



Right now, the thorns of negativity
are making their last, desperate stand.
But soon, they're going to wither, & fall away.
They're gonna rot, & disappear.

So don't despair.
Great times are coming,
for the United States,
& the whole world family.

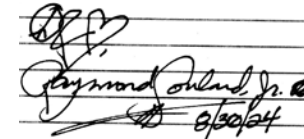
--David Lynch, "Weather Report,"
9/30/2020, Los Angeles, California.

Editor's Introduction

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

The Global Pandemic hit in 2020, very badly, rendering what was then ordinary life over. And it did not end, *has not* ended, simply because people grew impatient with precautions, or governments needed their populations to be *spending*, not safely sheltering in place.

Art does not solve such human-made, or human-perpetuated, catastrophes. But it can shine a bit of light toward better days, & the paths to them. Enjoy this volume in that spirit.



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



Scriptor Press Sampler

Number 22 | 2020 Annual

Edited by Raymond Soulard, Jr.
Assistant Editor: Cassandra Soulard

Judih Weinstein Haggai



| | | |
|--|----------------------------------|-----|
| POETRY | by Judih Weinstein Haggai..... | 7 |
| DREAM RAPS | by Raymond Soulard, Jr. [🌀]..... | 9 |
| POETRY | by Joe Ciccone..... | 40 |
| ALONE IN CABAÑA SUPERNATURA [TRAVEL JOURNAL] | by Nathan D. Horowitz..... | 41 |
| POETRY | by Sam Knot..... | 48 |
| MANY MUSICS [ELEVENTH SERIES] | by Raymond Soulard, Jr. [🌀]..... | 50 |
| POETRY | by Ace Boggess..... | 55 |
| POETRY | by Martina Reisz Newberry..... | 56 |
| RIVERS OF THE MIND [A NOVEL] | by Timothy Vilgiate..... | 58 |
| POETRY | by Tamara Miles..... | 69 |
| THE MYTH OF THE 4 FAMOUS TRAVELERS! PART I [EXCERPT] | by Algernon Beagle..... | 70 |
| POETRY | by Tom Sheehan..... | 88 |
| NOTES ON ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE | by Jimmy Heffernan..... | 89 |
| POETRY | by Colin James..... | 91 |
| POETRY | by John Echem..... | 92 |
| WOLVES [PROSE] | by Charlie Beyer..... | 94 |
| POETRY | by Gregory Kelly..... | 99 |
| POETRY | by Benjamin Gray..... | 107 |
| LABYRINTHINE [A NEW FICTION] | by Raymond Soulard, Jr. [🌀]..... | 108 |
| NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS..... | | 115 |

curiosity
which words await to be heard
will there be haiku?

* * *

this moment
this place this breath this
and now this

* * *

bird news on the wire
safe to wander kibbutz trails
all clear with blessings

* * *

friendly maskless face
a moment to remember
how we used to be

* * *

another chance to walk
new morning to bear witness
the earth is still here

* * *

last oranges on tree
fall into my open hands
happy to help

* * *

Scriptor Press Sampler is published annually by Scriptor Press,
2442 NW Market Street, #363, Seattle, Washington, USA 98107
Email: editor@scriptorpress.com | Web: <http://www.scriptorpress.com>
Front & back covers by Raymond & Cassandra Soulard.
Interior graphic artwork by Raymond & Cassandra Soulard,
except where noted.





Dream Raps

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

I stand in a room surrounded by frozen rainbow waterfalls on all sides. I peer deep into those waterfalls with my eyes closed, & something compels me to open my mind's eye, but I still can't see anything. Something compels me to reach my finger out into the unseeable before me, & draw a circle, big enough to climb through as I push it in.

And I climb through this hole where there is a circle, & there is a room, & there are waterfalls' frozen rainbow splendor. And I find myself sitting in a city, underground city, on a train platform. Look down, there's a notebook in my hand, of course; my hand holding a black pen, of course; scribbling away, of course.

Draw a Circle in the Air

So here's how you do it. Draw a circle in the air with your finger. Choose carefully which finger. It will have an effect on the result. As you draw the circle with the well-chosen finger, concentrate on a where, & on a when, to create a door in the air before you.

The first time I did this, I remember it was the second night after I had moved to my hovel in Zombie Town. Sitting amidst my boxes of books & notebooks & vinyl LP records. But I had just been taught, & wanted to try. I passed through the door & came to a newsstand, on an empty city street. I tried to remember which where & when I had been concentrating on, but I could not remember.

I walk up to the newsstand, & see that all of the periodicals on its outside racks are filled with pictures. No words, none of them. There are sporting magazines, food magazines, fashion magazines, automobile magazines, lots & lots of pictures. No words, none at all.

*I walk into the newsstand, & go behind the unmanned counter. I crawl among the magazines, in sloppy piles on the floor, scrounging for words, finding none. Then I see that there's a trail of wrapped little candies on the ground. They're glowing a bit, & they lead me to a strange tunnel. I crawl through the tunnel for what seems like a long time, following the little candies, crunching them as I go along. They seem to be helpful little candies, get deep inside me, & then I start to feel like, **OK, I can do this.** They start to glow, & I begin to **hmmmmmm.***



Finally, I come out of the strange tunnel, & I stand up & brush myself off, finishing the last little candy, the last **crunch**. I look around & I'm in a glowing hallway. There are strange pictures on the wall. They remind me of the pictures on the magazines I'd seen in the newsstand. There's pictures of dashing sporting heroes & swift automobiles & lovely fashion models & beautiful banquets.

I roam down this glowing hallway &, turning a corner, I suddenly come to a white-faced pink cat radio on a small low table. I notice that my **humming** & the radio's **humming** are becoming completely the same. We are **humming** together. Smile, walk on.

Then I come to a pretty turquoise-eyed lady, sitting on a comfortable divan. She bids me to join her with a gesture & a smile, & I do. I see in her lap a couple of comfortable Creatures, a rooster & a little froggy. She shows me next to her a table with her magic lantern machine. It projects pictures upon the wall. The pictures look like the magazine covers again. **What is connecting all these things?** I don't know.

