't attack &, over the course of time, approached him, a little each day, slowly, cautiously.

Now, this young man had an unusual idea of things. He thought to himself, *I wonder what that snake would eat? I wonder what I could offer that snake that he would enjoy?* And he got out of his fridge (one of those old fridges that uses ice for cooling) a little can of olives. And this old, old man told me that the young man he had been fed that snake every morning an olive. It'd curl near to him, where he sat on an old stump, to accept an olive, & to stare at him for a long moment, without chewing. Then it would retreat, still looking at him. That's what he told me. Got off at the next stop.

Then I met a child who I couldn't tell if it was girl or a boy. It was one of those pretty little things, but it was hard to say whether it was a kinda pretty girl, or a very pretty boy, dressed in shorts, a kind of uniform, smiled at me, but was mostly just talking to him/herself.

So I listened in. He/she said something like this: *I/we travel away from there, now gone deep into a cave, & beyond, & suddenly underground, now we're turning, mel/er, a flashlight in my/wel/our hand(s), many fairy humanoids dancing around the cave. We shine, I shine, our flashlight, & the little fairy humanoids approach mel/us but they do not touch mel/us, they do not do anything unusual.*

*They don't speak, maybe they hmmm a little. But there are butterflies amongst their number who emerge to nip at my/our forearm, & they nip & nip, as I/we stumble out of the caves. That was a hundred years ago, or was it a thousand?*

Now there wasn't anybody on the bus for a long time, & I just sat & read. I was reading the yellow pages of my old journals, reading about times that to me almost seem like they were someone else telling me a story. *Webster Hill?*

One whole page in which I wrote from top to bottom, over & over, in increasingly smaller hand, *events accumulate events accumulate events accumulate events accumulate events accumulate—*

And one of them is about a dream I had in which a girl I loved a long time ago, who never really loved me all that much, was with me again. Sweet, luscious, loony Mary Gall. We were in class. Now she loved me, in this dream, too many years later to matter. And I didn't know what to say at this point. I've had this dream so often, it catches me up & scoops me in, & I wallow in it for a while, & then I wake, & then I write it down. Still unchewed bit of my past.

Far more interesting to listen to someone else's stories. So one guy finally gets on the bus & he's got long dreadlocks, & a weird hat, & his eyes don't really match each other in color, one green & one golden, don't seem to be either of them straight. Nose is a little bent. But he's got a *really really really* nice smile on his face, even if it's kind of crooked. Sits across the aisle from me, studies me somewhat crookedly with his green & golden eyes, & says, *listen man, 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.*

*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 many columns long, many pages, little pictures, static, this place, events accumulate!*

I'm done with stories of all kinds for now, I think. Thanks though.

\* \* \* \* \*

### It Begins, Traveling Far

Again traveling far, somewhere far, like this time I'm a distance from myself even. Gray, indistinct. For a long time I don't feel the beautiful White Woods around me, & then I begin to, they begin to fill in around me, fill in within me, & I begin to walk them, gratefully, these White Woods, within & without.

And I come to a stump, somewhere in these White Woods, & it's filled with rainwater. I sit down next to it, legs crossed, watching a fair while. Seems no matter the weather, when I lean over to look within the stump, there's water inside. I see my reflection.

But then I see something else, I see a memory of a much younger me lying under a beautiful tree, decorated with shiny colored balls, & looking up at my many reflections in them.

And then deeper than these reflections, I see something else to take with me, a sort of gift, & I look into it, this gift, & what I see is that there's this woman with deep, intelligent, hurt eyes & she's a doctor. She's led her refugees for many years, traveled far & tended them, tended them much more than a medical doctor. She's been their leader.

Then what happens in this far gone place, & nameless of year & location, is that she meets the tight end, a football tight end, & she learns that there is a sort of new version of football that's come back into the world, that's sort of a new way of settling disputes between tribes. Rather than the bullets from guns that no longer fire, or the spears made from wood that no longer grows, instead they play football. Only they play for keeps, little equipment, no rules. They play it till they're done.

So he begins to travel with this woman, with her deep, intelligent, hurt eyes, & her people, & he has many skills they don't have. He knows how to find food where there seems to be none. He knows how to find water where there seems to be none. He knows how to find shade & warmth where there seems to be none.

And he's a good man, except very late at night if you don't rock him to sleep with a *hmmm*, he'll begin to talk about despots, about the leaders that brought the world to this place of grayness & yearslessness & mileslessness, & just surviving weirdly. He'll say, *deception, distraction, despair. That's what keeps people down, that's what clusterfuck despots use to keep people down. Deception, distraction, despair. That's why we're here.*

But the woman with the deep hurt eyes will eventually take him in her arms, & they'll rock together like the two closest of friends, & he will listen to her *hmmm* until he falls into a sleep of long ago, when football was a different kind of game, & he would leap through the air, & catch those beautifully thrown passes. Score & score & score & hurt nobody. *Hurt nobody.*

\* \* \* \* \*

## The Muse is in the Details

I was talking to an old friend on the telephone. What I meant to say to him is that *the muse is in the details*. I think about this now, sitting in this large room, many friends, I think they're friends, they feel like friends. The room seems to tip & sway a bit at times, because it's a room somewhere deep in a big spaceship, far out in space. Maybe where the stars are even farther apart than they seem to be.

I'm a very young man & I'm in love with this new girl in the room, with long dark curly hair & dark eyes. She looks like this actress on this TV show *TripTown* I used to watch, & in my mind anyway she loves me too. But that's how I suppose everyone operates these days. When there isn't much, you imagine the bread in your hand is a feast; you imagine meeting eyes with another fellow refugee has meaning in it; you just reach out to a paltry world & *whatever, whatever, whatever* there is, you magnify it. Give you a little something more than the less you're used to,

The ship rocks again. There's benches around the walls in this room, & there's benches in the middle, & people are tightly close together. I think we're all friends, refugees, prisoners, hard to tell where we're from, or where we're going, different places. People come & go randomly, without explanation. Like they melt into or out of the existing fact of being in this room.

At one point the ship rocks hard, & I tip into her, & I feel so embarrassed because this is something beyond what's gone on in my mind, sweet, & doesn't involve my shoulder leaning into her roughly.

And then later on the ship rocks the other way, & she leans into me, but it's *so* soft, it's like having a feather lean into you, or a whisper in your ear, or something like that. It's just the opposite, & I hold her in my arms for just an elongated moment beyond when the ship has stabilized again, & she doesn't push away immediately.

We know there's nothing to come of this, of any of this. We're friends only in that we're being transported from one dark place to another. But it's a long trip, & I think that even though we separate again, after that elongated moment, it's enough to feed my mind, & maybe hers, for a little way anyway, as the ship travels on. I almost dare to hope it will rock again, & neither of us will melt.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Old Beautiful Green Couch

My father & I sit together on an old beautiful green couch & I describe to him how my beloved tends to my wounded toe. Medicines, scrapings, bandages. He listens with that kind of attention I know means there is one of us present, we're speaking & listening as one.

But then the lights go out, & I guess I must fall asleep. I wake up on that old beautiful green couch, & he's gone, but there's a beautiful brown blanket on me. He covered me before he left. It's a brown blanket, very soft, covered in beautiful brown Creature Bear faces. I feel like they're looking at me with that same kind of attention that he gave me, concern, love, focus. *I'm not alone*.

\*\*\*\*\*

## A Variety of Cheeses

It seemed to be a huge, un-sleek spaceship, not the kind you would have seen in those fancy moving pictures back when, nope.

While I was on the spaceship, I was given a cup & I was told to masturbate into it &, as an incentive I was offered a variety of cheeses from a small fridge to help.

I don't think I'd ever been incentivized like that before to do such a thing. I managed to slip out the door &, since it was a big ship, I just started running & running & running. I'm not a fast runner, nor a particularly graceful runner, but I kept running. When you've got a choice between running & masturbating for the incentive of a variety of cheeses, you run & you run & you run.

Eventually I ran out of spaceship to run through. I ran right up into the White Woods, or that's what they looked like anyway. I say *up* because, when I briefly looked back, I saw that I had come from a spaceship mostly buried in the earth.

Very strange trees, glowing in that subtle way that they do in these White Woods, where I'd been many times before. Finally I stopped, breathing heavy, pretty much collapsed on the ground, sat under a tree. I would've kept crawling if they were still been following me, with their masturbatory cup, unfilled, & variety of cheeses. Nobody was following me.

But then I saw next to me, & it didn't feel like a coincidence, but maybe it was, I don't know, a thick leather book. And, on the other side of me, another thick leather book. I'd somehow sat down heavily, practically collapsed, between two leather books. Something etched in gold on each of their covers, but so faintly I can't make out the letters. *M-?-?-R-O-?-I-E?*

And then I felt under myself, *good golly*, there's a thinner book, it was taller, less elaborate than the other two. I looked inside this one, & it looked like more of a key? *Possibly?* Well, OK, so this is better than the alternative, I guess.

And you're going to wonder, *what was in those books?* And you're going to wonder, *did I start reading them? Did the key help? Did I really ever get off that spaceship?* These are some *good* questions.

\*\*\*\*\*

## In My House Alone, & It's Night

In my house alone, & it's night, & I'm listening to the noises & the creakings. There's a moment of stillness, & then suddenly police pour through the door, hold me down, & accuse me of seventeen different sins. I shake my head no seventeen times &, upon the seventeenth shake of my head, I find myself in another house, & there's my father looking at me with great concern because my mother wants to throw me out, possibly for my seventeen different sins. He promises to help.

Later, I see my buddy, the poet footballer, & I ask him to put in a good word for me with her. I feel lost, hunted, paranoid, & I keep wondering, *which seventeen different sins am I guilty of?*

I finally walk out. *I've had it*. I walk straight down the middle of the street. *Let them run me over, let them bring me down, I don't care anymore. I'm done*.

And I come upon an old, old man approaching me, wearing ragged dreadlocks under a weird ragged hat. He's also in the middle of the street, & he has the same crazy desperate look I have on my face. We're like mirror images of each other, & he puts his hands on my shoulders, & I can see that his eyes are two beautiful colors, one green & one golden.

He looks me crookedly deep in my eyes, hands on my shoulders & he says, *the world is one boat for all, & there are two choices. A stateless village of neutral support for all, or the coming corporate slave state in which government has been withered in favor of competing & cooperating corporate entities whose alliances form regions of power, & whose companies control the weapons, the food, the utilities, & the transit.*

*My friend, there will be three classes, the super-rich who live in controlled domed areas, safe from how the degradations of the environment have continued; a corporate bureaucracy who are maintained in company towns that are still livable; & the masses who live with no protection & have become more Beasts than men.*

*Yet within their numbers, my friend, there is old magick & old medicine & old ways of living that have re-emerged from other times. The most ancient books, written with sand-sticks in the ground even back before the time of cave paintings, say, **events accumulate.***

*And you have to come with me now, we have to smack our despairs together & form strangely- truly-honestly hope.*

Then he smacks my face hard & I smack his face hard & he smacks my face hard again & I smack his face again & we smack & smack harder & harder & then softer & softer & then we embrace, brothers, truly brothers. Smacking back & forth, & shouting: **events accumulate! events accumulate! events accumulate! events accumulate! events accumulate! events accumulate!**

We go off together, still straight down the middle of the street, together.

\* \* \* \* \*

### I Have This Friend I Don't See Very Often

I have this friend I don't see very often. Once in a while, that's about it. 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 some (or the sum?) of a given situation or aspect of it? Good & evil, either, both, are they forces of creation? Or estimations of the human mind about human behavior?*

He didn't always do this. I knew him back when, & I think I know what caused him to begin his travels & his studies. It was the last time he saw her, it was at the Festival, they hadn't seen each other in a long time & he didn't think that she recognized him. Perhaps her programming had been wiped, but still she was drawn to him. And he recognized her, didn't say anything to indicate they knew each other, but they had, a long time, some other time.

She'd been his automaton when he was young, tended to his very smallest needs. Sometimes he'd shut her off to clean her or change out her parts. He was always trying to scrounge up better parts to improve her behavior, her mental acuity, her sense of free will. She was one of the older types that were more modeled on human behavior & its mercurial nature. That changed with later models, until they were all discontinued

altogether & rounded up by the State, & destroyed.

Except for a few who managed to assimilate into the world, especially the underground world like this Festival they were at, where he saw her one last time, & they were together for a little while. But she didn't recognize him, & I think that sent him on his travels. I think, from that moment on, he just was never going understand. He was always going to search for *why*.

\* \* \* \* \*

### Stroking My Finger Across Her Back

My new beloved & I are in a house in a bedroom, close, I'm stroking my finger across her back. Writing words. I'm not sure what they mean. I think they are maybe some kind of weird impromptu incantation because now everything begins to go a little strange, then a little stranger, & then this room becomes White Woods. Just opens up, the walls fall away, melt before my eyes.

And there are many dark figures singing, drumming in the White Woods we're now in. An open field nearby. The sky is filled with the strangest colors & shapes. *What does any of this mean?*

And someone's whisper tickles feathery in my ear, as I sit with my beloved near the open field in this strange White Woods, *there are two races. One greater, one lesser. You are of the lesser. If you ever return home or anywhere near to it, you'll be kept chained up, in just your underwear, & that's how it will be. So don't ever go home or anywhere but.*

I stand, & find standing is difficult to do. My new beloved stands better than I do, & then she grasps my hands, & pulls me straight up with all her strength, & all her love, & I feel pulled nicely, slickly, sweetly, pulled up right.

We walk into that field with the drummings & the dancings & the dark figures, because this is the way away from home & into Art, deep into Art, which I suppose you could say is a Place of its own, another kind of home.

\* \* \* \* \*

### Your Whole Body Like an Electric Wire

Did you ever wake up in the night & find that your whole body is like an electrical wire, dipped in cold water? That you were wild shocked, just like that? Now I'm sitting up, I think I'm awake anyway, my new beloved still deep in her light sleepings, & I rub my mouth, but I feel a hole, & I press my fingers in tenderly. I feel that all my teeth are bashed in, they're all crooked & half-fallen out, & *what the hell? What's this all about? What does any of this mean?* I don't know.

I close my eyes & think, *please, please, please, please let this be a dream, please let it be a dream,* & I fall back toward my pillow, back toward my pillow, fall forever toward my pillow, & I fade through scenes, colorful, sepia, black and white scenes, liquid, *falling falling* toward my pillow.

\* \* \* \* \*

## I Call Up My Old Timey Bookstore Job

I call up my old timey bookstore job. I guess now it's opened up again. I show up, go behind the register, & start helping customers, problems with the little details, playing cards of all shapes & sizes & flavors, ice machines, scanner machines, & so forth. On my break I go into the little lunch-room which is, strangely, barely big enough to sit in.

So I'm standing there with my candy bar, & I start thinking about that time that I moved back to that far Western city, & I was living in an apartment with several guys, & I was proofing their school newspaper. They were hard drinkers & newspapermen, yet still in their all-night wildcatting youths.

On the other side of our apartment, beyond that courtesy curtain, there was a bar, & I go in there & I ask the barman, he's this nice-looking older black gent, for a Diet Coke. He gives me a Gin-Ginger Ale. I drink it anyway. Thank him, smiling.

*You're welcome, sir,* he smiles back, speaking in his weird sort of upside-down accent, like he was speaking backwards.

I look around. It's a strange set-up. The part we live in over there, & the bar here, with the barman. *Who pays him? How does this work?*

And I'm still chewing on my candy bar, thinking about those other times. I remember the time I woke there at 3 AM. I had poems spilling out of me. I was in an alley on the ground, & they were on the ground next to me. They were written *in* the ground, but it's hard to say how. *Some kind of sand-stick?*

Maybe they more were just words I saw in the ground. I wondered, *how do I keep these words? What do I do? If I dig up the ground they won't be there.*

Finally my break is over, & I throw away my candy wrapper in the recycle bin, & I go back to work behind the back counter. I do a little better this time, & I think: *OK, if this is going to be it for a while for me, this'll be it, but I bet there's more to come of all this.*

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## There Was This Piece of Writing

Learning this will aid your perspective, if nothing else. There was this piece of writing & its fate was decided not by how good it was, but by how popular it was esteemed to be. In it, the narrator tells a story about working in an office &, in that office, there is a relation to his estranged spouse, with whom he's not spoken in a long time.

This relation, let's say cousin, sees that the narrator's trying to get his shit together, & they begin to go out to lunch. There's a little pub next to the office building. It has good mushroom burgers, cheap beer. They spend their hour with both. The narrator describes to the cousin the depths of his despair, thinking he'd never see his estranged spouse again. But, even talking to this cousin, begins to give him hope. He learns that his estranged spouse has not really resolved her feelings for him. She's certainly not looking around & this, if nothing else, is encouraging to him.

Narrator finishes his second or maybe it's his third beer, goes into the bathroom, looks at his face in the mirror, he looks tired, he looks haggard. He wants a shower badly, one of the habits he's lost over time. Looks old, old, & he realizes that, while looking at

his face in the mirror, no one gets as down on him as he does himself. He washes his face, gives his cheeks a few wet slaps with the cold water, & then walks out of the men's room, & back to the bar where her cousin sits waiting,

She didn't know him in the old days, never came to any of their family events. In truth, this cousin has always been on the outs of everything, regarding family, & what's somehow interesting in all this now, the narrator observes, is that her helping him back along to where he wants to be is also helping her to find new open-hearted spaces in herself.

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## There's This Faux Pizza Joint

There's this faux pizza joint you can go to, it's right in the center of the city. If you looked it up on a map, & if you drew a line vertically & horizontally on the map, trying to pinpoint the exact center of the city, it would be this faux pizza joint.