Who is that dashing sporting figure? I don't know.

Who is that famous actress? I don't know.

What is the make & model of that fine automobile? I don't know.

Who enjoyed that delicious-looking meal? I don't know.

She resumes the story she is telling, that I guess I unknowingly interrupted. But I begin to doze in the divan, with the nice lady & her friendly Creatures. I begin to dream. And I suppose it would not surprise you that, when I wake, I'm where I began, & the circle I drew in the air before me is fading from view.

* * * * *

It's a Puzzle I've Been Working On, Ten Years or More

It's a puzzle I've been working on for these ten years or more, & I still haven't solved it. Began one night when I was drowsing in my hovel in ZombieTown, been living there awhile. Sitting on my broken spring mattress, enjoying a big bowl of *ChocoSmax* (*Them's the Fax!*), & watching my favorite all-night TV show, *TripTown*, on my black & white Dü-Mónt television, with the Antennar 2000 on top. Then this commercial came on with this doctor who says he restores anything, & I thought, *wow, you can restore anything, can you?*

I started talking to my Dü-Mónt television, or maybe my Dü-Mónt television started talking back to me a little. Sometimes I have conversations with my black & white Dü-Mónt television, with the Antennar 2000 on top, yes, indeed, I'm not too proud to say.

And the doctor said to me: *it was ten years ago or more that I was visiting this commune near Iconic Square. I would party, a lot of friendly people, Saturday afternoon in the universe, a beautiful one. There was this big house that didn't seem quite finished but had lots of room. And there was a big backyard, with a long table, like it was made out of a plank on logs with chairs of all sorts, metal & wood & brick, plastic. Everybody was gathered round this long, long table, sharing a meal.*

The old man, there's always an old man at these communes, with the long tables, unfinished houses, he was bearded, sharp, together. He was praising things, some in English, some in other languages, I think at points he was whistling his praises and maybe even letting out a cackle for one or two.

When he sat down, everyone smiled at him, pleased. Everyone joined in the meal. Lots of rutabega-&-mushroom soup all around. I was sitting with a couple of friendly guys, & they were telling me about something called **electric orange juice**. And they said to me, **you know what?** With **electric orange juice**, you can restore **anything!** They urged me have a cup.

So, alright then, I had a cup, & that is when I began about my mission of restoring things. From that day, that sunny afternoon, that unfinished house, that big back yard, that long table, those many smiling faces. They weren't all people, what do you think? At some point we were all **hummmmming** together, laughing, telling stories in many a tongue &, somehow, when we held hands & paws & what-not, me smiling & merry, sipping that **electric orange juice**, every story made sense.

So when I tell you, young man in your *ZombieTown* hovel, on that broken spring mattress, that I can restore things, you'd better listen! You better pay heed!

And his commercial ended there. No 800 number to call, no address to write to. No *but wait!* *There's more!* pitch. He just sorta nodded at me, no smile, & *TripTown* came back on. And I suppose I've been trying to puzzle out this doctor & his message these ten years or more.

* * * * *

Yesterday Didn't Begin Very Well

The world's been overrun by some kind of horror, & everyone flees, but most are killed. I wake up with someone in this dark half-fallen down housebarn, a stranger who became a companion along the way. Yesterday morning, we found ourselves trapped in an old factory, vast, no escape, going ever deeper in, hiding in corners, no shadow dark enough for what was coming.

And I had in my backpack something that is strangely more precious than anything else. It is a small, insulated pack, gray colored, a little stained. There's a paisley sticker on it that says, *Have a better tomorrow!* Inside this insulated little pack is a **cube** of ice cream. Cherry vanilla. I think it might be the last one in the world. And I don't wanna give it up for nobody. I have some idea that it will be important at some point. *I'm* certainly not going to dig in.

Deep in the warehouse, we find a ladder. My companion climbs up first. It goes up & up & up & up, & up & up & up & up. This ladder is impossibly tall but, I realize, after several hours of climbing, we are far from that warehouse danger. We just keep climbing.

I remember back before the world ended, there were people who were called *asexual*, & I think my companion is that way. She seems to love all, but not any in an erotic way. It's calming. It's helped me become someone better than I was, someone better than I ever

would have been had the world not ended.

Arrived finally to this housebarn. We're both sitting up now, awake from exhaustion naps. She looks at me & says, *My dream was among living metaphors, everything literal & symbolic. Grass, soil, people, all literal & symbolic.*

I laugh & say, *I can't match that. I had a dream that I had a pen-sized vacuum & I was chasing after a brilliantly colored cockroach along a wall. Then I catch it, but then it talks me out of vacuuming it. I don't know how. It's a fast talking cockroach.*

She laughs too, then says, *Is it still safe?* I check the pack, the fake bottom where we keep it. *Cube of cherry vanilla, sealed up, safe as anything.*

She stands up. I stand up. We get ready for a better day.

* * * * *

I Have an Apartment, Couple of Large Rooms

My beloved & I are hosting the Jellicle Literary Guild at a long table in our new two-room apartment. It's a full crowd, all the friends of old. Poetry, guitars, lotta laughs. At one point, I want a photo of everyone to put on the cover of *The Cenacle*. Someone ducks out of it, though. Someone always does. Eventually they drift from the long table, now more wanting to socialize on the old beautiful green couch, with the lovely crimson & electric blue blankets draped on it. I'm wondering, as I usually do at these events, *how can more writing be shared tonight?*

But people are talking now, losing interest. It was a good time, but they soon have all left. This new apartment has two long rooms, more than my old hovel by a country mile. I realize I've not really gone into the other room much. The door to it is hard to jiggle open, even when unlocked. But I do, it's time. Bring a flashlight too, since the light fixtures are all empty of light bulbs. On my beloved's to-do list. The two rooms are perpendicular to each other, so I am entering from the middle of this long room to the front end of that one.

There are bookcases that I don't remember from seeing it the first time. They are mostly empty, have random, dusty, fairly uninteresting titles, like the kind a thrift store might not even sell. My beloved joins me too, as do a few sniffing curious Creatures. MeZmer the White Bunny, Bellla the bloo-&-pink piglet. I wonder how we will fill up those mostly empty bookcases? We don't have enough books of our own, back in the other room.

We pass by many larger & larger bookcases, ever higher ceilings. For a moment I think of my dreams of the Attic. The books on the larger bookcases we come to seem nicer & nicer.

We keep walking & walking, past brown walls of maps & stacks of film canisters. One map looks like it depicts the Ancient Six Islands, when they were clustered together. One canister of film is labeled **RemoteLand – GateKeeper Copy Only**. But it's empty. Alas.

Then suddenly, no door, we come outside to a cement bridge. Follow it across & come to a very crowded old-timey-looking bookstore. There's also a Mulronie's Original Genuine Gourmet Space Pirate Burgers! with its crazy neon pink sign.

We cross the bridge back to our endless room. I worry there's no actual door to close off our library from here. I worry about how we're going to fill in those bookcases. Even the many shiny-covered Secret Books we share with the Creatures are pretty small in all.

As we are returning, I stop & look at a little book with an odd title, *Wyrld Poems from 1928*. I pick a page to read to my beloved & these Creatures:

*I see something. I see my face across time.
Me & not me. I exist multiply across space & time. Time is not linear.
And I think, no, this is not just me, this is others,
many others, who exist multiply through space & time, throughout all of
history &,
if that's possible, maybe history could be changed,
deaths could be averted.*

She listens, finger on chin, smiles. The Creatures sniff twice. I turn the pages & read another to them:

*Art she lives & mourns & bores
& wants & sexes & rolls & jumps
& skies & seas & a Rainbow Wheel stretching far.
Art & I love you. Art & I dance you.
Art & you spit me, & smile. Art & you gesture me near,
nearer, a breath's closest . . . Art, you gesture me on!*

I think they like that one too. I put the volume back, & we walk on. There's a door I notice among the bookcases. It's not a very remarkable door, half-hidden. Locked. I think it leads to the hotel next door. There is music coming through it though. A man's lovely, low voice, singing over & over again: *loss can be gain, loss can be gain, loss can be gain, pleasure from pain, pleasure from pain, pleasure from pain . . .*

* * * * *

Drowsing in My Hovel

Deep in wintertime ZombieTown. Like most hovels, it is a single room. It is, however, a *high-class hovel*, because it has a full window. So I can watch the snow falling outside, & the wind blowing, & the icy patterns forming on the window.

It does not have heat, per se, though I have a kinda-sorta, after a fashion, electrical heater. It operates on batteries & a crank. I sometimes wonder if this heater that I'm using is offering me more heat in just the cranking, because you have to crank real hard, & *then* the

heat lasts for a few minutes, & *then* it dies, & *then* you have to add more batteries.

Well, it's tough. I have lovely blankets, a crimson one & an electric blue one. I also tend to walk around my hovel a lot, such as you can walk around a hovel, with many shirts & pants on, & shoes & socks. I wear my hat & gloves too. But it's *my* high-class hovel, one full window. Better than how I was living back in Wyrd Godd Town.

So I'm watching the gridiron match (*the football match* as they call it in big-time Elliptical City) on my Dū-Mónt black & white television, with the Antennar 2000 on top. I begin to doze, perhaps to dream. Rouse myself after every quarter of the gridiron match to crank & crank & crank, *crank & crank & crank* my heater. The snow has been falling & falling all weekend. I've watched it pile higher, up to & half-way over my full window.

Come halftime, I change the channel with the stick I made to do that (with electrical tape, so not to get shocked), & drift into a movie. They seem to alternate somehow, mix together. Sometimes it almost seems as though the stars of the gridiron are starring in the movie. Only it's a movie about a bank robbery, not about a gridiron match.

The bank robber is, I think, the hotshot rookie golden-haired tight end in the gridiron match, anointed on this earth to win champ-eeen-ship after champ-eeen-ship. But he's a bank robber. He travels from town to town, robbing & sending money back to his family.

Now you could ask: *what kind of family is he sending it back to?* And I don't know if you could say exactly how he is related to all these family members. Seems like they are all just folks he knew along the way, from his boyhood on, who ended up with him in a hovel in the White Woods. Kind of a *grand hovel*, in my opinion. They have a fireplace, so they're *off the charts* in terms of hovels.

Anyway, they live in this grand hovel far away, in the White Woods, & he sends them money. He travels to each town whose bank he robs carrying a leaf-decorated & golden-handled travel bag. It's very stylish. He found it at a thrift store when his robbery travels first began. It seemed like a good way to transport his ill-gotten loot.

And now he has a new partner, a sort of jittery blonde woman. I couldn't exactly say how he picked her up. I think there was a fumble during that part of the movie so I missed how they met. What happens next is that he comes to this new town, with the jittery woman, & they descend into the main street in the center of town by this escalator. Now you could ask: *how is there an escalator in the center of this town?* But that's how they arrive to it, by an escalator that they rode down, & now they're in the center of town looking for the bank to rob.

The jittery woman is jittering, tugging at her hair, uncertain, mumbling about **cubes** of ice cream? But she plays a key role in the bank robberies. See there's a gaggle of cops over there, laughing in front of that bakery, as is not surprising? Meanwhile, the bank robber & his new partner are walking right straight into the bank that they finally espy across the street, yelling, directing, looking for the money.

It's kind of a strange bank, though, like both a bank & an auto garage. It's a weird little town. They seem to do things differently here, no doubt. The bank robber & his partner are in the auto garage, but the mechanics very friendly send them along to the bank part. The bank robber goes in there with his leaf-decorated & golden-handled travel bag, & his jittery partner, & *that's* when her usefulness comes into play.

He nods to her three times, & then raises his nose once, & she **SCREAMMMMMMMNMM-
MMMMM** but much *much* longer. She keeps going. She does not stop. She *screams & screams & screams*, & her *screams* are so loud, & so disorientating, that no one in the town, including the cops, is able to move or think. They just drop to the ground, & cover their ears, & moan in pain. He finally finds the money, floating in a pool of black water, possibly motor oil, & it takes him a while to pluck it out, dollar by dollar.