And if you go to this faux pizza joint, & you are friendly to the guy behind the counter—as you'd better be, because nothing good further is going happen, if you're not—& so you go into the faux pizza joint & you're friendly to the guy—, & what's going happen is that he's going let you go through the green & gold door—& you're going find yourself in a room, which is filled—almost to the four walls—with a model of the city, which you find yourself in the center of.

You can walk around it, looking at its amazing detail, every little tree, bush, the shade on that statue, that bench with the nails that poke out, that road they haven't paved in 100,000 years, cars all trying to avoid it except when they can't. All sorts of things. They're all there.

And although you can walk around the four sides, or you can walk among those trees, benches, buildings, & that's pretty cool, you may get to wondering, *well, what's this all about?* But, no, it's just best to keep moving, keep admiring it.

Like I did, you probably come to a bus stop along this certain street, toward the edge of the city &, near that bus stop, up a hill, is this house, high up on the hill. On this particular day, it's kind of rainy, kind of icy, just one of those messy winter days that nobody wants to be out in, & so you're thinking, *well, should I leave now, thank the guy behind the pizza counter. It was fun. Him smiling, I'm glad, thank you. Maybe stay a little while longer next time?*

Then you notice two women at different times come out of that big house on the hill, & tumble down the steps to the sidewalk below, land right at the bus stop. Crash badly, people gather round, & you think, *are these people who come from where I come from, or do they live here? Are there people for whom this is their world, & I'm just visiting from one level up? And is my world just a model for some further model up? Is this some kind of bad Star Trek novel?*

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## Every Tuesday Night, I Meet Up with These Two Ladies

Every Tuesday night, I meet up with these two ladies in their ancient mansion, & they sing for me. But I haven't in a while & they've missed me. One of the ladies sings in a certain sweet style & she's amazing, but this time she tries something different to show, & it's good, but it's not a style close to her heart.

We take the stairs down to some kind of bar in the cellar of their ancient mansion, & they order me milk & them fruity liquor drinks from the nice-looking older black gentleman barman. There is a fourth at our table, an old, old man in shredded dreadlocks & hat. They forget to order for him. On purpose? He speaks up & says, *nothing for me.*

*What is this gathering?* I don't know, but it seems important. I sit back with my milk & look at these fine ladies & I say to them, *in my bedroom there's a little door in the wall, through it is a long hallway, filled with plants, & it's kinda like I crawl in there with my mother to look at them all. But we need to keep it secret, so we keep the door shut, even though it's dark when we're in there.*

They nod, sip their drinks, say, *oh, you're so sweet & kind. Would you like another milk?*

\* \* \* \* \*

## Descending Up into the Gone World (I)

So I walk on from the courtyard where I've sat among my notebooks, black pens, & old memories, & I notice people are, well, they're not happy. But they're not quite as morose as before, & that's good. I go into this place, I guess it's more like an alley, I'm never sure exactly that it's there, but I just was passing by on the street, & I notice this alley, & I went inside, & it was long, & it was dark.

And then I seem to be ascending, or rather I was descending but up, if that makes any sense, into the gone world, & I found that I had a camera in my hand. It was a hard gadget to figure out, because there didn't seem to be an eye hole to look through, where you frame the picture when you take the shot, & there seemed to be more than one lens, & several buttons that didn't seem to do anything.

So this camera & I were descending upward through this glass structure, staircase after staircase, down, up. At one point I see people through layers of walls in the glass structure & they're at all angles & I'm trying to focus the camera, but it's hard to do, & there's this woman near me & I say, *I'm not taking your picture, I'm just trying to focus.*

I keep rising & rising until I find that I am now awake & sitting up in a chair in this brand-new bookstore, & I was looking down at this very maze-y book that I was trying to read my way through. No. Wait. *It's just the store map.*

\* \* \* \* \*

## Descending Up into the Gone World (II)

*What if dream mind is supraconsciousness?* Think about it sometime. Thanks for listening. I appreciate it. I suppose you're gonna leave now. I am, too. I've got this camera to figure out, & this maze-y book, er, store map, to climb back into, or possibly climb out of, or maybe both at the same time. I really don't know, but it all started with that glass structure & things got really complicated . . .

\* \* \* \* \*

## I Haven't Always Lived on This Hill of Bushes

I live in an unfurnished bush on this hill of bushes, among many other friendly bush-hill-folks, but I still leave my possessions, such as they are, in those White Woods down there. I haven't always lived on this hill of bushes. Sometimes I'll just leave for a while, & I'll go down to those White Woods, & I'll just reacquaint myself with where I come from, the glowing trees, the many wonderful, strange denizens. My friends, the Thought Fleas, guardians of the White Woods & so on.

The White Woods are not like other places, that's what I want to tell you. When you go down there, & you walk among them, especially if you're from them as I am, things will happen that you can't say waking & you can't say dream.

Because the truth of the matter is that sometimes I am walking among these White Woods, & I am dreaming, & in the dreaming I'm carrying a book in one hand, a small Secret Book with a shiny cover, & some kind of vial of juice. The object of the game I am playing, I've been playing it for years, is to try to find a way to flip the book inside out & flip the vial of juice inside out so that the power & raw materials of dreaming can become wakings. *Raw materials to waking's power.*

I lie down, after some hours, this is tiring, I love these White Woods, I love that bushy hill. I love my unfurnished bush. *Doze, dream, dream, dream, dreaming, dreaming, mmming, hmmmimg . . .*

—but this dream, it's so familiar, a supermarket, it's all the world I've ever known, a supermarket, & the friends I have & work with there. There's a problem with a labor automaton we took for a lark, & got caught. It's not working right now.

One of us gets taken to the manager's office & examined. They put a kind of sentient putty all over his face, looking for lies, looking for *deceptions, distractions, & despairs*. The putty is kept on his face for hours, & he can't move a muscle, as the putty examines all of his thoughts, secret, obvious, possible.

But what's happened by the end of the session is that the putty's pulled away, processed, & he's cleared, & he's sent back to us. We resume work, that's good—, & then I wake up in the White Woods, & that's good—, & then I walk back to my bush, & I crawl inside.

And then I just sit & listen sleeplessly for a while to the Imp in the Full Moon's **CAKLE! CACKLE! CACKLE!**

\* \* \* \* \*

## I Was With My Acid Guru

I was with my acid guru, & we were slowly cleaning up his very messy house, very messy. Trying to put it in an order, make it nicer, others coming over too & helping. These people are new to me, friendly, we're all going to get it in order.

When everyone else thinks that things seem to be in pretty good shape now, I follow them outside to the street, & they all get into a crimson jalopy & say to me, *wanna go with us to A-The-Of-Dance?* One of them, the rainbow-haired hippie girl, offers me a psychedelic pill. I smile sincerely at her & my acid guru & the rest, & I say, *I better keep cleaning.* She smiles me kindly, presses me to keep the pill, & off they ride. *Toot! Toot! Toot!* goes their charming jalopy car-horn.

I swallow my pill & hurry back in, because there are Creatures scattered in a small back room that I'm very concerned about, & I start to panic, & I call my new beloved on my green-as-Gumby phone, & I say, *how do I sort them all out, what do I do? How do I make sure they're all safely ordered up?*

And she smiles whisper-tickling feather into my ear & says, *Once. Twice. Breathe. Relax.*

And I do.

I begin to go through the room in a very orderly fashion, picking up Creatures. I have put two knapsacks on my shoulders, & I'm stuffing them into the knapsacks, & things are starting to get better, & I'm starting to calm to the task.

*I'm going to get them all, it's very important, we need to travel elsewhere.*

\*\*\*\*\*

## A Place of Art

There is a room that will be a Place of Art, & there are a variety of ways of getting there. One way is through the college bookstore, through its back door. Another has you walking down a particular street in the city, & looking for a particular bar called Luna T's Cafe, going inside & asking the barman with pepper gray hair, & the splatter-patterned apron, where the extra room is. He'll direct you.

That's where I'm going now, as a matter of fact. I painted this picture on a folding canvas. How it works is that the way the canvas is folded reveals a different picture—folded many times, folded in half, quarters, always something new shows. And when you fold it a few special certain ways, it's like it has an interior to it. *It's a strangely important picture.* Maybe it matters more than I do.

I want to hang it in that Place of Art, that's where I'm bound. I've been jobless for a while, spend a lot of time just calculating how much money I have left & how much my rent is. Over & over again, like a tic. Rent never changes, but how much I have left always goes down.

Friends I have, I tell them about the picture, tell them to come & see it. *I'm going to put it in that Place of Art, & there'll be a band playing too. Graffiti on the wall & my picture hung in a prideful place.* What's interesting, I'll say to some of my friends, maybe all of them, maybe none of them, I don't know who I'm talking to anymore, whether they're there or not, sitting with me in my one-room hovel, or maybe they're not sitting there at

all but I tell them, *years ago, before all of this—& I motion around my hovel—, there were other matters. There was this Indian golfer I knew, he would show me old videos of himself playing golf when he was young. By the time I knew him, he was old & fat & bald. Liked his Snickers bars, by the bagful, like the Minis, said it gave him the illusion that he was eating fewer of them.*

*And he'd show me these videos of golf games that didn't quite make sense to me, they weren't what I'd seen on television as a kid on Sunday afternoons, growing up. No, sometimes in these events it seems like dozens of golfers were hitting balls along the fairway at the same time &, I don't know, it was dangerous & dumb.*

*So what I'm telling you, whether you're sitting here with me in this hovel or not, is that this is not how it always was. In fact, this is not even how it shall be because, you see, far in the future from now, far from now is a box, it's a high-tech container, it's filled with worlds within worlds, & one time I was carrying it along, & I was also carrying along my little hedgedyhog friend, & I stumbled at the top of stairs, my friend fell but he was OK, & the box fell too, & opened, but nothing fell out, was there ever anything inside?*

*All you have is my claim that this will happen sometime in the future &, well, come to my show. My painting with the interior, maybe it's this painting wherein I've seen these things to come to pass. Tricks & tracks, tracks & trips, tricks & traps, traps & tricks, trips & trips, tricks & tricks & tricks, traps & tricks & tricks, tricks & tricks & traps, traps & tricks & traps, tricks & trips & traps . . .*

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## I'm in a Hotel Room, Which Begins to Get Strange

I'm in a hotel room, which begins to get strange. What happens first is that I'm somewhere else, like a club, & this woman has a small vial of *gooooo*, drinks half.

*What is it? Dunno.* Hands it over to me, *dunno.* She wants me to drink it all, all the rest, & I do, heck yeah. That's me, give me some *gooooo*, & some enthusiasm. I'll drink your *gooooo*.

But I noticed that this couch that we're sitting on is in my hotel room & there's a man sleeping over there, on the bed, won't wake up, won't leave. Soon there are others, of course.

And then I start getting worried for the Creatures, napping peaceably in an armchair facing that corner window, & wanting to make sure they don't get stomped on, or nudged aside, or scooped, as they sometimes get. More and more people show up. *Is this a gooooo party? Dunno.*

But people are on the couches, & on the beds, but after a while the couches & beds are gone. My things are gone & instead it's an art show. But the only piece is my folded canvas artwork. *How do I even know it's an art show?* Is this the Place of Art? There's no graffiti. There's no band playing.

*Is it the gooooo talking?* It could be the *gooooo* talking.

I push open the door, hoping someone will come in, maybe I can ask them if it's an art show. I certainly seem convinced. I push it open, push it wide open, & I just stand there halfway in & halfway out, looking up & down the hallway, & I say aloud to the empty hallway, *you know, I'm just trying to get my shit together.*



I look across the hallway, & the door to that room is a full-length mirror, ceiling to floor, where perhaps a door once was. I look into the mirror, deep into the mirror, & I look so tired & haggard, like an old, old man. Ratty dreads, dulled green & golden eyes, more slumped than bent nose. Need a shower, need two showers, I need to pull myself together.

I look at my tired, haggard, un-showered, un-double-showered self & think, *you make things so much harder than they need to be.*

\* \* \* \* \*

### It Continues, Like This

It continues, like this. My break over, I leave the tiny lunch room & its spooky memories, & I go back to the register of the old-timey bookstore I've returned to after all these years, & I work my hours away at the back counter, but I notice something.

I notice that as people buy their books, they're troubled, they're unhappy. It's nothing I'm doing, they don't respond to my smiles. They don't respond to my friendliness, & they're not rude. They're just sort of stunned, & I wonder what's going on, *did something happen out in the world?*

I ask one of them, a man with a long hat, his head in glistening pretty dreadlocks, one eye green, one eye golden, & he's buying a book about war, about peace.

I say, *what's going on, man? What's happening out there?*

He looks at me, & he wants to say something, but it's like he doesn't know what words to say. He doesn't know what language to say it in. He just looks at me & holds my glance for a moment, & I realize I've got to find out for myself, but there's hours left in my shift so I just wait, wait, *wait.*

Finally, shift over, it's evening time & I walk out into the Square, & I walk over to the newspaper stand. All the headlines are full of big words, big tall words. *Is it another attack of some kind, someone else out in the world?*

No, it's someone here, someone among us, someone who'd been among us for a long time, waiting his chance, to vent his anger upon this land & every other land. People are walking around dazed. I go over & sit at my favorite table at my favorite courtyard, which isn't there anymore, watch people walking by, scared groups.

Then there's a sort of cry, a sort of shout over at the newspaper stand, & I hurry back over, & now the headlines are saying someone with a little bit of power has struck back.

*It's gonna keep happening, President Clusterfuck, Donald J. Trump. It's gonna keep happening. Every day you try to punish the world with your fury, your anger, your sense of injustice personally done to you, everyone you try to harm, there's gonna be strikes back. It's gonna be in the courts, it's gonna be in the streets, it's gonna be on the airwaves but it's gonna keep happening till you are driven one day soon from the White House in Washington, D.C.*

*You've made it clear how it's gonna be by you, & now we're making it clear what's gonna be by us, in response to you. So keep doing it. We will too.*

\* \* \* \* \*

### On My Birthday

I found myself some years ago on my birthday, looking around at the extended dwelling that I lived in at the time, it was kind of part apartment & part bar & part classroom. I woke up early that morning before anybody else got up, which was pretty early, & walked through the rooms.

One room of the apartment was filled with racks of clothes that everybody had donated to share. We wore each other clothes, female, male, whatever. It was a nice mix. You got to learn how the other guy or gal felt, you know.

Some of mine though were kept in the far corner racks, playfully 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.

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 sits at a particular seat, can't tell how old or young he is. He seems to be gray-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 a good man, Bill.*

And everybody else at the bar laughs & mocks a little, but I get in all their faces this time, I'm a little bit annoyed, *it's my birthday.*

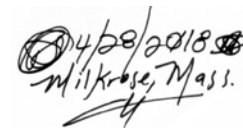
I say, *I have a Master's in English, & diction matters to me.* Someone's nodding, quietly.

Finally I walk into the classroom, & it's occupied too. There are two girls, a brunette & a blonde, I sit down with, well before classes begin. I sit between them, & I find myself paying attention to each in turn, swiveling my head back & forth.

But I'm married, so I'm not flirting, just friendly, & ask the brunette, *so what do you wanna do when you get out of here, this bar, this classroom, the racks of clothes? What do you wanna do in this world?*

Her smile is vague, but she thinks a long moment, & then she says, *what I wanna do right now is wish you a happy birthday & give you a tiny kiss on the nose.*

And she does.



\* \* \* \* \*



## Dolls

Sadie explained that she has always done her praying “on the move.” As a child she begged god for mercy at the doll hospital

down the street from her house. Her mother took her there—her mother made dolls and chose eyes and arms and legs with feet and toes or without.

Sadie begged god that the eyes would not look at her nor the hands reach for her as she and her mother journeyed the aisles. Later,

she begged god for no one to see her late to school, that no one would notice her new, thicker-than-ever glasses or the rash

on her ankle from walking through ragweed. Later yet, she prayed that her boobs would shrink, that her school uniform would hang straight, that

the mole on her neck would disappear. On the bus going to school, she tried to pray her mother out of the asylum, tried

to pray away the hour between dog and wolf which she hated, prayed for a boy to ask her to the sophomore sock hop. Sadie said

college years were a constant prayer. She pleaded for physical beauty, for a boyfriend, for a best girlfriend. Sadie was a

grownup before she took to her knees at which time she prayed for peace, for a smaller nose and, at last, for a husband. “Mostly,”

said Sadie, “I didn’t hear much back; the occasional cricket, the silver tinkle of a star, the throaty voice of the moon,

the soft slither of ivy journeying up the trunk of a palm tree. Mostly though, I heard nothing back,” she said. Dear Sadie—

Sadie of my favorite shadows, Sadie of my most secret fears and failures, Sadie of 6501 Hollywood Blvd,

your prayers have never been ignored. They have simply been addressed with substitutions. There is nothing to do about that, girl,

but take once more to your knees, forgive god and make yourself grateful for the star-rise.

\* \* \* \* \*

**Tom Sheehan**



## Jehrico’s Tub

From the top of the ravine wall, in a remote canyon of the Drago Mountains, Jehrico Taxico spotted an old wagon on the canyon floor, hundreds of feet below him. It was hidden from any lower view by a few trees and brush and a huge chunk of palisade wall that had fallen long ago like a dish on its edge. He judged that the wagon had not fallen from the high escarpment because it looked to be still in one piece. Probably its driver and occupants had sought safety by hiding in that place, he thought, only to get caught by whatever they were hiding from, or yielded at length to animals or nature getting as cruel as it could. No survivors lurked in the scene, or any horse or mule or ox that had hauled the wagon to this point. Only the long shafts for a single animal hitch appeared solid still sitting at an angle on the ground. A fallen rock had crushed one of the rear wheels. There were no other traces at all. And not a bone to be seen.