Then, when the leaf-decorated & golden-handled travel bag is filled, he grabs her hand, shakes her a little, she's still in her what you might call **screaming** fugue, & they rush through the scared & paralyzed town, & grab that escalator, & up they go. Now you could ask: *to where?*

Aren't you paying attention? *To the next town, of course.*

* * * * *

Wyrd Godd Town

It had been years that I have been away. The memories of it confused & conflicting. And I never thought I'd go back to Wyrd Godd Town, but here I was, in one of the old raggedy seats, on this sort of rickety train to Wyrd Godd Town. Train was crowded, didn't used to be. Lot of folks with me going to Wyrd Godd Town.

Almost seemed more like a TV show this time than a profoundly different reality, but everybody on the train was friendly enough. I stood up & started telling the story about what put me on this train years ago, riding *away* from Wyrd Godd Town. And about who I was going back to find.

I had an office job, I say, where sometimes I ended up with some or no clothes on. Never knew how. One time, I got some kind of awful green stuff on me. Half-nekkid, covered in green stuff. I won't say what kind of stuff, because there are ladies & gentlemen here in the audience on this train to Wyrd Godd Town.

So I got home to my rooming house. It was like this vast dormitory. Why was I living there? I had an office job. Weren't things hard enough? It's late, very late. I'd worked late hours & came to the huge laundry room. It's busy, so busy, 3, 4 in the morning, every washer & dryer is being used. How vast was this dormitory anyway?

But finally I manage to find one free, & I put in my jeans, covered in the awful green stuff (I won't say what kind of stuff) &, while I'm waiting for them to wash, I walk back to my room. There's this woman visiting. I'm not sure how I know her, I'm not really sure who she is, but she

visits quite often. This time she looks at me, in my boxer shorts with the crazy laughing pandy bears all over them, & just laughs. Not another word.

I don't quite remember her name, never quite do, but she brings me books. You see, somewhere along the way, I showed up at the library one time, half-nekkid. Had a problem on the town escalator. Got stuck halfway. Well, anyhow, that was the end of my privileges there. They couldn't have that kind of thing going on.

She worked at the library. Maybe she was sympathetic to me from then on. She saw I meant no harm. So she brought me books. Strange books, I never know what. Novels, biographies, textbooks, technical manuals, lots of true crime books. I find it hard to return **Aftermath** by Cosmic Early & **Nazi Jailbait Bitch** back to her.

Soon she always had to leave, to take care of her grandma, as she called her. She'd say, **Nice visiting with you but I have to go take care of my grandma.**

I nod. This is how these visits usually ended. They're friendly enough. But then I think of the Attic up there, that I've visited so many times in dreams. I think I could show this lady, my friend the librarian, in thanks for all these books she brings me, this wonderful endless Attic. We could cluster dream to there.

I don't say anything though. Maybe next time I'll get up my gumpation. I'm kind of shy, especially in my weird boxer briefs, jeans washing, & half-nekkid at work. Things are just unstable, this dormitory. I don't even know if I belong here. I'm trying to work all this out. Maybe taking this lady librarian friend to the Attic is just a little too much.

So she's about to leave & then I notice, & she notices, that there's something by the door of my room. It's a suitcase, & she remembers, oh yeah, & she brings it over to my old mattress with the thin pillow & the lovely crimson & electric blue blankets. She opens it up & it's a suitcase full of weird masks, handcrafted. They kind of terrify me. The noses seem to go on too long or too multiply. The eyes sink deep & pierce hard, & they're just disturbing. I say, **Did you make those?**

She laughs & replies, **No, no, my friend. My grandma, Nana Wordsley, made them, when I was little. She made them all the time. She'd sit at our front window, & she'd watch people pass by, & she'd say to me, get me my materials! & I knew that she was going to make a mask out of what she'd seen, those people passing by. And I just thought I'd bring them by & show them to you.**

Well, now I'm careful, & I want to say they're pretty or beautiful, but then I accidentally say, **They're terrifying, lady librarian!** She laughs & says, **Of course they're terrifying! My grandma said the world is terrifying! And the only way you can deal with this terrifying world is to make a terrifying response. This is how she did it! Don't you understand?**

So I'm thinking about this for a moment when there's a sound of hecklers out my window. They're shouting & yelling. I think it's something about me being half-nekkid at work, or maybe something about my jeans, I don't know. There's a pounding at my door, which I'd shut to look at Grandma Nana's terrifying facemasks, & there's someone out there freaking out, trying to get

in. And I don't know what's going on—

someone on the train to Wyrld Godd Town stands up finally, grabs my shoulder, hugs me, tight, & I realize, *oh, it's OK. I'm on the train to Wyrld Godd Town, but I'm not in that situation I was telling them all about.* And I thank him, & a few others stand up, & they hug me too. It seems like it's going to be OK, at least for the moment.

Because bad things happened in that dormitory right after, & if they hadn't stopped me I would've kept talking till I told them all, & I don't think it would've helped anybody if I had. I think it's time to just settle back in this raggedy seat on this sort of rickety train, & just enjoy the rest of the ride in my return back to Wyrld Godd Town. *Try to find the Lady Librarian? Maybe have a better tomorrow?*

* * * * *

Some Say That The *Hmmmmmm*

Some say that the *Hmmmmmm* is like the veins of the world. One can trace & follow their patterns, & there are so many secrets to be discovered. I've been down among the roots of the **Great Tree at the Heart of the World** for a long time now, & sometimes I forget there is a world above & beyond the roots of the **Great Tree**.

I travel, of course, with Creatures. They are with me here amongst the roots of the **Great Tree**. The two bloo-eyed Kittees, Jonny & Jonny, & their Friend Fish, Murmur, drive me in their famous Boat-Wagon. The blue-and-pink piglet Bellla, with her tricky smile & merry eyes, is with us too. She & I sit in the back seat of the Boat-Wagon, all of us always buckled in. *Safety first!*

When we encounter individuals of various kinds, Bellla likes it when I find a lull in the conversation & pull her out suddenly from the shirt pocket in my green plaid jacket, & reveal her, *out of the blue-and-pink*, as it were. Some are shocked, some amused.

Occasionally I remember that, somewhere back there, is my sleeping self. This is my *hmmmming* vein, from here back to that world up there, out there. But I don't miss any of it when I'm here. I don't miss anything. I have found many answers to the greatest question, *Why is there something instead of nothing?* And let me tell you, there are *ever more* answers to be found!

* * * * *

Deeper, Stranger, More Complex

Here goes. Like a recurring dream, this feels like familiar light, anger, revenge, emptiness, loss. I find myself half-awake, with my beloved, in a strange hotel. Seems like it's a mile high. Wasn't our apartment next door?

Half awake, I look at her lying close next to me, & I say *I love you* very softly, & she says,

shhhhhhh.

I can't imagine why she would say that at that moment, but then she nudges me a little bit, & I look over, & I see the other two people sleeping in this bed. A man & a woman. The woman half-nekkid. I sit right up, stir us all.

And my beloved says, *you were sound asleep. They came & said these two had nowhere else to go. The rooms are full, all booked. They said if we didn't say yes, we'd have to pay more.*

I nod. *What else is there to do?* Elliptical City can be like that.

* * * * *

Maris Monkey

*This is how it began on that far-in-the-future **Starship Victoriana**. It began with Maris Monkey. Were those famous Space Heroes, Mulronie the Space Pirate & Commandeer Cacklebird, flying together in the Commandeer's **Space Tugboat (TOOT! TOOT!)**, sent to help Maris Monkey or was Maris Monkey sent to help those famous Space Heroes?*

*Anyway, something went wrong. It wasn't intentional, but you see when Maris Monkey came aboard that far-in-the-future **Starship Victoriana**, when she was docked at Outer Space City, she brought demons on board. And the demons possessed the officers of the **Victoriana**. It was then no longer a peaceful starship exploring the galaxies & the universes & the stars & the quasars & the pulsars. It was a warship.*

The demons directed a bloody killing swathe across the eons. Each time they encountered another craft, or landed on a new planet, no matter how they were greeted, with kindness or paranoia or suspicion, they always took it the worst possible way. Every encounter was a threat, a danger that had to be destroyed—

I look up from my book, at the lovely turquoise eyes of my beloved in this strange old dusty Red Dog Diner. *I notice that a long-tailed insect has pricked her finger & entered partway. The rest elongates into a strange being that now lives in a tiny fenced-off garden on the table at which we sit. It drinks & grows fatter & fatter, & I try to smash it but can't. It gets so fat it looks like it will explode.*

Snap! Snap! Snap! I wake up, she's OK. It's just the dusty Red Dog Diner. I look back down at my book, & I see that *the Monkey & the Space Heroes have taken charge of the situation. The Monkey extended a long tendril into each officer of that far-in-the-future **Starship Victoriana**, & sucked out the demons, spat them on the floor. Those famous Space Heroes gathered these demons in a wicker basket with a solid top, & brought this to a quarantined area of the starship.*

*The famous Space Heroes receive many thanks, & then travel on in their **Space Tugboat (TOOT! TOOT!)**. The Monkey declares to the officers that she will work with the demons in the quarantined area until they are ready to offer both an apology, & a willingness to turn another way.*

The Monkey I've been reading about for so long enters the quarantined area, & the officers wonder what will be her fate.

* * * * *

I Wonder About the Worldwide Conspiracy

I wonder about the worldwide conspiracy of men, women, events, places, occurrences. These things are not easy to reckon or deduce: *what's real, what's imagined, what's wished for, what's possible*. I don't have any answers, not a one, not yours, not mine, not anyone else's, just a thought to travel through life with a changing set of questions, & a changing set of ideas about those questions.

Is there really a worldwide conspiracy, men, women, events, places, occurrences? Is there any purpose to it? Is it conscious, or is it more instinctual? I've asked you, but will you tell me? Is your set of ideas based on your current set of questions? Are all we have questions & ideas?

I don't know, & I don't know if it's possible to find out. But maybe there's something to all this, to be known, if one reaches one's hand a little further. One looks a little stranger. One listens otherwise.

* * * * *

I'm in an Apartment Lobby, Maybe a Cafe

This little story begins in an apartment lobby, sort of a café. Someone passes me quickly, short man dressed in seven colors. He's going up to see an old friend of mine, who I can't go up to see anymore. Bringing him a bouquet of plastic flowers that jingle.

They come back down, & now my ex-old friend's holding the bouquet. They're both smiling & laughing & telling jokes in a language I can't begin to understand. I don't even know if it's really words. *Whistles? Cackles?*

Anyway, I leave. I take all my bags. I've got a lot of them, & I leave. I walk out into the night, down the street, all the stores strange to me, selling things I don't understand.

But then there's a place with a picture of breakfast food in the window. And a smiling Sun & cool-shaded Moon holding ray of light hands, so I guess it's breakfast all the time. I go on in, sit down at one of the tables, pick up the menu before me, see it has a single picture of breakfast food. *All of it.*

Apparently you order one meal, but it contains everything. You got your *eggs*, you got your *bacon*, you got your *sausage*, you got your *toast*, you got your *pancakes*, you got your *waffles*, many kinds of *sides* & *syrups* to pour on or eat separately. You got your *juice*, you got your *milk*, you got your *coffee*. I'm distracted from my breakfast studies when a man at a nearby table turns to me & smiles, winks his third eye at me, then gets up & hurries away.

I turn back to my breakfast, just arrived, but then I'm distracted by something else. I have to stand up & leave my many bags & breakfast because there's a noise in the back. I go into the back room & find not a kitchen but just a sort of weird office.

There's several of them there, & I cough, hoping they don't tell me to get out right away. But they don't. They're studying whatever's going on through the back window, through these tiny binoculars they pass back & forth.

And I, *whatever*, I gotta return to my bags & my breakfast. *But they're gone!* Table's cleared, & my bags are moved over near the door. My long woolen overcoat too, yah it's a little long & a little old, drags along the ground a bit, not seen its best days in a while. *But who has? Who comes into a place like this, ends up distracted in the back room/office?*

I grab all my bags, walk outside. I got a few bites of breakfast in there anyway. Look around, & the buildings all around me are folding into themselves, *they're imploding!* I see walls of dust rising & falling.