He could not tell how long it’d been there, but the wagon was now, without any doubt, his bounty, his possession. Perhaps, he thought, some good luck was coming his way. Lots of folks in Bola City looked on him with a bit of disdain, some of them calling him shiftless and worse, mostly because he would not kowtow to the demands of harsh bosses who treated him meanly simply because of his name. He would not work very long for such men. There were times he’d quit after mere hours because “I ain’t putting my mule Mildred through that sort of treatment without getting her fair share of feed.”

Even the part-time minister, butting into a morning church gathering, said, “Why, Jehrico’s name is just a trade off with the Good Book, daring to match it up with a foreign name. That’s near blasphemy from where I sit.” He got up on his high and mighty horse and added, “A good lesson is not too good for him every now and then.” Some people in Bola City looked differently at the good minister after he said that mouthful.

In that high morning of discovery, the skies bluer than ever, random clouds throwing shadows into the canyon on top of other shadows, Jehrico Taxico rode down off the edge of the plateau on a narrow ledge. At the back of his mind he cradled two thoughts, one that Mildred was as sure-footed as any animal he had ever known (“she had better be” came up a third thought on its own), and the other that the ancient people who had carved this path along the edge of the cliff must have spent whole lives working on it. He couldn’t imagine how many of them might have fallen over the edge while doing their work, or coming and going. Their days, obviously, had to be long and arduous, and filled with immediate danger.

With those thoughts the ancient people took over his mind, which said, “Mildred hasn’t let me down yet in our long journeys.” Jehrico Taxico whacked her

on the neck, knowing it was a love tap accepted by the mule. She made a funny noise for that acceptance. She had better accept, for the pair of them was a long-distance odor to anybody they met on the trail.

"J&M ain't goin' to surprise anybody," Collie Sizemore once said in Hagen's Saloon. "I smelt the pair of 'em long before they was near enough to hear." Collie, like Jehrico, was a fixture out and about Bola City. Where Jehrico's claim was sometimes in dispute, like some cowboys with bad smellers 'cause they were disturbing on their own account, Collie's distinctive claim was the reduction in identification of things, as if he wanted to be spared of too much speech. A shot and a beer became "an S&B" and Tally Rand, saloon owner and his woman Laverne, became simply T&L, and from that initial declaration he nevermore spoke of, to, or about them as singular entities, but as T&L, the one and only T&L, the pair of them, the barsome twosome, the great salooners.

A stranger, in town even for a few days, would find his head spinning on his shoulders trying to divine what Collie was saying, for in one breath of conversation he might hear about J&M and T&L and S&B and J&R and Q&A and L&D, while the other listeners nodded, and M&M, which eventually meant Me and Mine, Collie and his family, out on the M&M spread south of town. *He has odd mouthfuls of the King's English*, as one patron of the saloon, passing through, was heard to utter as he climbed back on the stagecoach moving further west.

So, on this day of a major event coming to Bola City, there is M&M talking in his way out front of T&L's place of wetness and watering, and J&M going behind the huge rock slab once fallen endwise off the face of the canyon wall. The first thing Jehrico Taxico noted was that usual leather traces had disappeared. He believed them to be either taken away or eaten up by the laws of nature. "Look at that, Mildred, ain't a good piece of leather left."

He did not see any human skeletons or bones on the ground or in the wagon's front seat, and there were no weapons, no ammo of any kind, no tools. "They done got took away, Mildred, that's for sure." He saw no trunk remnants or any clothing usually carried by people moving west. Thieves of some order or other had executed their claims.

"Hey, Mildred, take a peek at that natty piece of canvas flopping atop somethin' large in the back of the wagon." Jehrico Taxico thought the little flutter of canvas to be from a breeze he had not felt. "Best not take no chances." He drew his rifle from the scabbard and held it steady as Mildred walked closer to the wagon. "It sure used to be green, Mildred, that canvas, but it's gone brown and black streaks now and hardly no patch of green at all." But it did not move again. When Jehrico Taxico pulled on it, it came apart in long thin pieces, the way frayed silk finds its end. He harrumphed and said, "Imagine what them bones is like right about now."

To his eternal surprise, he admitted later on down the line, "That old, torn canvas was coverin' an iron bathtub, a real iron one, with claw legs for its four feet like it could walk away on you if it had a mind to. Two people could fit in the dang thing at one time, it was so big. Ain't that a pretty picture for thinkin' about? I seen pictures of such tubs and knowed immediately that there ain't no other tub like it in

all of Bola City, or in the whole of the territory. I never had me a bath in anythin' of the sort. The river, every once a blue moon, as old Crowley said, was good enough if a woman teetered herself on the bosom of the horizon, being as what hope is."

The cowpoke Crowley had spoken likewise for Jehrico Taxico, whether he knew it or not.

Jehrico Taxico, as slow in his thinking as Mildred his mule in obeying the strap, began to think how he could best utilize his newfound treasure: a sole, unique, one and only, bathtub for all of man, with appropriate dues paid for its use. He wondered aloud where in Bola City it could be best used. "Sure enough, Tally Rand would offer a goodly sum for its purchase, or Scales at the other end of the street. But I'm thinkin' real hard here that a separate place would be best, could get more users, make more money."

His mind wandered through all the citizens of Bola City who could backbone a new enterprise. At length, after close measurements and other judgments, Jehrico Taxico informed Mildred, "Molly Yarbrough at the livery's the one most promisin', and the most honorable. Though tough old Barnaby Fremont does all the heavy work and fronts the livery from dawn to dusk, it's Molly Yarbrough who holds the purse strings close to her bosom."

"But, Mildred," he added, as he looked at the tub again, "we got to get the damn thing to the livery." He set to work.

The shafts were apparently still in decent shape, and when he took them apart he pictured them closed on Mildred. With a half-day's work, he had the front wheels and axle free from the wagon and the shafts ready to mount. Not without a struggle, he managed to get the bathtub off the wagon and lowered down onto the axle. He had to balance it and tie it down, with the claw feet in the air and rope lashed around them.

As he and Mildred headed back toward Bola City, a squeak of humor hit Jehrico Taxico right where it's funniest. It felt good, almost as if his whole body regaled with the feeling, and he could see the good townfolk of the place lined up all along the street and pointing at him, making the silly noises they sometimes do. "They can laugh all they want, Mildred, but we got the last laugh this time." He looked over his shoulder and the tub sat as even as it could be, balanced over the heart of the axle, the single line of rope as taut as it was at the beginning of their ride.

"When we decide we're ready to go to St. Louis, Mildred, with all the money we're gonna make, we'll be used to all the hullabaloo. Even old Collie's got to fathom somethin' new outta this, like JTM or JMT or TMJ or MTJ or however he'll have me and you and this here tub of ours. Yes, sir-ee, Mildred, we is now a triple measure of names and bound for St. Louis in a few years."

It was, in fact, Collie Sizemore who first spotted them coming into town and he rushed into Hagen's Saloon and yelled out, "T&L, you gotta come see what this is paradin' into town, if you want to believe it. It's J&M and somethin' I never seen before, all scrunched up on half a wagon and tied off like the damnedest windstorm's a comin' cross the Big Divide. Looks like a boat, it does, all tied up with rope and plunked down on wheels, and Mildred hustlin' along like she allus does. Just J&M

and this thing I ain't got a name for.”

Tally, in a second, knew what the trophy catch was that Jehrico Taxico was parading into town. People were coming fast along the street, making noise, exclaiming on high that a mystery was upon them, and Scales was in the lead.

“Jehrico,” Tally said, “if that thing is yours by found, I’ll buy it from you, fair and square. You name a goodly price and we can discuss it over a few pints a’ beer.”

Scales cut him off at the pass. “Forget him, Jehrico, I’ll give you top dollar for it, and you get first and last wash of the day any day of the week you choose, and that’s my given promise.”

“You neither one spoke any money yet, not for real. I got lookin’ in other places to do.” Jehrico Taxico said, while letting Mildred drink from the water trough. The crowd was bigger, the word already spreading wide.

Most honorable Molly Yarbrough, by now standing front and center of the gathering, smiled at Tally first, and then at Scales, knowing which way their roads took them. She said, loud enough for everybody to hear, “Jehrico, I won’t buy it from you, but I’ll rent it, for out back of the livery where my two rooms are, and you get free use of it every day if you so choose. You get half of what comes in and washes off, trail dust and all, as what can fit it. We can be pards in a new business and I’m hinking’ now of a name to go with it.”

She saw Tally and Scales trying to measure things. “Like a big sign that says Jehrico and Molly’s Emporium of Cleansing,” and she smiled as she saw Jehrico Taxico nod his approval and Collie Sizemore, his mouth set tight and his head tipped in thought, already going to work on a short-cut.

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**“Thanks for Ending Your Poems”**

—rejection letter with typo

at first you had us hopeful all atremble  
your image of the sun ablaze through early overgrowth

clearly referred to war in the Middle East  
but why did you leave the light so soon

to describe graveyards of acorn husks  
caskets clustered half in half out of earth?

you went on forever about the acorns  
we didn’t think you’d shut up about those fucking acorns

also why do squirrels keep running across your lines  
like little silver missiles?—oh never mind

from there it’s a tangle of indecency  
hunters raising rifles in the dawn mist

deer bouncing past children in backyards  
as we wait & wonder which will be shot first

brakes squeal from the highway yet we never see the crash  
smell fumes or burning hair

where are the blood & skulls? where’s the shock & awe?  
worse there go those squirrels again frolicking on a fencepost

trying to squeeze a plum between their teeth  
they run on & on through all of history

until let’s face it you have nothing left to say &  
like an obnoxious wedding guest say more

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## The Fires of Industry That Burns All Away: Traditions Aflame in the Churning Mouth of Socioeconomic Evolution

I saw a Kecak Fire Dance in Bali, a sacred ceremony where heavily made-up and bejeweled performers wordlessly enact a Hindu legend, such as the story of Rama winning Sita's love—until he left her with his cousin—and went to kill a magic deer apparition, but that was a trick—and then the monkey king gave her a magic ring—and the cousin tried to steal her—but she tried to tell Rama she was still alive—until the serpent—*never mind*.

The performance is accompanied exclusively by the sounds of the human voice and body. A chorus of thirty or so shirtless men march out in crimson trouser capris, each one rhythmically clucking or clicking, chanting, clapping, you name it, permanently raising my personal standards about a capella. They circle again and again in opposite directions around the enormous candelabra (a three-dimensional menorah, some might say), weaving in and out of each other like a country square dance. Their movement is as hypnotizing as their chorus of sounds. The men, most of them probably old enough to claim senior citizen status, end up seated in three rows encircling the fire in the center of the stone temple floor.

Not an auditorium, or even an outdoor stage, mind you—this performance takes place in a massive, ancient stone temple. And the performance area is defined by the cheap folding chairs that surround it. The fire is reflected in the glassy eyes of the audience, a slew of tourists sipping beers out of plastic bags. We are directly off of a bustling city street in the center of Ubud, where motorbikes race by like in the film *2 Fast 2 Furious*.

*ii.*

Such is the constant anomaly of Bali. Ancient and sacred juxtaposed with commoditization, sin, and industry. Commercial enterprise has wedged its way into this organic mecca. Bali is recognized as one of the most spiritual places on earth, yet that recognition may be at the root of its problems.

Fifteen years ago, people expressed concern about Bali's 200,000 visitors per year, and the impact it would have on the ecosystem, local culture, and the financial structure of the rather unindustrialized island.

Today over a million people visit per year. It's a popular spot for scuba and snorkeling, massage, yoga, surf, meditation, sex, self-discovery, and its *cheap cheap*

*cheap* prices. Bali's a hop, skip, and a jump from Perth, and other cities in Australia, where the cost of living is extremely high. You can use the same amount of money to vacation conservatively in Australia for a weekend, or spend it lavishly for two weeks in Bali.

The Balinese still devote their time, energy, and prayers to the Hindu gods and spirits, but a new deity, the dirty dollar, has risen fast and harsh to its own altar. Still, the temples stand their ground.

The traffic here is atrocious, because the government will not build any overpasses or bridges that would be higher than the temples. They also will not move a temple. There are rules about cutting down certain trees too. What you get is a city that has exploded with motorists, shops, restaurants, bars, cafes, vegan eateries, yoga studios, hotels, and the like, stacked around, and blatantly competing with, the majesty of centuries-old stone ceremony spaces.

The pavement is littered with natural offerings, placed lovingly outside of each door step, every morning and afternoon, with burning incense and ample prayer offered by a kneeling woman in sarong. You can date them (the offerings, not the women) pretty easily by how many times they appear to have been stepped on and run over by the motorbikes. All of the materials are natural and compostable so eventually they return to the earth.

*iii.*

Bali will not recover from this. Or, rather, what it was will not be reclaimed. It's too late—so many businesses were spawned when tourism exploded, and too many people changed occupations to accommodate the massive tourist influx. Things have come down since then, leaving families scrambling to make a fraction of what they used to. Such is the ebb and flow of the rustic town turned major tourist attraction, right?

Is it a tragedy, this loss of a people's way of life? Or is an amazing act of evolution and survival, a rapid feat over natural selection? Are the Balinese pulling off a major stunt? Maybe this is the natural churn of innovation, wherein the societies have to shed the traits that no longer make them fit for survival. A peacock would lose all of its beautiful plumage if it somehow challenged the bird's ability to survive and reproduce. The traditional life of devotion to cultivating the land and honoring the spirits of the island would eventually mean starvation for anyone living in Bali now.

*iv.*

But tradition still exists, like the Kecak Fire Dance, and that's a good thing. Even if that tradition is being sold at \$4 a ticket amidst the exhaust fumes in downtown Ubud.

The men are seated crosslegged on the floor, and their hands are extended to the knees of the man at their sides, connecting the three circles. All eyes are on them,

their bare skin, their glassy eyes, and chattering mouths. Chanting at the fire, they sway back and forth, their heads making jerky motions tilted right and center, right and center, right and center.

Half the audience is gaping, entranced in the psychedelic sound of their song. The other half is looking around in fear and/or major judgement at other stunned audience members. I notice my head tilting and righting itself in tune to their chattering song, because suddenly I've teleported to some obscure Balinese jungle situation and the fire is hypnotizing me to an other-dimensional vibration.

\* \* \* \* \*



Raymond Soulard, Jr. 

## Many Musics

Eleventh Series

*“Myriad lives like blades of grass,  
yet to be realized,  
bow as they pass.”*

—The Shins, “For Those to Come,” 2003.

### *lii. Carnival Room*

Soap bubbles. *I remember now.*

I woke the night in my bedchamber  
to soap bubbles floating around  
me in the window's moonlight.  
Raised my finger to pop one & heard  
a moment of music. Popped more &  
each time a pretty *ting*. Like music  
released, & then gone.

Then I raised up quick when I saw  
more at the foot of my bed, found  
they liked to be popped several  
at once, many of my fingers as I could,  
like an instrument. I followed, popped & played.

Until I was at the wall opposite  
my bed & saw whence they'd come.  
A hole in the wall, round, smooth  
at its edges, like twas always there,  
like waiting my middle-night notice?

I followed, kept popping the bubbles,  
like this was part of the magick. Listened  
too. The bubble music was being faintly  
replied to, a singing in kind, were these  
bubbles his? I was in a tunnel now,  
not dark but faintly glowing. No fear.

The music nearer, I learned its moods  
& modulations. Sometimes sounded gay,  
sometimes tragic, but it never ceased  
now, & became my path to follow,  
when a fork to choose, when unsure.

The music led me to the White Bunny,  
who was waiting for me by a long  
curving stretch down. Her glowing  
fur bright in the tunnel's murk,  
her mesmerizing eyes & pink nose  
steady upon me. Long furry ears, slim torso.

She was close with the music too, like there  
was a *hmmmming* she shared with the singer,  
how they spoke, how she knew to wait  
for me. She sniffed me twice & slow  
hopping led me along. I tried *hmmmming*  
too & found it sometimes made all  
this seem clearer, friendlier.

She showed me how to travel the  
tunnels, how to sniff for the unknown,  
how to *hmmm* for direction, near  
friends. How to remember without words,  
feel deeper these places as between us  
something shared grew.

It was many dreams before I found  
the bones & grit to remember one to the next.  
Before I remembered on waking where  
I'd been, & that I'd been many times before.  
Until then, the bubbles would lead me  
to the hole, the music would take me  
to the White Bunny. Hop, sniff, *hmmmm*, *wake*.

Then the first time I spoke to her upon our meeting.  
"Where do you live? Would you take me there?"  
She studied me closely for a long dream's time.  
Then turned & hopped away, faster & faster,  
a blur I somehow followed. Then we arrived.

The Great Cavern seemed like the center  
of the world. Or close to it.  
I could not see its roof up there high,  
only study the Great Tree's heightless  
height up there. Only feel like  
the Great Tree's roots might lead  
to even greater.

I met the White Bunny's fellow Creatures  
one by one, many more dreams the doing.  
They were shy & yet it felt like they  
knew, or expected, me. I . . . belonged to them  
in a way I had never felt before. Truth  
with no how or why.

All admired the gnattering little imp,  
like a tiny black & white pandy bear with  
crazy laughing eyes, her strange play  
with objects, now this, now that,  
*now here? now gone!*

But her tricks ran deeper, like a wise  
funny book written on the water,  
finished in the air. She seemed  
both the most ancient & het  
most new of them all. Would sit peaceably  
in my palm, lazily gnawing, & then  
a sudden wild cackle & away!

So many friends to meet & know.  
Pretty little giraffes clustered in  
my lap to nap. Handsome dancing  
bears in hats & bowties, leaping  
from small stones to larger boulders,  
among shadows high high & low low.

Each time I climbed through the hole,  
& followed the musical bubbles, the White  
Bunny waited me. Yet she could not  
lead me to the Singer, could not  
explain who or what he was. My  
friends simply accepted him as so.



His voice was always in our  
songs, sometimes our laughter,  
even the gnattering little imp would  
seem to play & teach among his music.  
I sometimes heard his echo in my  
waking hours, distantly, like the  
morning tide of the Wide Wide Sea.

I wished to thank him for bringing  
me here, gifting me all these friends,  
this whole beautiful world. So gathered  
all of my friends together in the  
Great Cavern. White Bunny, imp, giraffes,  
bears. Hedgedyhog, hummingbird, turtle who  
isn't a turtle. So many more known,  
napped with, *hmmm'd* with. Because of  
this unseen friend.

"We must make him a gift, &  
find a way to give it him." They all  
listened me closely when I spoke,  
like human language spooked them deep,  
& yet loved me. Finger on my chin,  
I wondered, *what gift?*

"Find me a small box, the color of the  
Wide Wide Sea. For next time we visit."

With a few magickal waking words I  
borrowed from the Architect (he had  
so many!), this beautiful little box  
they found for me would be most protected.  
My friends gathered strange little stones,  
rough little jewels, pretty nuts, feathers.

With the White Bunny, gnattering little imp,  
& the turtle who isn't a turtle, we traveled  
for many of my dreams, listening closely,  
nearing him, then not so near to him.  
I grew to fear will would not be enough  
to find him, despaired a little. His  
music we followed grew despairing too.

Then I sniffed twice, took a leap, & suddenly laughed.  
He joined me, merry sudden too,  
as did my friends. Laughing became  
a happy song, a song of finding, a song  
of gifts. We hurried, we slowed, no rules  
for finding him. *He did not know where  
he was. We sang. We gnattered too. We neared.*

I felt us very close now, we all did,  
the music filled us whole but, still,  
not quite. I sniffed twice, took a  
sudden leap again, & began to sing words.  
"There is a door. And now we pass through!  
There is a door! And now we pass through!"

And so we arrived the Carnival Room,  
the root of the music, its Tower, its starcraft.

*One had to look around like singing.  
One had to listen close 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 blue  
castle upon his head, their songs  
joining our laughter, & the general gnattering,  
& the Singer's happy cries. *Many, one, none.*

The Singer, I finally learned, could only be found in this way, not a solid form, but by habitation. *He was his many musics*, & 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 musics, any note or quiver of them. The rooms I pass through grow larger & larger, sometimes empty, sometimes furniture the size of mountains. Always a glowing murk, no sound but my hurrying feet.

I try to remember the musics, just one, but they elude me. We sang so many, & many times over. *Just one*. Nothing.

Then . . . *music!* but not his *hmmmming*. Instruments. A squeeze box, two fiddlers. I come to a room of more familiar size again, dark but noisy. I follow the music, I croak, then croon, then *hmmm* with it. 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 grimy old squeeze box. The fiddler tall, thin, dressed in faded harlequin rags, dancing & playing 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 of the Wide Wide Sea, like the tallest oaks, like everything I can conjure.

I forget the where & what of it all, forget to sniff twice, leap, & know. I dance back my years to far away unknown places, maybe other worlds, & 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*.



\*\*\*\*\*



## Provisional Truths

Night rain faded out at dawn. I woke to the sound of Dave telling a dream of his to Gus and I forgot my own. This is the third time that's happened.

François is in a hammock reading a fat novel by Honoré de Balzac called *Père Goriot*. I'm in another hammock reading my surroundings. Two magenta dragonflies chase each other in the sunshine, their wings delicate sheets of glass.

François explained the difference between a *gourmet* and a *gourmand*. A gourmet likes good food and a gourmand likes lots of food. He says I'm both.

Gus is telling Dave about Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. "Our prof said a lot of the stories are about abuse of power," he says. "Gods are like high-ranking people who can do whatever they want. Even the goddesses were merciless. Artemis, the moon goddess, was takin' a bath in the woods with her nymphs. This hunter named Actaeon was out there with his dogs and by mistake he saw her naked. He stood there with his eyes poppin' out. She saw him. She was so pissed off she turned him into a stag, and his dogs turned on him and ripped him apart."

\* \* \*

"¿Sacando chontapalo, ese Ignacio?" Joaquín asks Dave, a question that can be rendered in English as, "Does that Ignacio suck out magical sickness darts (that have been shot into a human victim by an evil shaman)?" They're talking about Ignacio Chimbo, the Quichua shaman Dave used to study with.

"Sí," Dave answers. He jumps up, heads for a puddle, grabs one of those eighteen-inch Amazonian earthworms, and forces it wriggling inside an empty plastic jug before capping up the jug. Bait.

Dave and I were talking the other day about whether we believed in *chontapalos*. We figured maybe, somehow, sufficiently focused thoughts can become physical, hard and sharp, and harm or even kill people. It could happen through a conversion of thought to energy to matter, like I was imagining that night on *yagé*. The math doesn't work out, but spirits might not do math anyway. Their physics might be based on something more like language.

The shoreline of a big brown puddle left by the rain is shining.

The sun perches like a golden songbird on top of the sky.

On the river, a boat drones past like a giant cicada.

Chickens forage in the organic trash heap.

The waves from the boat are crashing, low, rhythmical, against the riverbank.

Gus is murmuring aloud from a book of Emily Dickinson poems. "How



the old mountains drip with sunset,” he murmurs. “How the hemlocks burn. How the—” I don’t catch the next bit—“cinder by the wizard sun. How the old steeples hand the scarlet ’til the ball is full. Have I the lip of the flamingo that I dare to tell?”

A banana plant’s leaves are pagan cathedral glass shot through with wizard sunlight. Have I the quill of the flamingo that I dare to write? Just a Bic ballpoint pen made from the bodies of ancient plants—eaters of air, drinkers of light. Gus keeps murmuring Dickinson. Don Joaquín sighs, then yawns luxuriously. I close my eyes and examine the smooth grainy orange inside my lids. Did the same one day while lying on a beach in northern California at the age of eight. Pressed my closed eyes to make everything rich, deep blue, then covered my eyes with my palms to make everything black. The black was composed of tiny multicolored grains. I realized I could never see complete blackness, even in the dark, because of these grains. I parted my lids so the sunshine bounced in off my eyelashes, prismatic fly wings. And my mom’s voice called me to a picnic table for a sandwich of canned tuna fish mixed with mayonnaise and topped with slices of tomato on whole wheat bread.

“ . . . Paralyzed with gold,” Gus concludes, and closes the book.

François puts on a pot of rice, then lies back down in his hammock with *Père Goriot*.

Gus gets up and puts on flip-flops and walks away.

Fujimori, alpha rooster, vanquisher of Samson, flaps his wings and struts.

Cuauquillo’s asleep, a shadow with a shadow in the shade.

François kicks a foot out, stretching, and the wind chime replies. The Québécois’ hammock hangs from beams, the chime hangs from another beam, the beams communicate structurally among themselves.

The Swarovski crystal hanging from the western roof beam slices open sunlight and spits out rainbows.

Mark and Dave are working on crowns they’ll wear during ceremonies. They’ve cut and split pieces of *cocowasi* wood and are now each shaving a strip of it down, to be bent into a broad, flat hoop and tied with palm fiber string. It’ll either be painted or wrapped seven or eight times with a long strand of beads. An upper part will be added, three or four vertically-stacked levels of a tubular, flexible pith from inside the leaf-stem of the right species of palm.

The crowns are part of the traditional costume of Secoya men. Some of the older guys still wear them around like New Yorkers with fedoras. Crowns are good to wear during the *yagé* ceremony. Joaquín says the sky people like to see drinkers looking sharp. I think crowns also provide some psychic protection to the head they encircle, helping people stay sane during the intoxication.

I’ve started making a crown too. Mark and Dave are both better than I am at shaving the wood to make the hoop bend smoothly. My hoop is lumpy, and I can’t muster the skill—and maybe the interest—to get it right.

“Hey, guys, it’s ready,” announces François, and the rest of us salivate like Pavlov dogs. Lunch is rice with sardines, plantains, onions, cumin from a plastic bag François brought with him, and tiny, fierce chili peppers from bushes outside the hut.

\* \* \*

Tomorrow morning at 3 a.m., we’re going to drink a brew of a plant called *gonsá* to make us vomit and clean out our stomachs. I don’t know what *gonsá* is and I don’t much care. I trust Joaquín. I may not be able to manufacture a good crown, but if the Secoyas can drink *gonsá*, I can drink *gonsá*.

Last night, I slept only about three hours: wired on coffee from the morning, and too hot, under my dirty blanket on top of my other dirty blanket, listening to the quacking of a colony of a certain species of frog by the river. (Joaquín maintains those frogs are evil. They definitely sound like they could be, but I can’t quite bring myself to believe in evil frogs.) François’s orange chicken had left us all blissed out, and we stayed up late telling stories.

Let me back up. The day before yesterday we pooled our cash and bought a chicken from Maribel and killed it. François told us that after killing and plucking a chicken you should leave it alone for twenty-four hours. It won’t decompose, but the meat will tenderize. So we put the dead, plucked chicken in a covered aluminum pot and hung the pot by a piece of twine from a roof beam so the ants wouldn’t get into it. As it happened, they did get into it: after a while, we saw a double line going up and down the twine. But, being ants, they weren’t able to carry away more than a tiny bit of the meat.

“One night on a bike trip,” Gus said, “I slept by the side of this highway in Canada. I was too close to the trucks goin’ by, and I dreamed these monstrous extra-terrestrial humanoids with gigantic heads were talkin’ to me! No idea what they were saying. They’d just come toward me, growling, and then move away.”

We were sitting cross-legged on the boards of the sleeping area, gnawing sweet meat from the chicken’s bones in the dancing, lambent glow of a glassless kerosene lamp.

“I think the indigenous people would say those humanoids were real, just not in the same way as, like, this lamp is,” I said. “You can’t touch ’em, but you may be able to hear ’em and even talk to ’em. They’re truck spirits.”

“It’s true,” said Dave, flipping behind him into the darkness a drumstick he’d stripped clean. “Even machines have spirits. *Yagé* showed me that everything in the material world is reflected in the spirit world.” Where he’d thrown the bone, one of the dogs growled.

“People say *yagé* is like a teacher, I have heard,” volunteered François. We heard the bone splintering in the dog’s jaws.

“*Yagé* is the best teacher,” Dave said. “The Secoyas’ whole system of knowledge is based on *yagé* and the other plant teachers teaching ’em how to network with the forest, using all these channels of communication amongst animals and plants and spirits and elements! By the way, François, this food is friggini’ awesome. You’re a total maestro.”

Mark said, “Amen. This is great. So Don Joaquín told me the forest is full of passages to other worlds. In visions, a shaman can travel through ’em to villages where animals like wild pigs live. Over there, they look just like people. The shaman can talk to the chief and ask for some pigs to feed his family. If the chief agrees, he’ll send the pigs out through the passages in the morning to be hunted.”

“Do you believe all that?” I asked.

“It’s hard to believe, and hard not to believe,” Mark said, his eyes steady in the light of the lamp.

I nodded. “I wouldn’t put it past Ha’kē to go into another dimension and visit spirits. I’ve read a lot of stories about shamans doing stuff like that. But why doesn’t he summon wild pigs more often?”

Dave said, “Because he’s a high, proper master of the way, which means he’s not greedy. It’s something he’d only do if it was *absolutely* necessary.”

“Makes sense,” I said. “By the way, is there any more chicken?”

François poked around with the spoon. “Only the neck. You want?”

“Anybody else?” I looked around, embarrassed by my gourmand hunger. The others shook their heads. François put the curved, bony piece on my plate, then said, “Does the Secoyas believe on gods?”

As I nibble-sucked muscle morsels off vertebrae, Dave said, “Here’s what Ha’kē’s nephew Seraffin told me. The Secoya gods basically go like this. First, there’s Ńañē—God the creator. He made the earth and all the creatures on it. Then he lived here for a while and let people do what they wanted. Ńañē acted like a normal person, but he sometimes busted people for doing stupid stuff.

“For a while, he was married to two sisters. Their dad didn’t like him, and tried to kill him, so Ńañē turned the guy into the first tapir!”

“How is the story?” François asked.

“Ńañē was living with these sisters and their dad. Every morning, the dad would say, ‘I’m going fishing.’ And he’d go out and come back home later with those giant earthworms. The Secoyas call those *wasí*. He’d come back and give them to his daughters to cook, saying, ‘Look at these delicious fish I caught.’ But Ńañē, when *he* went out to fish, he brought back real fish. His wives liked that ‘cause the real fish tasted better. The women’s dad got jealous. He rigged up a snare to a big, flexible tree, high enough to fling Ńañē up in the air and smash his head on the dome of Heaven. The Secoyas consider the sky to be like a dome, or the inside of an eggshell.

“So Ńañē walks out the door, and heading out on his hunting and fishing trail, he steps right in the snare. It pulls *right* around his ankle and *whips* him up in the air! Higher and higher! Until, *whoosh!* He feels the top of his hair brush the underside of Heaven! Then he’s falling, down, down, down—*boing!* He hits the end of the snare and dangles by one foot from the tree with his head hanging down!”

“Sounds like he’s trapped,” said Mark, scratching his chin.

“Yeah! But not for long. He’s Ńañē! He summons ants and asks them to cut all his flesh off his bones and put it under the tree. They do! But his skeleton is still hanging there! He summons squirrels and has them gnaw through his ankle tendons! His bones tumble to the ground. Then he puts himself back together, and searches out his father-in-law, and transforms him into a tapir with a giant ass! The tapir struggles to walk, but he can’t with that giant ass dragging on the ground. He says, ‘Ńañē, would you please do something about this ass?’ Ńañē grabs a bamboo knife and cuts off the giant ass and throws it into the river, where it turns into the first manatee and swims away!”

“Ńañē lived on earth for a while until he got fed up with human greed, then

took off for the sky, leaving the earth in the care of four celestial beings: Cancowitoyai, Wiwati, Wanteancó, and Oco Wanteancó.

“Cancowitoyai’s name has three parts. *Canco* means a firefly with a white light. *Wito* is the white down of a bird or the white fluff of a plant. It symbolizes everything that’s totally, totally pure! You guys remember when Doña Alicia put that fluff on us so we looked like baby birds. That was *wito*. *Yai* is jaguar. Cancowitoyai looks like a normal Secoya. He travels through the cosmos standing in a canoe that moves by itself. The constellation of the Southern Cross symbolizes his canoe. He’s in charge of game animals and fish. If you see him in a vision, you can ask him to send you some animals to hunt. He also sometimes instructs shamans and gives them his special *yagé*. But he’s only around in August, September, and October. The rest of the year, he’s somewhere else.

“Wiwati’s name means growth spirit. *Wi* is growth and *wati* is a spirit. He has four arms and only one leg. All these limbs don’t have joints like human limbs. They’re like the bodies of snakes. He’s in charge of the growth of plants. He’s the one that made the forest rise up again in that one story just by saying his name.

“Wanteancó is also called ‘Yai Paj Ha’ko,’ Cat People Mother. She’s the jaguar spirit. She’s hostile to humans for nine months out of every year, whilst in August, September, and October—that’s *Cancotecawe*, the celestial season of the cicadas—she’s friendly.

“Oco Wanteancó is Wanteancó’s sister. Just like Wanteancó is the mother of the jaguars, Oco Wanteancó is the mother of the water jaguars. I haven’t heard anything else about her. Water jaguars are jaguars who live underwater. They live in these subaquatic villages that are just like human villages and, down there, the water jaguars look human too, but when they come up to our world, they dress in jaguar tunics that turn them into big cats.”

“That’d work,” said Gus, nodding.

Mark said, “You said Ńañē got fed up with human greed. What happened?”

“Check it out. There was this *ginormous* tree, *way* bigger than any tree on earth now, and it was connected to the sky by a giant vine. The tree was full of water, and the water was full of fish. It had some holes in the trunk, and when people wanted to go fishing, they could climb up there.

“But some people got tired of catching the fish, ‘cause it wasn’t always easy, and they decided they wanted all the fish at once.

“They took stone axes and chopped the trunk all the way through, but the tree didn’t fall. It was still held up by that giant vine wrapped around it, so the tree was dangling from the sky.

“They chopped through the vine, and the tree fell with a *humungous* crash! *Boom!* When it fell, the tree transformed into the Amazon River with its tributaries. All the rivers and streams that flow into the Amazon used to be branches and twigs of that giant tree.”

“Speaking of water,” said Gus, “anyone want some?”

We all did, and he fetched cups and the aluminum pot of drinking water.

“Ńañē figured humans were too greedy,” Dave went on, “and he didn’t want

to live here anymore. He made an announcement: 'I'm going away! I'm leaving at midnight. Just before I leave, I'm going to cry out: *Hooooo!* Any being who stays awake to hear will be immortal. When they get old, they'll be able to shed their skin and be young again.'

"But just about everybody and everything was too lazy to stay awake. They all fell asleep except a few things like the cicada, the snakes, and a few trees that shed their bark—and one old lady. She stayed up and heard Ñañē shout. Then Ñañē zoomed into the sky and was gone.

"A while after that, the old lady told her family she was going to visit some relatives. She went away. A few days later, a teenage girl appeared in her village and started flirting with the old woman's grandson, who was a teenager too. She moved in and became his girlfriend. But one night, when she was blowing on the fire to get it going, he was like, 'You're blowing on the fire just like my grandmother used to.'

"The girl laughed and teased him: 'That's 'cause I *am* your grandmother!' He took it as a joke, but it started him thinking.