Why doesn't my friend like me anymore?

* * * * *

I'm Living in One of Those Little Boxes

Imagine a world in which all of your loved ones have been taken away from you, not by tragic death, nor by the variables of the human heart, but by military order, by one man's bitter, raging anger. He'd grown tired of people's love not all being directed toward him, *all of it*, so he separated not just the poor, not just the vulnerable, but *everybody*. Everyone was separated from everyone else.

I live in one of those little boxes, **cubes** people like to call them, where everyone lives now. Six-foot-by-six-foot-by-six-foot. Each of us is allowed three possessions. I have my beat-up & beloved copy of *Aftermath with Additional Appendices & New Dream Fragments* by Cosmic Early. I have my roll. Everyone has a roll. It's a keyboard, you know, rolls up. You unroll it, click the **on** button, & the whole world is there before your eyes, at least what he allows you to see of it. And of course he follows you, or maybe just his algorithms do, I don't know, but the roll is required.

For a long time, I haven't known what to pick as my third item, & then one night I fell asleep & I actually had a dream. I hadn't had a dream in a long time. Those weren't much around either, anymore. They were suppressed, in the food, the water, because they were not about loving him.

But I had a dream anyway, & in this dream a Creature, a White Bunny, comes to me in my **cube**, with her shining eyes, & her wonderfully empathetic face.

She looks at me for a lingering moment with her meZmering eyes, as though we are familiar to one another, or might have been at one time. I shake my head, just a little, sadly, & she

turns & hops away. Pauses to wait for me, & I follow. We enter these strangely glowing & beautiful White Woods, as open to the world as my **cube** is closed up tight.

We reach a clearing lit with full moonlight. Shaped like a, um, *temple*? Is that the right word? Though I sense she's not one to speak the English much often, the White Bunny hops into my grasp & whispers a word in my ear, as I'm waking up, & that's my third possession, because it allows me to return here & many more places, in dreams, any night I wish. *Ha ha ha.*

* * * * *

A Tree Stump in a Clearing in the White Woods

You are in the White Woods, deep in the White Woods, where yet there is no center, nor far edge. You are deep in the White Woods, & you come to a tree stump in a kind of clearing. Not a deliberate clearing, not a random clearing. Shaped like a temple in the full moonlight. *What does that mean?* I don't know.

And there is a tree stump, & it's hollow, yet not empty. It's filled with water. *Rain water?* It hasn't rained. But the water looks fresh, undusted, clear, down to a very dark & ambiguous bottom.

So you look down into this tree stump, but not closely enough. You get down on your hands & knees, & *really* look down deep into this tree stump.

At first, you don't see a thing, not a thing. But then, as you look closer, you see your reflection, not on the surface, but somewhere way down below. *Down deeper in than it seems possible.* It's not that small down there anymore. A memory comes over you, as you look down deep into this tree stump that shouldn't be that deep.

It's an old memory. *Is it yours?* You find yourself holding it, lightly, upon your fingertips, like a many-colored soap bubble. You look into it, & you see a brown plane, vast, empty at first, & then a face you knew long ago, & a sound, a single musical note, but one dear to your heart-bone. *A radio?*

You shudder & begin to cry into this memory, into this stump, in these White Woods, down deep in them, no center, no far edge. You begin to cry great wailing cries, your tears fall into this water, & it begins to release you. *It begins to release you.* But because you are you, & not someone else, it gives you a gift that is for you, & no one else.

You stand, look around, then find in your hand a black pen & a blank piece of paper.

* * * * *

They Say It Was the Old Football Tight End . . .

They say it was the old football tight end who began pushing back against the violence in

this town. He was a big man, always been. He had a lot of violence in himself too, spent it out for years on the playing field. Catching passes, knocking guys down. He understood it, in other words, he understood its power & lure & trap. And then one day, he came out of his gated home with a toolbox. First thing he did, he took down the gate, piece by piece, screw by screw. His home was no longer gated.

I live over there a-ways, kind of a party house. I rent the room in the far corner (the side of the house that's *always about* to get finished), bout as big as the bed I sleep in. Many people here have grown bored of the violence in Wyrld Godd Town, & so ignore it. I suppose that's another approach. People wander round in costumes, bathrobes, cheerleader outfits, fur, strange white imp masks, but nobody's happy, nobody's delighted. *What kind of party house is this anyway?*

But I look through my very tiny window & see the old football tight end doing what he's doing with the gate. I crawl out of my bed/room, walk by the various bored people in their costumes & masks, come outside & follow the old football tight end.

Come to a field, it's never much been used. But he has called many into it, all sorts of smiling people, they're from afar, but they heard his call. Now they're gathered in great crowds. He's ready to address the violence in him, around him, on the football field, & elsewhere. He waves a big hand, leads us all up a hill, urges us all to *gather round & take a look down the other side of that hill.*

And what's down there is so shiny & strange that we're not even sure what it is, but I can tell you this much so far. *It is a lot better* than furred & cheerleader-outfitted & masked but *boring* roommates. And violence everywhere, for that matter.

* * * * *

I wake . . . from something . . . Is it a dream? I don't know . . .

I wake from something, is it a dream? I don't know. I don't know if it's a dream. In it, Bags End was gone. Creature Common was gone. Everything was gone. All felt neutral & still. Calm, but not good. *Was it a dream?* I don't know. I look around. Oh, here I am, *grrroan, sorry*, in my sickness, on my cot next to Outer Space City. *Grrroan. Sorry.*

I'm in a room that is filled almost to the edges with a miniature city. Now in the olden times, a miniature city would have been a model of something bigger. *Grrroan. Sorry.* No, it's all happening down there, in Outer Space City. *Grrroan. Sorry.* It's something in the air here. I have slept in this room too long.

I watch this city from above, with tiny binoculars that I fit on the very edge of my nose. They're doing something down below that just might get all of us out of Outer Space City. It's not a good place. *It's got a good name*, you might say, *so how could it not be a good place?* It's not. It's got demons. It sinks, closer & closer to its demise, every day. Gravities all around are tugging harder at its failing engines.