"A few days later he was hunting in the woods and found his grandmother standing there. He ran up to her and gave her a big hug! But it was just her empty skin! It folded down over his back. He got a *crazy* shock from that, and he got sick. He had just enough strength to bring his dad to the skin, and then he died. Then his dad killed that girl, who'd been his own mom!

"So according to the Secoyas, these stories explain why God doesn't live on Earth, and why humans get old and die: because of greed and laziness." Dave leaned back and gazed around at us.

I volunteered, "The Bible says people's problems started 'cause of disobedience—Adam and Eve eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil when they weren't supposed to."

Dave said, "Different values, right? The Judeo-Christian thing's all about obeying authority."

I said, "Yeah. But there's also things in common between the systems. Check this out. I took a class on Jewish mysticism. Professor told us this ancient esoteric tradition said King Solomon was a great magician, and one of the good things he did was go around binding demons that were making trouble for humanity. Not killing them, 'cause you can't kill spirits, but tying them up to contain their power. So one time in '94, Joaquín was telling me some of the things shamans do. He's like, 'We bind demons.' *Amarramos demonios*. I was like, 'You bind demons?!?' He's like, 'Yeah, we bind demons.'"

Gus said, "Did he tell you how?"

I said, "No. And I don't feel I can ask him a lot of questions. I think he just wants us to look and listen." Dave nodded.

Mark said, "I don't think binding demons would be the kind of thing that there's a trick to. I think if you had to do it, if you were advanced enough, you might know what to do."

We put the plates and silverware in a pot of river water to soak until morning, then went to bed, i.e. unrolled our foam mats and sacked out on the same boards

we'd been dining on.

But I couldn't sleep, so I took a candle over to the half-finished hut and started writing this journal entry, as gnats kamikaze'd the flickering flame.

Now I imagine fighting my demon. He looks just like me, but bright red. I punch him: my fist goes right through his chest. I try to bite him, but he flies down my throat and bursts out my belly. I compress him to a pellet and clench him in my fist, but he yanks my fist out to the horizon, then flies through my head like a mosquito though fog.

I didn't know if the battle's real on some level, or only symbolic, but I wish I could tie him up and seal him in a bottle with a glyph stamped in the lid so he could never torment anyone again.

Maybe he feels the same about me.

Speaking of supernatural phenomena, what does it mean that people say shamans turn into animals? I'm trying hard to figure that out. *Haciendo yai*—doing jaguar, making jaguar—is what the Secoyas call it in Spanish. Maybe a better English translation would be incarnating or performing jaguar. Maybe there's no good translation for the phenomenon in either Spanish or English. But *haciendo yai* is what Rufino said I was doing that night with Joaquín and Lázaro in '94. I sure had no problems with demons then. Would've scared the hell out of them, roaring and pounding on the floor of the hut. Similarly when I roared at that photojournalist. But I was a bit demonic myself then. Hmm.

Yaitarí was *haciendo yai* when Joaquín and Baltasar killed him too, but in a different way. Yaitarí sent his soul out of his body in the form of a black jaguar. Or something else happened that I don't even have a concept for. It reminds me of an old European story where one night a guy hits a black cat in the eye with a stone from a sling, and in the morning the local witch has a bandage over the same eye.

When I was here in '94, I read *The Tain*, a book of Irish legend. In one of the stories, two druids need to travel fast through the woods, so they transform into deer. In *The Yagé Drinker*, Francisco says a shaman turned into a jaguar and visited Hupo, the place where God lived on earth; upon the shaman's return, he invited other people to go with him, but warned that it would take a few days: "It was faster for me, because I went as a jaguar."

When I was *haciendo yai*, I didn't physically transform. Would I have moved faster through the forest anyway? Hell yes. My proprioception, my focus on my body, was immeasurably heightened during my jaguar trances, as if I were learning to use my body for the first time—and being introduced to a profound mystery of the mammal tribe. I bet that's how a jaguar's consciousness functions. Maximum awareness of the body and its surroundings. No energy wasted on reflection or self-consciousness. The *here-and-now* is there is.

It's hard to know what this means, or how to fit it in with the knowledge system we're taught in the States. The so-called spirit world has a life of its own, and it's a force of nature, though its relationship to science is elusive, perhaps necessarily so. When I try to observe that relationship precisely, I'm unable to concentrate on it. My focus glides away like a firefly on a summer night.

One night on *yagé* in '94, it became clear that the fireflies east of the hut were celestial spirits. I understood this partly because I felt I was perceiving the unfiltered truth, and partly because they appeared to be blinking in response to my thoughts. This year, I read in *The Yagé Drinker* that Francisco Payaguaaje said some of the insects that appeared during the dry season were celestial spirits.

*Yagé* and the culture that surrounds it are bizarre and worthy of study, just like many other topics—lunar landings, goldfish, Swiss cheese, Surrealism. *Yagé* must feel normal enough when you grow up around it. People like Joaquín and Francisco drank it at home with their families when they were kids.

In the rainforest among indigenous people, I was searching for the roots of poetry in magical language, when suddenly, a frog quacked. The tip of this pen is a blackbird flying through unknown skies.

*Cicadas are whirring.  
One of my friends is snoring.  
A motorboat navigates upriver  
in darkness.*

*Flame blown by the wind,  
this crippled candle is losing wax fast.  
Insects are biting my back.  
I speak with the voice I use in dreams.*

*My ears speak through my writing hand  
as a bat navigates upwind  
in darkness lit by sound.*

*All this music moves me.  
I stay up late watching this poem  
sprout between my hands.  
Nearby,  
tree frogs are singing.*

\* \* \* \* \*

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## Judih Weinstein Haggai



arise morning  
runners, writers, dogs and birds  
witness the sunrise

\* \* \*

early morning blasts  
fools and saints in headlines  
here with my breathing

\* \* \*

metaphor re-runs  
staircases and bus routes  
on the backs of seals

\* \* \*

pedal on  
through the night  
belief as fuel

\* \* \*

chorus of jackals  
explosions on the border  
sleeping? no problem

\* \* \*

small blue planet  
sundance solstice  
bow to your partner

\* \* \*



## Notes on Cultural Evolution

“Now, that might raise the question of what kind of *freedom* there is for the person. As long as we are in the system, there is very little freedom. You can say ‘I do what I want’, but what you want is the result of the system. We are wanting things which are incoherent and creating misery. And we’re not free to give that up.”

—David Bohm, *Thought as a System*

“Technology, or the historical momentum of things, is creating such a bewildering social milieu that the monkey mind cannot find a simple story, a simple creation myth or redemption myth to lay over the crazy contradictory patchwork of profane techno-consumerist post-McLuhanist electronic pre-apocalyptic existence. Into that dimension of anxiety created by this inability to parse reality rushes a bewildering variety of squirrely notions, epistemological cartoons if you will. Conspiracy theory, in my humble opinion, is a kind of epistemological cartoon about reality.”

—Terence McKenna

The human cultural matrix is a system far smarter and more powerful than any individual human or group of individuals. That is why it is in command of human affairs, and humans are not. It has been this way since before the dawn of civilization. We think we’re at the helm. We’re not. There are far more subtle and more fundamental forces at work in human affairs than the decisions of anyone or any group. Conspiracy theories are seen to be irrelevant.

We’re passengers on a train and we do not lay down the tracks. We cannot even see out of the windows. The system is far more complex than and so far removed from human control that our beliefs about things really are a sort of sick tragedy.

And when we’re no longer needed as the host for the evolution of memes, Nature will discard us. The only way to kill this cultural organism is for humanity to become extinct. Nature is using us. Humans are merely unwitting pawns in the real action, which is memetic and cultural. It is an operation on an entirely different level, and almost everybody is totally blind to it. Nature’s goals through cultural evolution are more important for it than human lives are. The evolutionary push now is toward Artificial Intelligence.

\* \* \*



There are forces at work on this planet that are quite invisible, and extremely powerful. Human culture is like a giant organism, and individuals are very small cells within that organism. Or culture is the brain and individuals are like individual neurons. Or one could liken it to a machine. Culture is a huge mechanism, and individual humans are like minor cogs in the overall mechanical process. This machine operates on what to us would be a decidedly abstract level, and yet it drives all of the human affairs of Earth.

The evolution—i.e. the adoption, mutation, and selection—of memes is the essence of what is happening. Everything in human society, every thought and almost every behavior, is shaped and in many cases decided by the greater cultural evolution. The cog is quite unaware of his place in the machine, or even what the machine is really doing. It all takes place in human minds, yet is far greater in its overall networked projection than any individual or group of individuals. Human choice has absolutely nothing to do with it.

\* \* \*

A form of abstract progress, i.e. complexification, may or may not be going on in Nature, but progress on a human level is a meme specific to our civilization and is not objective. How do you know progress is even happening? Sure, technological “progress” is occurring, but how do we know how this will affect the destiny of man himself? It could be very deleterious in the long run. So that wouldn’t really be progress.

And it seems to me that the only objective measure of progress in human societies is the development of the level of happiness overall. With all of this complex technology, etc., are humans really any happier than they were fifty years ago? *A hundred, two hundred years ago?* I think a lot of people would say that *no, we’re not.*

There’s a lot of misery associated with modern society. So how can we be said to have progressed? The notion that progress is necessarily happening on a level meaningful for human beings and their most central interests is a cultural bias that most of us don’t even think about. More complex does not necessarily mean “better.” Instead of using the word “progress,” perhaps we should instead substitute the word “development” in order to shed some of the baggage.

\* \* \*

Cultural differences exist not only in categorically familiar areas like customs, beliefs, and languages but much more importantly and fundamentally in the very configuration of consciousness due to basic potential differences in the wiring of the brain itself. The perception of the world of a 2018 AD New Yorker is virtually alien to that of a Tibetan monk of 950 AD, and even more so to a Plains Indian of 500 BC. If you were somehow able to teleport between these various nervous systems, I think it can be said that you might not even know they were all the same species.

It has been shown that the human brain is easily plastic enough for such variation. The cultural realm—the sphere of human thought—is not ordinarily considered to be so vital. Everyone just assumes everything is an epiphenomenon of genetics. And you can’t really fault them; it’s what the scientific community has fostered. But the connectivity of the brain is vastly complex, and allows for any behavior and any perception one can possibly imagine. Everyone thinks cultural differences are merely morphologies on a theme of some ill-defined human nature. Human nature itself is not fixed. And neither is perception, or consciousness.

\* \* \*

The primary reason for the malaise, despair, and loneliness of the modern age appears to be a consequence of a basic split with our evolutionary heritage. For most of our time on this planet, humanity has not suffered from all of the dysfunctions of the modern age, such as the proliferation of murder, rape, crime, suffering, want, insular ideologies, shabby institutions, and many other tragic social and cultural failures.

Our ideologies and institutions can be quite stifling, and often constitute almost total malfunction, and this coupled with a sedentism that goes wholly against our heritage of roughly 200,000 years has led to a break with the genetic necessities specific to our species. This leads to a marked loneliness that, while not often talked about, is a symptom of a cultural bankruptcy and lack of sufficiency to provide for all members of the community of life which, until very recently in geological/evolutionary time, was being done more or less because of necessity, which preserved diversity, and which of course is a fundamental attribute of a healthy ecosystem.

I would venture to reiterate what so many people have said, and that is that the current constitution of modern civilized societies eliminates virtually all forms of diversity. While it may be possible for humanity to survive the onslaught of this war on diversity with such high-tech and successful agricultural practices, it will simply not do to let this go on to destroy billions of years of evolution in the blink of an eye. *Do we have to wait until life on our planet is no longer worth living?*

\* \* \* \* \*



**Muskeget Island**

A place I only wish to see  
in the stench and beauty

of a nightmare  
with its placenta-strewn shore

and endless moanings  
safe in the shallows beyond the reach

of the Great White  
rolling like a slaughterhouse floor

where some fifty-thousand once-gentle  
half-ton beasts mate and defecate

creep inland bearing disease  
for the bird's fresh water

no longer yielding to the one man  
walking its shore

testing his modern resolve  
to just let things be

\* \* \*

## Self Portrait #1

The fog rolls in  
but this time not all romantic-like,  
more like a brush fire  
the kind that precedes tragedy

This place would not exist without you  
nor would it go on forever  
as does Jupiter's storm  
and its four satellites

We are beyond the sextant  
and the boxed sea clock  
beyond all the slimy sea things  
that slide underfoot

When my skin like the liquid lagoon  
grows wet and sticky  
and cold  
just burn me up and pray for heaven

just know your chances of finding it  
are about as good as finding  
just one time  
a decent pear

\* \* \* \* \*

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**Algernon Beagle**



## **Bags End Book #9: Edgar B. Bear Visits Bags End!**

This story and more Bags End writings  
can be found at: [scriptorpress.com/bags-end.pdf](http://scriptorpress.com/bags-end.pdf)

Hello Sampler readers,

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

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

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

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

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

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

\* \* \* \* \*

### **A New Friend Visits Bags End!**

Your old pal Algernon believes the best way to trod through this strange world is to put mah Beagleboy reporter's fedora on straight, watch out for big guys with crazy dangerous confusing plans, & keep mah paws clumping steadily 4orward. I like mah share of hugs & kisses & smiles from nice guys like Miss Chris & Princess Chrisakah & the Blondys 3, who all believe that kindness are the best payment, not part of some tricky plan.

But mostly I just like to write mah newspaper & pay attention to smart older guys & go have a good mull or 2 in mah comfy armchair on Milne's

Porch, while watching the sun go down.

I usually don't think about how Bags End News gets made into many copies & sent to fantasylands & other strange places all over. Most Bags End guys read mah newspaper like it's mah fault, & they look 4or themselves in it, & when they are in it, they complain even more if I don't treat their antics like heroic feats. Some guys like Betsy Bunny Pillow the fluffy & mean don't even got feats! Haha. I told a funny.

Me & Lory Bunny, who is Sheila's older smart sister who Sheila calls Brains but I don't make the newspaper & then we go to the Bags End Post Office & General Store to see Postmistress Elayn El about making copies & mailing them.

I don't go into the Post Office cuz it is full of possible food stuffs. O! Yuk! Lory Adjusts her smart guy spectacles & smiles payment not plan at me, & hops into the Store with the new Bags End News in a folder to see Missus El, who looks like a pink elephant but is much smaller.

Sometimes mah silly Bumping brother Alexander Puppy comes with us with his silly smiling it's-all-good-even-the-bad-parts face & his strange one word Bump language. He waits with me like I asked & talks Bump to me like I am listening. If I am lucky, that nice green-eyed Ally Leopard is there to tell me what silly things Alex is saying to me.

If I'm lucky. Ha! Another funny.

So Lory goes into the Store & Missus El takes the newspaper & mails it to Princess Crissy in Imagianna, who smiles her tricky Princess smile to make many copies & mail them. All with a smile. I don't know. Some can. Some can even better.

Well, the last time this all happened, Lory came out with a letter 4or me & it wasn't the usual complaint or threat from some disgruntled Bags End big guy.

"Bump!" said Alex, helping the way sneezes usually help.

Ally Leopard wasn't around & Lory explained she knows only a few words of Bump.

"A few words of a one word language? Lory, doth thee seek to annihilate mah very sanity?" I demanded. Then I really wished for Ally to tell me what I had just said.

Alex said, "Bump?" again & looked serious 4or him, which 4or most is goofball summer night.

Lory took out her little notebook & adjusted her smart guy spectacles & writed some things down. She & Alex talked Bump some more & it nearly drove me C R A Z Y when Alex said Bumps r e e e e e a a a a a l y s l o w l y & Bumped her r e e e e e a a a a a l y s l o w l y like that helped!

Lory nodded & looked at me. "Alex says, 'chill out, you'll live longer.'"

Hoo boy! Yes sir.

So we then all tramped with mah letter to Milne's Porch, which is located through me & Alex's bedroom window, which is in the Bunny family's apartment. I am adopted by the Bunny family & Alex is mah brother cuz Miss Chris told me to.

We sat in mah comfy armchair on the porch, Lory in the middle so Alex couldn't helpfully Bump me, & I couldn't helpfully lose mah mind.

Lory adjusted her smart guy spectacles & began to read in her voic

that makes everything sound like you should listen really good.

"Greetings, My Friend Algernon, it's time, yes much more than time 4or me to write to you. I am deep in some world's Woods & your constellation appeared to me tonight, or in my mind, I can't say yet. But I knew it as you, again, o yes, it was you, third time, & so I am writing to you from deep inside some world's Woods--"

"Hold on, Lory!" cried me. "What is he talking about?"

Lory smiled at me like I was one of her smart guy cronies. "The letter isn't done yet, Algernon. Do you want to hear some more?"

Alex reached over & patted mah nosebone very nicely with no Bumps of any kind. I nodded at Lory. I had a very funny feeling about this letter & the person who wrote it, but I didn't tell Lory or Alex.

I nodded & Lory read more. "I think I shall be coming to visit you soon 4or sure this time. You're becoming quite the Artist--"

"Hey! Who is he talking about?" I jumped up & yelled. "Miss Chris is a Artist! I just write my newspaper & hope 4or the best!"

Lory was smiling even more at me. "This is a fan letter, Algernon. Enjoy it." Then she gived me a little kiss on mah furry cheekbone & started reading again.

"You know how big the worlds & other places are, of course, but perhaps there's more to it all than merely this. What do you think? We will talk, o surely we will talk about this & more when I visit. Stay well, My Friend. Wishing you Love & Beauty, Edgar B. Bear."

Then Lory stopped but not cuz I interrupted so I figgered she was done.

"Bump!" said Alex all brightly, be4ore I could think another thing.

"Bump?" asked Lory, & that caused a flock of Bumps that I had to flick off mah face with a flap of mah pawbone.

"Lory! This Porch is not very friendly to Bump & other fake languages!" I said.