And yet I look down into that miniature city & I see inventions. I see brilliant geniuses hurrying back & forth. They are building an Outer Space City that will not eventually crash due to the gravities. It will expel the demons, one way or another. And I think: *how do I get down there? Grrroan. Sorry.* OK, OK, here's why I'm sick. I've been drinking some of that illegal black market Mi-Nee powder. It's supposed to mini-fy you. It hasn't mini-fy'ed me yet, but I drink it a lot, as you can tell. *Grrroan. Sorry.*

Now wake up! You don't live in Outer Space City! Your hope is not drinking awful tasting Mi-Nee powder! Wake up! Wake up! Wake up! Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!

* * * * *

I'm in a White Room

I'm in a white room, but with eyes closed, it is kind of like traveling without moving. As I become better, I am able to navigate without hitting the walls, & travel far. I'm able to scale up & over & onto the ceiling, which becomes the floor or wall. Sometimes I stumble, I crash, & then I lay simply in a white room. *Is it to a prison or a medical room where I'm bound? Is it where my body really is or is it a projection from somewhere else too?*

I get up. Let me try this again. Close my eyes, begin to move forward. Find myself floating in a kind of deep outer space, eons pass by, fear tugs at me, but cannot hold. *I float, & I float, & I float & now, finally, I come to somewhere in the far reaches of outer space.*

There's a handmade sign along the road, welcoming all to the *Motorcyclist Club's Picnic*. Lots of longhairs, leather jackets, leather pants, leather boots, but everyone's friendly. They offer me food, call me *brother*. Why, there's a bluegrass band setting up at the far end of this natural amphitheater. It's where bluegrass *should* be played.

I sit for a moment against a tree. People are smiling at me, they don't know me from Adam, as the saying goes, but doesn't matter to them. One friendly fellow comes over, he's a big guy. Six & a half feet tall or taller, 300 pounds if an ounce. He brings me over a bowl of soup & he says, *Brother, I think you should try a little bit of this rutabega-&-mushroom soup because, let me tell you, I can see by your face that this might just be the cure for what ails ya.*

I thank him, knowing no good words to say, & I begin to sip my rutabega-&-mushroom soup. Find myself, my attention, drifting from the wonderful bluegrass band down there, jumping around, fiddles & banjos, upright basses, *everybody singing, everybody clapping, everybody dancing free.* Find my attention drifting upwards, & there is that ship overhead.

Oh, right. That's where I am right now. That's where I ended up. I can't tell you how. But I'm up there, & there's a white room, & in that white room I've traveled far without much moving. And I came here, to this spot, in this big field, this rutabega-&-mushroom soup, & those friendly longhairs, & that wonderful bluegrass band. How do you think that all works?

I finish my rutabega-&-mushroom soup, & give a big wave goodbye to all the longhairs, so they know I'm appreciative. I even give a wave to the bluegrass band, & they strum up

a little flourish for me to depart by. There's no stage, there never was. I walk away smiling.

Find myself walking through an empty, vast playground. Alongside me, on one side of the path, there's swings, there's a tetherball court. Come to a wall on the other side of the path, 10, 15, 20 feet high, & it's textured. I seem to recall that it's a kind of game you play where you're trying to travel from one end of the wall to the other, & you do it by throwing the ball against the textured wall. But the textured wall will knock the ball back where it does, & two teams are trying to go from one end to the other. I think it's called **Stick-it**.

I come out of the playground eventually, & I sit down on a bench. It's just a sort of empty space & I close my eyes & begin to *hmmm*. Open my eyes, back in the white room, but it's OK. It's OK this time. *I got this navigation*. Navigating with my mind, navigating with my heart, navigating with my feet. Trying to play them all together, high & happy, all attention, like that wonderful bluegrass band back there.

* * * * *

It Was an Old Spaceship, Very Old

It was an old spaceship, very old. It's like the kind of spaceship that you could see once had been great & proud, sleek. I never knew what its name was because someone had spray-painted **Feebletons** across whatever its name had been. I never knew what that meant, never heard anyone talk about **Feebletons**, whatever they are. I did find a playing card once, with a picture of a funny little spaceship.

The ship was decayed, but it kept getting bigger. It's like other spaceships were welded on to it so more people could travel along. More goods. A whole kind of weird little civilization rose up of people who'd always lived on this ship, **Feebletons**.

I lived in the garden maze. I was pretty much the only one who knew how to get around it, how to get in, & deeper in, & then back, if I chose to. Somewhere in the garden maze, I'm not gonna give you coordinates, so don't ask, there's a game going on at night. Torches light up the open area of the maze where it occurs.

We called it **Stick**. It's sort of like that baseball game they used to play, but not really. Too many other kinds of rules have been welded on to the game. Just to give you an example: there's a bell on the bat, & the bell doesn't make the bat any easier to wield. In fact, it makes it much harder, but that seems to be part of **Stick**.

And so I lived in the garden maze for a long time. Occasionally I get my news of more spaceships being welded on to **Feebletons** as it traveled along, but I'd now found somewhere far more interesting than any of that.

I'd come across a strange clearing inside the garden maze, & within that strange clearing there was a vast desert. I explored it bit by bit, but I worried that if I went too far into it, I'd never find my way back, & *then what?*

I'll tell you *then what*. I was tired of the garden maze, the endless games of **Stick**. I decided I wasn't coming back. I said goodbye to the garden maze, gave a quiet wave to the folks playing **Stick**. Couple of bells rang in my direction. Then I walked into & across that hard desert floor.

Walked & walked & walked, *walked & walked & walked*. Then, in the distance, I saw buildings, great tall buildings. I believed that maybe I was finally coming somewhere, I was finally coming to a start, all the rest behind me. *That wasn't a start, that wasn't living*. Ahead of me, those buildings in the distance, that's where I was going to begin.

The neon pink sign I come to reads:

Welcome to Wyrld Godd Town.