Lory giggled. "Sorry! Alex was saying he thinks Edgar B. Bear is really smart & will probably want to know all about Bump if he doesn't already. He hops Edgar will change your mind about Bump."

I looked hard & deeply into the sillyness of Alex's face. "He writed his letter in English, ya dum brother!"

Alex smiled & Bumped & went in a cheery 3 steps. Lory stayed with me 4or awhile.

"Lory, that Edgar B. Bear thanks I am some kind of smart guy."

"You are smart, Algernon!"

I shooked mah head. "Not like you & Sheila & Miss Chris & Princess Crissy. I am smart like mah friends the Weeds who know how to get by. I know when to write & when to run."

Lory gived me a grand hug & said, "O Algernon! There's more to you than that! Just wait & see!" Then she smiled at me & hopped through mah bedroom window back into Bags End.

I stayed put 4or a long time. I don't know how to have a fan yet. I guess I am gonna learn though.

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## **Edgar B. Bear Visits Bags End!**

I was sure glad that Edgar B. Bear likes mah newspaper & all, but the more I thought about him visiting Bags End, the more jittery I got.

I mean he seemed like a such a nice guy & I was worried about how some of the tricky big guys like Betsy Bunny Pillow would look at him & think: "All mine!" That's what some big guys are like, thinking us little guys as just waiting patiently around 4or our lucky chance to help their plans! Yah, right, but it's true.

Or maybe that little big guy Sargent Lisa-Marie Chow would try to make him a soldier in her silly Army of the Babys, & he would have to march up & down until she says, "Twoops Dwismwised!" in her silly Baby accent.

One way or another, I worried. And then I worried some more. Someone likes mah newspaper & I was sure certain crazy big guys just would not stand 4or it.

So after worrying mahself into a dizzy, I decided to go see the biggest big guy of them all even though she is smaller than me. Sheila Bunny that is. Nobody scares her a lot.

There is no really good time to go see Sheila. You just have to hope 4or bad than worse. And it helps sometimes to give her a little something 4or not throttling you with a single blow of her cute furry little paw.

But I couldn't think of anything good to bring her & her maybe wrath.

Then I came up with an idea. O Dear Readers! I trembled at this idea!

I walked into Sheila's Throne Room with a hearty but fearfilled "Hi Ho King!" & got ready to be smited in case.

Sheila was in her Throne, sleep but awake. "How does it feel to have a fan?"

"Huh? How did you know?" I demanded.

"I read it in your newspaper, Beagle!" Sheila said almost nicely.

O rats! I thought. I was gonna pretend Edgar was her big fan too so she would help me save him from tricks!

"So how does it feel to have a fan?" she asked again.

I flopped down in mah favorite place on the floor near her Thone.

"I don't know, Sheila! OK, I guess. But why am I worried when he visits he will end up writing Betsy's dumb lie-ography or marching in Lisa's silly Army?"

"That's Bags End, kid. Everyone here's hustling for something." I could see Sheila getting more & more nap-comfy in her Throne.

"So how do I save him?"

Sheila sleepily stared at me with one open purple eye. "You don't. He had read your newspaper. He knows what kinds of troubles pock our landscape. Just stick by him so he enjoys his stay in Bagsendland, but does not get crushed flat. Bring him around be4ore he leaves. If you both survive." Then she laughed a little laugh that could have been mean or nice, & fell asleep.

Well. Um. Well. Well, well. Sheila's favorite is never the low one. And I knowed nobody would tell me smarter advice so I figgered OK.

I kept thinking that Edgar would write to me again to say when he was coming, but his next letter didn't come day after day. Then I figgered maybe he wasn't coming after all & felt sad & relieved & sad some more.

And the thing about Bags End is that the tricky big & the strange things that happen keep it from getting bored.

I noticed something 4or the very first time while waiting & hoping & fearing Edgar's visit. That is that some guys in Bags End watch me to see what story I am writing about 4or mah newspaper. O, not Miss Chris or the Blondys 3 or mah friend Princess Crissy in Imagianna. They like mah newspaper because it is something I like to do, not because I am part of their plan.

But Betsy Bunny Pillow & Sargent Lisa watch me 4or sure. And Sheila sort of does but she is not really a big guy in ways other than her littleness. Even mah silly solipsistick brother Alexander Puppy watches me!

It was a day when all these guys tried to come hither me that Edgar showed up.

School was over 4or the day & I had just got the usual sad news that mah letter from Edgar hadn't come.

I was walking slowly toward Milne's Porch when Sargent Lisa suddenly found me & blocked mah klumping steps.

"Bweagle!" she talkd. "I have dwecided in mwgy gwand mwerceies not two cwourt-mwarshal you twoday."

"Thanks, fella," I gruttered & secretly got ready to run.

"Swince you are bwinging the Gwand Army of thwe Bwabys a new wecruit, your own numerous twansgressions will bwe overlooked fwor now," she talked more.

I looked at her. She is this red-haired baby with bloo eyes who wears a M\*A\*S\*H TV shirt & green diaper, like Hawkeye on the show. She is cute except 4or her who inside & that is the problem.

"4orget it, Sarge!" I yelled & began to run up the ramp to the next floor cuz Lisa is not too good at toddling up.

She was madder & madder & she kept falling down so she started crawling up the ramp, but then her diaper fell off & she cried & ordered me bwehweaded, bwenosebwoned, & even debweagled. Debweagled? Hmm.

I got away 4or like a whole minute before the lights on the floor I was now on dimmed, & the shadowy figure of Betsy Bunny Pillow appeared. I froze. Lisa would be at me soon, diaper or not, so I couldn't run away.

"So you are now allied with the Abominations!" Betsy slowly whispered till she was fastly screaming. I think she meant the Face Pillows I met not long ago that I tolded about in mah It's OK to be Happy! Bags End Book.

Betsy bounced closer to me. "And now you summon a cohort to aid you in your plans to crush my Bunny Pillow Free State!"

"Betsy, I don't know him! He is just some guy who likes mah newspaper!" I whimpered.

I heard crawling noises behind me & knew it was Lisa.

"You will deliver this cohort into my possession immediately & I will determine his qualification to continue to be." I heard in Betsy's voice that sound that means she is about bounce & smother, & I was ready to do anything when someone else showed up.

"No, Ms. Pillow, do not harm Algernon!" It was a nice voice & when I looked back I saw the shiny blue bear who had made it.

Too late tho as Betsy screambounced through the air. I felt the bear

pull me down & make me roll weirdly around & somehow Betsy missed us both!

Then Lisa was yelling, “Hwalt!” & I figured that me and Edgar B. Bear were doomed! O unhappy day!

\*\*\*\*\*

Dear Algernon,

By when you read this brief epistle I will be en root to your beloved Bags End. I cannot wait to to be in this strange & unique place I have read about 4or so many years now. I realize yours is not the most tame nor benevolent of lands so I shall be preparing myself 4or the most dangerous events which may occur during my visit. You are, after all, a Beagleboy journalist & there4ore must rush to the very heart of each rising hurricano! I cannot wait to get there & finally meet you!

Love, Beauty, & Truth, Edgar B. Bear

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Bags End At Its Best & Worst!**

I never really knowed that some guy I never met far from Bags End would read mah newspaper a lot & like it & get the bright idea in his head that he would like to visit Bags End & meet me & see Bags End 4or himself.

I had just figured that mah newspaper was read by mah friends in Bags End & other places like Oz & Narnia, & of course by mah enemies looking 4or reasons to come around with their frowns & their big dum plans.

But then this smart guy named Edgar B. Bear wried to me & so it is true about mah newspaper being read in places unknown by strangers. Edgar’s bright idea about coming to Bags End tho was turning out to be a bad one becuz the most popular word for a lot of guys in Bags End is me.

Here we were, trapped on all sides by furious big guys, caught between Betsy’s smothering wrath & Sargent Lisa who was between us & the ramps away from this floor.

“Bweagle!” Lisa yelled in her dum Baby accent. “Thwere is no escwape frum your military dwuty! I am pweased to see you have ffound our newest recwute!”

Be4ore we could talk or run or anything more, tho, Betsy was closing in on us from behind. “Stand down, Sargent! I will take care of these two in my own way!” she whisperscreamed.

Lisa thinks Betsy is a big guy in her Army of the Babys & so she saluted & said, “Yes, Swirl!”

Edgar started laughing. Laughing at crazed big guys is never a good idea. But he wouldn’t stop!

“A real live talking Pillow just as Algernon wrote! And you are indeed Sargent Lisa-Marie Chow wearing your M\*A\*S\*H shirt!”

Betsy stopped. So did Lisa. I wanted to grab Edgar & run right then but he put his shiny blue paw on mah nosebone softly & said, “This is

wonderful to really be here. To see how real all of you are!”

I kept expecting Betsy & Lisa to finish us off but they were listening to Edgar’s nice ways closely.

“Are you an enemy of my Bunny Pillow Free State & why should I believe you & why should I not smother you & take you away?” asked Betsy, klumping her questions like a snowball.

“O Goodness no! I read all about your heroic fight against Farmer Jones! You are very brave, Ms. Pillow!” Edgar said all blue & shiny & nice.

Betsy listened closely & puffed out her chest proudly.

“What I can’t understand is why you’d try to make Algernon write a fake version of your travails. The real stories are so much more interesting. And people love so to read true stories of heroes!”

I thought Betsy was gonna bomb Edgar like Dresden with her Pillowy wrath but she didn’t.

Edgar walked up to Betsy & put a paw on her dress. “Tell the truth, every word of it. Algernon has your whole heroic saga in his newspaper. Why harass or bully him when he has so loyally penned your deeds & published them to the world?”

Well, I was ready for this dream to end when it didn’t.

“Beagle! You have one week to assemble from your archives every word that tells my whole heroic saga! Be prompt or be deleted!”

Humf! Betsy made the whole thing seem very Bagzinian again. I guessed I wasn’t dreaming because here was a big guy pulling hard at the bit in mah mouth.

Betsy bounced off without another word & Edgar smiled nicely at me.

“Well,” he said, all excited. “What will you show me first? Sheila’s Thone Room? Miss Chris’s house in Connecticut? Oooo! Princess Chrisakah’s Castle in Imagianna?”

I looked at Edgar’s shining face that didn’t know how close we had just come to being captured & set to work on crazy big guy plans, but I decided not to tell him. He seemed smart like a big guy but sunny & hopeful in a little guy-ish way. “How about if I show you Milne’s Porch first, Edgar?”

He smiled very big at me & it was a smile like Princess Crissy gives me & like the Weeds give me without faces, the kind that believes in the better Algernon somewhere inside me. I believe too, sort of, when that smile is going.

So we walked toward Milne’s Porch. Edgar is taller than me & he liked to keep one of his bloo paws on mah back nicely.

He kept finding new things to believe were really true. First was Betsy & Lisa, I guess, & then were the ramps we had to go down to get to the right level.

Then we got to the Bunny Family’s apartment & he walked around believing in all sorts of things.

“I can’t wait to meet Sheila!” he said. Me, I had met her already & figured she would enjoy being met & believed in 4or a long time, so better not right now.

So we went into me & mah brother Alexander’s bedroom on the way to Milne’s Porch. Edgar was eager ahead of me & suddenly I heard him say a loud happy “Bump!” & another voice the usual one say “Bump!” back.

O great. Mah brother is taller than me but in his silly heartbone one of the little guys around. I found Edgar & Alex sitting on mah bed! talking Bump fast & slow.

Edgar was so happy tho & nice & believing that I couldn't give Alex mah usual lecture on the silly madeup language he talks.

I tried nicely instead. "Hello, brother. Would you like to come with me & our new friend Edgar onto Milne's Porch?"

Alex smiled bigbig & yelled happy Bumpwords & jumped up & tried to Bump me all happy but I runned away on mah short but determined legs till Edgar said Bump words & Alex rushed back to him to talk Bump some more. Good Grief!

Finally, we all somehow ended up in mah comfy chair on Milne's Porch with Edgar in the middle, & me & Alex on the ends. Edgar happily talked real English to me & fake Bump to Alex like he was a good juggler.

Then it got weird. I thought again maybe I was dreaming cuz it seemed like all 3 of us were talking English & Bump together!

"Hey!" I yelled. "Something weird is happening!"

It was then that I figgered out that Edgar B. Bear was no ordinary guy. I don't know what he did, but I could understand Alex without nobody telling me what he was saying.

"Edgar! Are you a magick guy like Princess Crissy & the Blondys 3?"

Edgar smiled so happy at me & said, "Things change, Algernon, my friend. Things change."

Things change???

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### **Edgar's Visit Continues--But First a Dream**

Somewhere along the way, it seems like your old pal Algernon got famous, maybe a little bit. I knew that other Bags End guys like Sheila Bunny & Betsy Bunny Pillow are famous, & they like that kind of thing, but me, I just want to shamle along after them doing mah Beagleboy journalist thing. Fame does not become your humble scribe. Hehe.

Fetch me mah famous guy's pen! And await mah next opus! The golden words I will offer the millions shall eagerly be read tomorrow!

Hehe.

Yah, right! Not me, brother!

I didn't know I was famous until I met in letters, then face, this nice smart guy named Edgar B. Bear who came to Bags End to see all of whathe had read about in mah Bags End News. Now he was arrived I had to figger out how to show him everything without us getting fakevolunteered into the schemes of one big guy or another, no easy thing to do, let me say here & now--

I decided not to fool around. As we walked through Bags End, we would have the Blondys 3 floating in the air nearby, & with us one or more would be Miss Chris & Princess Crissy & maybe Sheila who has not had a big-guy-all-about-me plan in a long time.

I didn't tell Edgar mah plan the first night he was in Bags End. At first he was in mah bed with me but he & mah silly brother Alexander kept talking Bnglish to each other & keeping me awake.

Bnglish? What is Bnglish, you ask?

Bnglish is a very bad idea. Bnglish drives me nearly mad sometimes.

I guess you could say Bnglish is when Bump language & English 4orget they are different & I know this is a dum explanation but I have no other one.

What happened that night was that I fell asleep & had a very strange dream.

In mah dream were many Bags End guy I hardly see a lot these days.

There was this tiny little guy named Doctor Greenface, who is just a little furry fellow, but a good doctor. And there was Sargent Lisa-Marie Chow's big sister Elizabeth, who has nice bloo eyes & loves Stevie Wonder songs. And many more.

And all of them were kind of sad with me cuz I don't write about them like I do about Betsy & Lisa & Sheila & the other big guys.

"Listen! They are big guys! Big guys have big plans & big plans get writed about in newspapers!" I explained.

But these words didn't sound right to me once I said them, & so no surprise when nobody said nothing to me, just keep looking at me.

"Algernon, you are being fooled," said this boot named Jill, who usually just Squeaks & kicks.

And I got really sad, & cried, & then Alex work me up all concerned & speaking his usual Bump tongue.

For a moment, I liked him much cuz he saved me from that dream. But then I remembered the Bump thing. I looked up at him & humfed. Then I remembered the Bnglish thing & looked up at him & HUMFED big.

"Bump?" he said with his silly face.

"No. Humf!" I cried.

Alex nodded. Then he looked like he was thinking. Then he smiled & said, "Bumf!"

"O good grief! Leave me be, ya crazed relative!" I shouted.

Alex kept smiling at me like I was his biggest fan.

"O fooley!" I grumped & escaped Alex's B9-ness by crawling through the windo of mah bedroom onto Milne's Porch, & closing the window behind me.

I sat 4or a long time avoiding words, which seemed smart cu it seems like it was mah words that had gotten me famous.

But what about mah dream? Mah friend Miss Chris's toy tall boy brother Ramie told me that dreams are real & try to send us messages, but tricky. So mah dream, what was its message?

It was, I guess, about all the unfamous guys in Bags End.

I thinked some more, reall hard. Then I got it! To show Edgar Bear Bags End I had to make sure it wasn't just big guys' Bags End! He had to see the nooks & crannies too.

Then himself came crawling shyly but smiling through mah bedroom window. I smiled bigly back at him, & he sat down next to me in mah comfy armchair.

“You have been thinking too hard, my friend,” he said. “I can see the strain in your face.”

Well! This was new! Usually Bags End guys don’t read mah face none.

“I think mah dream last night was trying to tell me I should make sure to show you more of Bags End than just about the big guys,” said me.

Edgar gave me a excellent hug. “Flow, Algernon, just flow.”

“But I am not a river!” quoth me. I worried I was gonna lose his thoughts again.

Edgar laughed. “No, I don’t mean that at all!”

I waited for him to tell cuz I figured he would.

“Goodness, Algeron, I 4orcast that today will be our day of Grand Adventure! We will commence here & conclude here. In between will be the fun tho.”

“Does that involve Pillows or Army babys?” I said suspiciously.

“Probably but I suspect too that there will be many of the little guys your dream was full of.”

“But what does flowjustflow mean!” I demanded.

Edgar was quiet. But it was a Sheila or Princess Crissy thinking quiet.

“You know how once in awhile you are walking along not worrying or afraid? Just walking?”

I nodded. Even in Bags End this happened.

“Well, it’s like that but more. You train yourself to be that way 4or times when you usually wouldn’t be.”

“But those times mah motto is run just run!” I said, & Edgar laughed merrily.

Then he got up with no more words & off we went 4or adventures in Bags End.

Now it happened to be Saturday & so none of us guys had to go to school. Me & Edgar got as far as the Bunny Family’s living room be4ore adventures began.

Allie Leopard, my silly but timely brother Alex, & that nice if strange redheaded clown guy Jackie were all talking too many words too fast. I was all 4or sneaking by, but they all talked fast to Edgar & he talked fast back. Then he came back to me.

“O Algernon! We must go now!” he said. “Someone has made off with Jackie’s best Squeaks!”

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### **Grand Adventures with Edgar B. Bear (Grand Finally!)**

Maybe your old pal Algernon isn’t famous after all. Maybe famous is one thing & a lot of people knowing your name is another. I still don’t really know but maybe I am getting closer to true thinking like this.

Mah friend Sheila Bunny is famous. She was born famous. She knows how. Mah friend Miss Chris too is famous like its air. And mah good friend Princess Crissy too. The Blondys 3 are famous tho I don’t think it matters to them.

And mah friend Edgar B. Bear is famous by now & it don’t bug him

or nothing. He is a little guy at heart, & I think little guys think more about fun than famous.

OK, so then there is your old pal Algernon. I think I am famous cuz I stand next to famous guys when everyone is looking. When I told Princess Crissy this, tho, she said I was too humble. Then she hugged me a lot. And Edgar agreed & helped hug me so I was buried in hug but fine. Except for that famous part.

Princess Crissy & Edgar liked each other so fast if you blinked it was already going. And Crissy got Edgar to gang up a lot on mah humble bone. I almost had to run back from Imagianna to Bags End to Sheila & her phat dictionary to look up “humble” to remember it means modest & low to the ground, which is both what I am!

Yikes!

Now the reason we were in Imagianna is a somewhat silly one—in a way. We were there to get Princess Crissy’s help in getting back Jackie Clown’s best Squeaks—O goodness!

But here we had brunged the poor little guy. Jackie lives in a box & he has a pretty shirt & bloo cap & short red hair. I think he smiles all the time cuz clowns have to or something, but his usual were sad & some were really missing.

“Squeak-squeak-puff-squeak!” he would say sadly, & we could hear the missing Squeak.

“He says that he fears his happiest Clown days are through, & something else too, but I missed it,” said Allie Leopard, who knows real & weird & fake languages too. He is a nice greeneyed guy who is friendly to all words.

We were sitting in Princess Crissy’s bedroom & Jackie Clown was in the middle of us in his little wagon we pulled.

“Bump! Bump! Bump!” yelled my silly brother Alexander. I don’t know how he ended up with us, but he did & all his silly Bumps in tact too.

“Alex says he has always felt a special affection 4or Squeak language. He feels it is kin to Bump. He regrets this situation & wishes he could help,” said Allie but not laughing. I looked from him to Alex’s silly furry yellow face smiling, & did not think Alex could make those thoughts in any language.

Crissy laughed at mah mulling face & hugged me.

“So what do we do about this?” I said after liking a good long hug.

Nobody said nothing because just then the door to Crissy’s bedroom crashed open & there was Betsy Bunny Pillow fluffier & crazier than any Pillow alive or stuffed.

“BEAGLE!” she whisperscreamed but then no more after that. But it seemed like she would say more. She bounced closer toward me tho & there was no fooling around about her angry bounces.

“O Betsy! You too!” said Princess Crissy, & she was so upset & looked like Miss Chris so much that Betsy let herself be hugged & niced over.

Well, now we had a problem.

“It’s like a, a, um, language eater!” I cried.

When the big guys start getting in trouble, there’s no going back to calm.

Then I thought & said, “What about Sheila? She speaks Bunny!”



And Crissy looked at me & said, “If someone is eating languages, will they get hungry 4or English too?”

Oops.

Edgar had been sitting quietly holding Alex’s yellow paw to keep him OK. I remembered how excited he had been to finally come to Bags End that he had readed all about in mah newspaper. Now he was here in the middle of a huge emergency. Was he having fun? I hoped so.

“Crissy, can you make a temporary magick language 4or us to all speak in case all the rest get eaten?” Edgar asked.

Crissy smiled. Crissy smiled bigger. That’s how her magick usually works.

“Usually language happens between the mouth & ears,” she explained. “But since we may lose our ability to speak words to hear, we will be able to talk other ways.”

Then she decided to hug me really good cuz she likes me. Even Betsy didn’t complain because she likes Crissy so much too.

Then she said, “Algernon, you are the best beagle in the world!”

“O shucks, Crissy!” said me, mah humble bone all buzzing with warning.

“What did Crissy say?” asked Edgar.

“You didn’t hear her?” I asked.

Edgar shook his head, & Jackie Clown semi-Squeaked, & Alex said Bump words, & Allie Leopard told us they all said no.

Crissy smiled crazytricky & said, “I talked to you with my touch! We all now can talk to each other by speaking, touching, with smell or taste or by looking hard into each other’s eyes. It was the best idea I could think of.”

Wow. Crissy is really smart! What a good idea! Everybody agreed & tried out the new language. I tickled Crissy hello, & Allie & Alex stared each other hard some silly Bump words. Betsy licked a lollipop she had with her—O Yuk!--& shared it with Edgar who laughed like it was a funny joke he tasted. O! Yuk! Jackie was so happy again he pulled out a strange little green & gold flower he had hidden away in his box for each of us to smell, which we did, & sniffed his happy Squeaks. A Squeak joke of course. And he laughed a lot & has such happy red cheeks that everyone laughed a lot too.

Crissy then talked regular & said we should go to see Sheila right away.

“What is your new language called, Crissy?” asked Edgar.

Crissy smiled tricky again & said we all had to hug together & she would tell.

So we all piled on the floor around Crissy & made sure Jackie Clown was there to & when we were all hugging, Crissy said, “It’s called Symbiosis.”

Edgar huglaughed but I didn’t know why. Crissy hugsaid, “One last thing. It’s one language so no matter what your native tongue, you will understand everyone else. Neat, huh?”

“Very neat, Crissy,” said a voice that sounded like mah silly Bumping brother’s. Wow!

So Crissy led the troop of us back to Bags End. She walkd close to Betsy & I think they furtalked all the way tho I am not sure.

We walked to Sheila’s Throne Room & I was glad to be near all these

big guys.

Edgar Bear walked next to me & patted mah headbone to talk.

“This is such a Grand Adventure!” he said, all happy.

“But it’s scary! What if the Language Eater eats all of the languages & then finds out about Symbiosis!”

Hmm. “Hey! I forgot! O languages . . . yuk?” Hmm. That was weird.

Edgar laughed at me & fursaid, “O Algernon, it’s all good!”

“It is?” my fur answered his paws.

“Always!” said Edgar.

“O,” said me. I knowed by now that Edgar is smart like Sheila & the Blondys & Crissy & Miss Chris, so I should listen.

Edgar laughed with his mouth his time. I get to meet Sheila Bunny now! How grand!”

Grand? Did grand mean weird or dangerous? Edgar is such a little guy loving & big guy smart!

“Should I bow?”

“No. Crissy doesn’t like that stuff.”

“No! To Sheila! She is the King!”

I looked up at Edgar & stopped. “No. She wishes she was King! She is only Mayor cuz we all voted 4or her & we haven’t even done that in a long time!”

“O!” said Edgar & his fingers sounded unhappy. Um. Yah. Right.

“You can bow if you like, fella,” I gruttered. Don’t like hurting feelings bones, ya know.

So we all trooped into Sheila’s Throne Room thinking we would find her there curled up in her Throne with a carrot. O! Yuk! & maybe a Kerouac book or a jazz record on. But no. The room was empty.

“Where could Sheila be?” asked Princess Crissy out loud, & it sounded weird cuz we had all been talking the other ways while walking.

“Sheila might be with Miss Chris in Connecticut,” said me. “Or riding her BunnyCycle somewhere.”

Crissy had a perplexed look. “I hope she isn’t in trouble.”

Goodness! This story was getting worse & worse! “We should go see Miss Chris right away!” said me. Crissy & everyone agreed & Edgar was all happy even tho he just hadn’t met Sheila! Well, I really hoped he would meet Miss Chris & that things would get better.

Crissy smiled at me & I figgered another hug was coming & it was. But this was a bigger hug cuz it had hugwords in it & I hugged back “O shucks!” a lot & “I love you, Crissy” words too.

“OK, Algernon, we should go now,” she talked out loud. Betsy came up & dirty looked me till she was next to Crissy. Ha! Crissy wants to be a beagle, not a dum Pillow I thoughted while looking at her.

“I heard that, you dum PUF!” Betsy whisperscreamed, um, puffed. I had 4orgotted we all talked Symbiosis but I didn’t know mah eyes had talked to her.

I decided to chill with the little guys in the group. I found them playing a game sitting in a circle.

“Squeak! Squeak! Puff! Squeak!” cried Jackie Clown, his sadness forgotten.

“Bump PUF Bump!” said Alex.

Edgar B. Bear clapped his pretty bloo paws twice, then missed once, then clapped again.

Allie Leopard said, “Jackie & Alex & Edgar get one point each!” & all the little guys laughed & cheered.

“Listen, it’s time to see Miss Chris,” said me, sort of politely. I was surprised they all got right up to follow me. Well, Crissy really cuz she was head big guy of our group.

So we went to the door that leads to Miss Chris’s bedroom in Connecticut. We found Miss Chris on her bed with her bunny slippers & she was sucking her thum & reading mah newspaper! Wow!

She picked up on Symbiosis language really easy & pretty soon all of us were crowded together on her bed hugging close & talking eyes, ears, paws, & so on too. Even dangerous big guy Betsy was good. How could she be a bully with Crissy & Miss Chris & Edgar & everyone else friendly languaging her?

Then Miss Chris putted me in her lap 4or special niceness. “A-wa-wa, you are the best writer I know!” she smiledsaid.

“O shucks!” I humbled. “Thank you!”

Crissy said next to Miss Chris & they looked smiling at mah newspaper.

“See how the words are appearing as I talk?” said Miss Chris. “I knew you were coming because I read about it while you were on your way!”

Crissy looked double proud at me. “Algernon! How did you do it?” she asked

Then I figgered what they were saying by looking at the newspaper & watching the words 4orm on the page, & I saw how what was happening was showing up as words on the page.

“Hey!” I yell.

“Bump!” yelled Alex, thinking we were playing a game.

“Squeak!” yelled Jackie Clown, who loves games.

Crissy is looking at me now with her smart pretty face. “Algernon, I think you are writing all of this using the Symbiosis language I made up.”

“Huh?” I say.

“Your thoughts are going right to the page without you having to write them down.”

“Oh” I say. “Yes. Sure.”

“What?” I yell. “That’s crazy!” I add. I look at the paper Crissy & Miss Chris are holding, & see these words going down one after the next as I think them. Frog! I think, & it goes down too.

It was even worse with Miss Chris & Princess Crissy looking all proud of me. Mah humble bone stayed quiet, keeping out of the way. Smart bone, I’d say.

“So now what?” I grumbled. “Do I think everything good again? Would that work?”

Suddenly, Betsy Bunny Pillow leaned close to me & without words of any kind I got her message that she wanted her whisper voice back right away. So I gived it to her.

She harumfed at me & left right away, stopping only long enough to get more hugs from Miss Chris & Crissy, & say to me, “Don’t 4orget about the work I’ve honored you with!”

Yah right. Honor. Does she think I am Tweedledummer or Tweedledummet?

I then heard Bumps & Squeaks & real English words & laughing & Pufs & saw the little guys were playing their game again. It was like they kept 4orgetting to be upset & scared cuz they had each other to play with, & they knew that big guys Crissy & Miss Chris would take care of them & tell them what to do next.

So I gave back full languages to all the guys who lost them. The funny thing was the little guys went on with their game after stopping just long enough to decide they liked the Puff part even tho it was bad be4ore!

Then Crissy & Miss Chris decided to play the Hug Algernon Game, which is mostly about hugging me & laughing a lot.

I was hugged & happy, which was usually good, but I wasn’t as happy as I should be.

“What’s wrong, A-wa-wa?” asked Miss Chris as Crissy & her team-skitched me. Yum! Oops—

“I dunno. Seems lke something tricky goes on here. I mean things looked so bleak & then it was all good again. Usually it’s harder.”

Crissy looked at me think-big. “Does it have to be so hard?”

“I don’t know, dude. Just seems like funny business.”

I had about a half minute more full attention from Miss Chris & Crissy be4ore life righted itself.

“Good job saving us all, beagle. Now move over!” said suddenly Sheila, all little-big & purpled-eyed. She accepted all the kisses & hugs & happiness for her like this is how it should be. I didn’t fight her tho cuz mah brain was burning too hard to settle & enjoy such affections.

Then I saw mah newspaper that Miss Chris has been reading. I saw that it wasn’t writing on its own no more.

“No more Symbiosis?” I asked Crissy. She smiled. O. Right.

I said goodbye to everyone & went back to Bags End. Just be4ore I left, Sheila said from her Throne of Girls, “Sometimes problems contain their solutions, beagle.” And Edgar B. Bear, who was also being holded pretty good, said, “Thank you so much, Algernon! I am so glad I came!”

I wandered the hallways & levels of Bags End 4or a long time. Sheila was right. And Edgar was happy. And everyone had their languages back. It’s all good, I guess.

Finally I was tired enough to want to sit, so I ended up on Milne’s in mah comfy chair.

Hm. I said there mulling 4or a long time till the Blondys 3 came. Blondys don’t say too much but they know more than most. They floated in a trey of smiles from beyond Milne’s Porch & they didn’t talk a single word. Even Simmi the Baby Blondy, who is a real good cheerleader, only cheered me with her eyes.

They floated all around me but I wasn’t scared. Maybe they used wordless Blondy magick to help. I don’t know but I fall asleep & later, when I woke up, I was OK again. Edgar B. Bear was asleep in mah chair with me, &

he was dreamsmilinghappy.  
It's all good.  
I 4orget I guess.  
I'll try harder to remember 4or the next time. O there will be a next  
time!



\*\*\*\*\*



Gregory Kelly



### I am, I want, I have yet (Fragments)

i am an alloy of sorts,  
a malleable piece of metal work.

\*\*\*

i want to be  
a fleeting  
aurora  
a ribbon come  
unfastened  
from your hair  
a faint arc  
whose shimmer  
is on stage for  
less than an hour.

\*\*\*

there is a part of us that is not defined  
like white space in a painting.

\*\*\*

i want to dig  
in the sand  
a repetitive  
motion.

\*\*\*

i want  
to be  
a be  
-ing void  
of dark  
matter.

\* \* \*

i had potential once  
like a match stick.

\* \* \*

i want the light  
that is within me

to be  
like when astronomers discovered  
Icarus

and mapped the trajectory  
the path the star forged  
its 9 billion light year  
explore

your  
light  
has  
finally  
fallen  
to  
Earth.

\* \* \*

i have yet  
to find  
my existence  
fulfilled.

\* \* \* \* \*



**Ton Pussy Est Aussi Précieux Que L'Or**

It started with an earache,  
expanded into excruciating kidney pain.

It could only be love.

I met her in the Ellesmere Port Library.  
She was researching  
a biography on Simon Callow  
and was all dust and paper cuts.

I presented myself as fifty years older  
yet arrogantly adept at getting wood,  
largely due to her immaculate pussy,  
which tasted and smelled of strawberries.

Not the ordinary kind.

I'm suggesting the south of France in June,  
after a summer shower,  
slightly and fortuitously damp.

I reminisce again now,  
still depraved, deviant even.

Quite unable to observe the stars  
because her knees are in the way.

\* \* \*

## Misophonia

Yesterday a huge party limo  
arrived at the yellow gate.

It was a wedding group  
here to shoot wedding photos.

I rushed outside to get  
the clothes off the clothesline.

The revelers didn't seem very appreciative  
or perhaps feigned disinterest,  
as I stood there smiling  
my arms full of underwear.

I live on the border of many things,  
one of which is Connecticut.

If asked to pontificate,  
my three favorite movies are,  
not in any particular order,  
*The Third Man*,  
*Sunset Boulevard*,  
and *Debbie Does Dallas*.

\* \* \* \* \*

Charlie Beyer



## The Mother-in-Law Present

*i.*

My surveying assistant and I enjoy swapping lies about our lives while taking measurements on the frozen steppe. We shuffle from foot to foot as we talk, stamping occasionally, trying to prevent frostbite in the toes. The ice crystals swirl about our feet, hurrying across the whitened ground. He tells me of the golden river where he easily dug one hundred ounces of nuggets one blissful summer.

"After moving one extra large boulder," says he, "there was seven ounces spread out before me like a bowl of spilled popcorn."

And of course the water was crystal clear and the temperature was like a bathtub. Beautiful women were hanging all around the pile of gold like moths to a porch light.

"So why are you so stupid as to be here?" ask I.

Oh, this misfortune, that misfortune, sold the claims, new wife, new babies.

"But hey!" he says. "The gold is still there by the ton! Why, we only dug . . . and there was this place . . . and this other guy got . . ." *Ad nauseam.*

My greed is piqued. Next day, we gather all the information on the area. Due to my remote location, about 300 miles from civilization (library, bureaucratic center, McDonald's), I can only get a crummy map of the area. Perusing the claim records, I am agog to discover that three-quarters of the area has no claim in it. A virtual research strike!

*ii.*

At home, I excitedly tell my wife. She says, "That's nice dear, but Christmas is a month away and you have to get a present for my mother."

*What? Is she loony?* Here I am, discussing an empire of gold claims. A value that could be worth millions, just poised for the taking. *How narrow and niggling can life be?* Absolutely annoying. A \$20 mother-in-law present. Christmas . . . bah! An impediment to progress.

Then clarity hits me. I can accomplish all my goals in one fell blow. I copy off a mass of claim forms and write up fifteen 80-acre claims. The last one is called "Mother-in-Law Sanctuary." This I mail off to my wife's mother with great fanfare.

Here the munificent, magnanimous miner is designating certain set aside areas to be maintained in perpetuity for all small mammals and the quality of life as ancestral tribes knew it. Green-speak.

“I proclaim this act as a conscious effort to preserve the ecology by the environmentally minded mining industry,” I write her.

I file all the claims with the proper authorities, (the courthouse and the Bureau of Land Management). Costs me about \$600. Much better plan than the \$20 trinket present.

These filing agencies are like used car dealers. Just sign here and pay up. No, we can't say if it runs, if the transmission will melt within 100 yards, if there are 20 megalomaniacs claiming the same place. No mechanical or legal advice, just record and file.

While on the outside, I buy better maps from the BLM of the claim zones. I peruse the maps for anything I have missed. *Horrors! Oh terror!* I have misread the meridian. All the claims that I just filed have invalid legal descriptions and are technically *void!*

I have cross-staked on top of hundreds of other foam-at-the-mouth old-timers. I ain't nuttin' but a snake-eyed claim jumper! I can almost feel them out there. . . cleaning their rifles, carving my initials in the soft lead of a live bullet. The mother-in-law present is at best a lawsuit for claim jumping. At worse, a highwayman-style bushwhacking in some breathtaking natural setting.

I must try to rectify the Christmas present. When I search the records again, I find a huge river section on a more remote and wild tributary. Getting grandiose now, I file two claims of 160 acres each, a total of a half a square mile. In order to do this, I must put eight names on the claim forms. So I load it up with the mother-in-law's daughters, her sons-in-law, her husband, her postman, whoever I can think of. No problem that they are not around. I'll just act as their agent. File the whole mess with the courthouse.

Now to visit the place.

*iii.*

I turn off the highway and onto an old and neglected road, with fragments of asphalt occasionally appearing like some long forgotten skin rash. The oaks and moss hang over the narrow car-width track; low fog lays fifty feet overhead.

I pass a country residence with a hundred car junkyard. Squalid squire spreading his mangled mechanical malignancies across the scenic splendor. Like the eyes of some strange portrait, the real or imagined shotgun barrel follows me as I past the junkyard shack. The hubcap shingles glitter through the gloom. *Will this truck join the junkyard? My body recovered 30 miles downstream?*

Mile after mile, up the one-lane track I traverse. Occasionally, there is another survivalist dwelling, crumbling pre-fab, beer cans and Pampers forming an encircling perimeter.

On deeper into the void. Nothing but worn dirt track. The tears from hundreds of years of settlers are sprinkled thick as dew in the crowding brush. As the road finally crumbles into chaos, I notice a notch in the fugitive flora heading for the river.

After parking, pointing toward escape, down I go on foot, a faint vibration at my feet. Suddenly, with a last spider web in my face, I fall out into the open. Shear cliffs of blood-stained rock loom around me, their tops lost in the fog, their walls torn from the kinetic geologic process.

Before me is a jumble of house-size boulders, not river-worn but sharp, like a gravel driveway from an ant's point of view. Just ahead is the river. A protozoic swirling fume of thunder, foaming waters. Rapids tear through the gorge before me. Not the “take your chances rafting” type of rapids, but the wash-away-the-locomotive type. They shake the monster boulder field.

The low vibration quivering my every inch fills me with a dread sense of evil. Tiny creeks cascade off the cliff walls to join the maelstrom. Moss, creepers, and scrawny trees follow the water wisps up the cliff as though they are attempting to climb out of the terrifying gorge.

Obsessed though, I dig some gravel from beneath a boulder. To pan in the river is a trial, the water level rising and falling three feet in the pulse of the water. One slip in and I am pounded to pulp.

There in the pan is *gold!* Not some smooth, flakey, tamey type, but ragged pieces torn violently from their rock and thrown ruthlessly into this gorge.

Looking around some more, I find a cable. It's wrapped around the axel of an early 1970s road hog, windows smashed, tires flat. The cable is stretched tight. It goes right across the river about sixty feet above the flailing cataract. It's greased. *The tram-car is on the other side.*

*Lord, help me, some hidden survivalist must be drawing a bead on me right now.* I have an out-of-body experience looking down on my shot and perforated body, the gun shots sucked up in the river noise to nothingness like firecrackers under the surf.

That's it. I'm out of here. I flee back to the truck. *Will it start?* I'm panicking, sweating in the fog, no rubber necking on the way out, strictly business driving. The highway never looked so good. The clouds part, and a ray of sunshine fills the cab, illuminates the Highway 12 sign. *I escaped.*

*iv.*

Back to the courthouse. The recorder is a dowdy middle-aged woman, her face pinched up like a crushed hamburger wrapper. Her attitude surrounds her like a force field. Obviously hasn't had sex since 1964.

Politely, I state, “I made a mistake on some of my location notices. Can I just strike them from the record?”

“No. What's recorded is recorded,” like the snap of a steel trap.

“Is there nothing I can do?”

Sardonically, she replies, “Well . . . you could file a relinquishment.”

“OK. OK. What's that?”

“This form here.” She pulls a Xerox from the desk. “It costs you a buck a page, then \$5 to file it. Every person on the claim must be notarized. Then, after I

record it, it goes downstairs to the tax assessor.” She smirks proudly from her power statement.

“Tax assessor? What tax?” stupidly I ask.

“Every mining claim must pay a tax.”

“Mining claim tax!? I never heard of anything like that.”

Silence from her. Force field growing. “What’s this all about? This sounds illegal.”

“Look, mister, I could call security.” She lifts the phone like a Smith and Wesson.

“OK. OK. Where’s the tax assessor?”

“Downstairs.”

Must be hard to get extra words out of the force field. Let’s see . . . downstairs. Is that twenty floors below, like the Spanish Inquisition, or deeper still, like hell? I follow an unlit two-foot-wide concrete staircase down and down, the mottled concrete walls appearing flecked with blood and spittle from where they dragged some resistant citizen, bumping and clawing on the stone.

A greenish light looms in the distance. The ceiling is only five and a half feet high. I have to duck under the plumbing.

Now deep in the catacombs, an artificially lit lair, on the counter is a map of their world all blocked off into colored zones.

“Excuse me,” I ask the bouffant bureaucrat. “I would like to ask about this mining tax.”

“Your name, please.”

“Ah . . . no. I’d like to inquire what the tax is for.”

“Please give me your name.”

*You pathetic monomaniac. I’ll give you a broken arm but what spell will you cast with my name?* I think.

“Well, really, I only came to ask about this tax.” I try the sweet tone, but seems to not be working. Now she’s shifting from foot to foot.

Screechily, she says, “But I must have your name.”

“Charles Brown,” I blurt out. Her stiffened body relaxes as she fluidly glides over to her filing cabinet. Like an ostrich burying her head in the sand, she seems to disappear past the neck into the cabinet. Soon, she’s up for air.

“Oh yes, Mr. Brown. You have quite a few claims.” She pulls a three-inch-thick dossier from the file. I smell my own fear.

“Would you like to make a payment? A payment?” She must be nearing some kind of bureaucratic trance.

“No. No. I don’t want to pay anything.” She deflates.

“But what’s the rate, just out of curiosity?” She inflates.

“Well, Mr. Brown, it’s quite variable.”

“OK, varies between what?”

“Well, it’s different for every zone.” She’s shuffling again.

“OK then. Zone 6.”

“Oh, Zone 6.” She’s massively relieved. I’ve given her something to fixate

on. “The rate is 12.36% of appraised value per cubic nautical mile to the half power, divided by 646.9.”

Right. Let me pull that string out of the back of your neck and hear that again. It would be easy for me to calculate, if my background was as nerd accountant.

“So, let’s see . . .” She’s in her element, deftly clicking away on a 1950s adding machine. “Ohooo . . . with all these 80 acre claims, the tax comes to \$1200. About a dollar an acre.”

“Gahhaaa!” I reply. That’s not a bill, that’s the Kublai Khan’s ransom. “But these claims are invalid,” I protest. “All those descriptions put the claims in a non-existent place.”

“We need to have a relinquishment form on file here. Otherwise we charge the tax.”

I need to pound her face into this desktop blotter until her eyeballs bug up like a halibut. Otherwise, I’ll show my violent male side. I am quivering in rage.

“Look. I already paid federal taxes on this land. I don’t need to pay this illegal tax.”

She’s confused, crestfallen. She cannot separate her white trash private life from the reality of the bureaucratic job. Like a cat whose pleasure and aggression receptors are so close together on it’s brain stem that it bites you when you pet it. She imagines that I’ve said, “I’m selling the trailer and going to Mexico with the blonde. Our life together has been a charade to please your mother.”

She replies, mascara starting to run, “But I’ve calculated correctly.” She thinks she’s said, “I’ve tried to be a good wife. I’ve always been faithful.” There is desperation in her voice.

I blurt back, “No way am I paying a *dime* until I get some answers about why this tax exists. What is this ransom all about?”

What her confused mind hears is: “Faithful. *Ha!* Faithful to the bonbon box maybe. Sex with you is like screwing a beached walrus. With the whiskers.”

She stiffens noticeably. My questions are beyond her comprehension. Defense mechanisms on high alert.

“I’ll go get Mr. Lump,” she says. Her internal translation: “Talk to my lawyer, you two- timing bastard.”

Mr. Lump comes out of the paper catacombs. He’s a short pudgy type, with a little red bow tie. I repeat my protest to “the Lump,” claiming to be an upstanding citizen who need not be double- taxed under constitutional law, the Magna Carta, and God. Very slowly he explains to me, the kindergartener, that this is a “user-possessory tax” for all the poor bastards who use federal lands. The proceeds go to buying new wigs for the spinsters in the building, red bow ties for himself, and a little left over for the local school for the mentally disabled, known as the “Public School.”

The little grub is so sure, so final. How can I doubt his assuredness? This is not a tax, but a natural force, like gravity.

I feel weighted down. Lost. No longer do I want to use experimental interrogation techniques on these poor pathetic dumpy people, graduates of their Public School. Maybe I’ll just start a small fire in the bathroom and leave, tail between

my legs.

The file clerk is leaning against her cabinet, arms crossed, scowling. I muster my strength and give her a flirtatious wink. Her brows pop up, eyes open wide, the arms come out in a reaching gesture. She's thinking, "He's leaving the blonde and coming back to me. *He loves me.*"

Sorry, sweetie. Not in this lifetime.

I climb back up the stone stairs, avoiding the infectious walls. Back where I began, I buy two pounds of relinquishment forms from Spinster One. She's scanning me with her death ray, head slightly askance so the whites of her eyes gleam menacingly. She's been high speed talking to bouffant Spinster Two in the basement. She secretly knows I'll be treacherously heading back to the blonde.

Back at my tiny village, I fill out the relinquishment forms. *Oh lord!* The monster claims with the surplus survivalists crawling all over them has eight names on each form. This means that I have to send it to my mother-in-law so she can get her signature notarized; she sends it to her son-in-law who does the same; he sends it to his sister-in-law; she to her aunt, etc. Thing will look like the chain letter version of the Declaration of Independence. Could take months, years, *epochs*.

v.

OK. OK. New plan. I fill out the forms with just one name, take it to the village Notary Public. She's 400 years old. She used to notarize land grants for the conquistadors in this area. Her sagging cheeks sweep back and forth across the desk. She has one of those Mexican dogs that looks just like her. As can be expected though, since time began for her, she's never seen one of these forms. She thinks I'm into some sort of weird Arizona land scam. In a way, I suppose she's right. She wants to have one of those alarm buttons under the desk like they have at the bank. I can hear her bony finger knocking at the underside of the table until it sticks in some old chewing gum or similar foulness.

I pull out a crumpled mess of small bills as a good faith measure to show that I'm open to bribery. She tries to pretend that she's not looking at them, busy with her paperwork, but ends up giving the bills a slack-jawed stare. That will buy a lot of cow tongue soup, or whatever nasty shit these old people cook that is stinking up this trailer. Finally, laboriously, she signs it. I must be nearing her age now. I burst out into the fresh air, rushing home with my tightly clutched prize document.

My wife has developed a talent from using my checkbook all these years. It is called the Rembrandt skill, after the famous forger of French bonds. She craftily forges the names of the rest of the people, the other magnificent seven, who supposedly accompanied me to the sagging notary. Oh Yes! These signatures are great! We've got to open a small check cashing business some day. I mail in all the relinquishments. Fifty dollars in postage.

About \$800 later, I'm now back to square one—but *free!* I made an appointment with a brain surgeon for a lobotomy, to prevent this type of clerical work in the future. Trade him my adrenal gland for the procedure. Meanwhile, my

mother-in-law is planning a trip to visit her sanctuary. She's all excited about the biological beauty, the diverse flora and fauna. I'm thinking one of those nice Kevlar vests that are guaranteed to stop a 38 slug would be a great new year's gift for her.

### *Epilogue*

Twenty-three years later, at an address that is supposed to be off the grid but on the dark web, I receive a letter from the Trinity County Tax Board, from a J.F. Lump, Junior. This little drama in California has been erased from my mind by life's continuing troubles—and the drugs used to accomplish the erasing.

But the previous exalted tax collector, Mr. J.F. Lump, Senior, has bequeathed his profession to an offspring now full of his "Public School" education, and out to make a name for himself by collecting all the taxes in arrears over the past fifty years.

In an orgasmic moment, similar to what his father had with the bouffant recorder so many years ago, Junior finds my tax bill for the multiple claim filings. He sends me a bill for the 1995 tax on the mining claims, which amounts to \$847.

How he found the fake address in the Idaho desert is not clear. But because I am a criminal, there is a penalty of \$393.58. And, because of their trouble, a collection fee of \$120. Then, due to my insensitive dereliction, my money was actually their money and I just didn't know it. So interest in the amount of \$2,285.58 has been added to the invoice. At least I'm getting off easy on the puny collection fee. All told, I owe the State of California Franchise Tax Board \$3,646.16.

*Get in line.*

\* \* \* \* \*







### Bus Stop Story

The first thing I notice is the fine line of the beard outlining his strong chin up to the side of his shiny bald pate. He walks restlessly, rubbing a forefinger along his left temple. Next to me another man poses the usual bus stop questions: *Has the Number 50 come? You been waiting long? You work around here?*

The sound! The sound! Searing right through me it starts like a hum then goes higher, louder, from ah ah ah ah to AYE AYE AYE AYE, the man with the fine line beard flails his arms like a bird ready to soar, whirls and whirls then falls into the street like a heavy boulder tumbling down the side of a mountain. The questioner and I rush to him.

Still flaying, his right hand clenches my left wrist like a crushing vise. *We turn them over on their sides now*, the questioner says calmly, his cigarette dangling from his matter-of-fact mouth, *no more putting sticks in their mouths to hold down the tongue.*

As we roll the man onto his side, his hand drops heavily from mine, his huge shaking body becomes quiet. *I've called the paramedics*, someone else says, *they'll be here soon*, and, with that, the chartreuse-yellow truck rolls up and medics step out and into their official roles.

The Number 50 arrives and I climb aboard; the questioner remains with the epileptic. I can't shake the sound or the feel of his grip on me. A few weeks later, the man with the fine line beard is back at my bus stop. I rub my left wrist. Our eyes do not meet.

\* \* \* \* \*



## 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 are 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 flecked 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 *hmmmming* 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 in 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 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 among Pirth's dancings, grasps my hand.

"I'll be here."

I nod.

"Now go make the 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 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, with 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, not 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 pulled the indigo Beacon from my knapsack & raised 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 came 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.

*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.

*cvii.*

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 wit 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 good 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, even 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 hard for peoplefolk 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.”



\* \* \* \* \*



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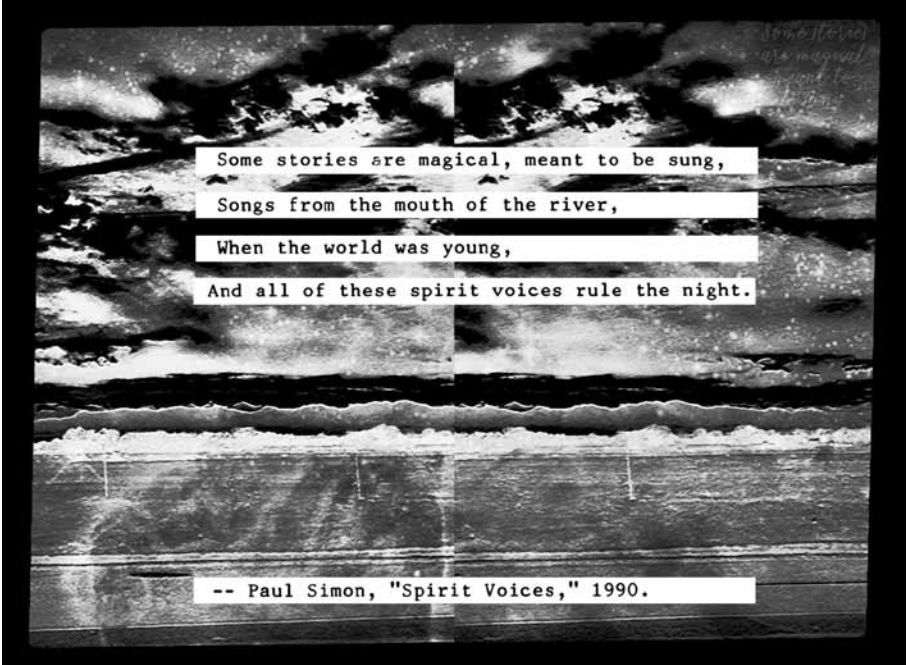
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**Raymond Soulard, Jr.** lives in Melrose, Massachusetts. Each one of these little volumes is a sweet miracle to make, finish, & share.

\*\*\*\*\*





Some stories are magical, meant to be sung,  
Songs from the mouth of the river,  
When the world was young,  
And all of these spirit voices rule the night.

-- Paul Simon, "Spirit Voices," 1990.



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