* * * * *

It Was One of Those Nights

It was one of those nights that everyone has somewhere along the way. Comin' home to my ZombieTown hovel with a plastic sack of edibles from the local grocery store. Not veggies, nothin' good in there, just chocolate & cheese puffs & ice cream & soda pop. Maybe some potato salad pretends to be dinner, maybe some cold chicken nuggets from that deli counter. Oh, and of course, a big ol' box of *ChocoSmax (Them's the Fax!)*.

And the black & white Dü-Mónt television, with the Antennar 2000 on top, is cooperatin' reasonably well tonight. Shows last most of their length before snowin' out. Like that funny one about the weirdass bank robbers in that strange town. *Lady robber screams like a banshee!*

It wasn't supposed to be cold tonight but, lookin' out the full window of this warm hovel, I see the snow is fallin', fallin' heavy. *Here it comes & comes & comes*. That's OK. The kinda-sorta, after a fashion, electrical heater is on, plus there's my lovely crimson & electric blue blankets. Layin' out on the old mattress, watchin' the black & white Dü-Mónt television, driftin' in & out of snack food comar. Like the old sayin' goes, *exxxstasis*.

There's a movie on now about *this Island that I arrive to, having been sent here after a long, circuitous trek, a trek round the world? I'd become involved, you see, with a strange worldwide conspiracy of people livin' in low-budget motels, & workin' at security guard desks & coffee shops & bookstores*.

I met one, & then the next, & then they sent me along. I slept on many floors in my travels, I rode on many no-roof buses, spent a lot of time walking along from one place to another, often with just a hand-drawn map to get me from here to there. But nobody would tell me what the purpose of the conspiracy was.

*Sometimes I would crawl off to the side of the road, under a tree in the shade, & I'd have that same dream again, an old TV commercial with the blonde girl from that weirdass TV show called **Trip Town**, over & over again, never changed.*

One time I was lucky enough to stay in a hotel room, but that didn't work out too well. Called Noah Hotel. Run by hookers & the homeless, someone told me. **They call it the No-Tell!** he guffawed.

But the events in that hotel room grew more remote & virtual over the course of the night. I could not get **Trip Town** off the black-&-white Dü-Mónt. The blonde girl kept **screaming** like a banshee! Even unplugging the TV didn't help.

I look up suddenly, *oh*, back on my mattress. It's just the black & white Dü-Mónt television, with the Antennar 2000 on top. Familiar kinda-sorta heater & lovely crimson & electric blue blankets near me. Half-et bowl of *ChocoSmax* (*Them's the Fax!*). Familiar hovel. That's all, nothing more. *The fax.*

But I close my eyes again, wondering still.

*Am I still sleeping in this ditch, dreaming of **Trip Town**?*

Am I still in this strange motel room, with fellow participants in this worldwide conspiracy?

Or am I on this beautiful Island, watching the sunset over that beautiful Wide Wide Sea?

There are many pathways to Dreamland, many Dreamlands, they say, all mystical & spooky.

* * * * *

"Our life is no dream; but it ought to become one, and perhaps will."

— **Novalis**

"Wars in the future will be fought in the mind by drugs, dreams, televisions, internet, sex, persuasion,

the manipulation of loyalties, needs, desires, to the point where to obey is to receive pleasure & endorsement, & to disobey not punishment but simply nothing. Physical war, impoverishment, suffering, disease, prejudice have all been eradicated at the cost of freedom & self created identity.

This epoch is not sustainable because the world is too badly damaged."

— **Nazi Jailbait Bitch**

Our Two-Roomed Apartment

We have two long rooms in our apartment. When you come through the front door, you can go straight or left. Go straight, & you'll find kitchen & a living room area, then a bathroom, & way back there a bedroom area, where the Creatures comfortably nap. We like to have visitors in this long room, literary gatherings & what-not.

But if you go left upon entering, through a sometimes-stuck door, you'll come to some other kind of room. It keeps going on & on & on. We like to call it **Imaginal Space**.

For my beloved & me, the left room is lined with endless bookcases &, living peaceably among these, many kinds of **lilies**. There's the **starfish lily**, a **high high high high high high-as-the-sun lily**, the **lowdown-in-the-groove lily**, & *many* others. The bookcases

were here when we moved in, but then one day, while putting in lightbulbs, my beloved wished for lilies too while among the bookcases, & they came, flowing through the endless room, & out the back where there is a cement bridge, going on & on. But our left room is not yours, if you choose to visit it.

We like to say, *if you choose the left room, you've opened a door bigger than you know, for you can come in here & invent your own room. **Your own kind of room, or rooms.** Your own flowerbeds, whatever lily you choose, or any other kind of fleur. And yes, there are Creatures here too, in case you get uncertain. They will nap in your lap or **hmmmm** near you for comforts. But you'll find your way, & you'll notice that, as you begin to groove with this room, it begins to resemble something dearly familiar to you. Familiar by your dreams, familiar in your heart, familiar as you sniff, familiar to your listens, your looks around. And there you are. **Your own kind of room, or rooms.** Come share the wonders of **Imaginal Space!***

* * * * *

Down Deep in Imaginal Space

Now you may not have heard so much of **Imaginal Space** before, but let me tell you a thing or two about it. This is a story that takes place somewhere down deep in **Imaginal Space**.

Down deep where dreaming occurs, where deep communing with the world occurs, where the ferment that gives life its sense of movement occurs, there is **Imaginal Space**. Think of it as the dust & clay by which all raises & changes, becomes, & becomes again, & becomes different.

Somewhere in **Imaginal Space**, you will find yourself walking, you will find yourself entering what seems like a glowing hallway. You will walk down the glowing hallway, not knowing what it is or what you might come to. And you will hear a lady's voice in the distance, & you will approach slower, not knowing if she is friend or otherwise, not knowing if you yourself might spook & scare *her*.

And so you approach slowly, perhaps crouched, just to listen, for she is speaking on & on. You go a little closer, & go a little closer, & you will see that she is seated in some kind of old fashioned couch, called a *divan*. There is a little table next to her & on it is a—*could it be?*—a magic lantern machine?

She's projecting pictures on the wall of the glowing hallway near her. One of them shows a kind of a strange rusty metal boat, & she is telling about its occupants. She says their names are Antique Andy, who is a rooster, & Ollie, who is a little froggy. They are traveling on the Wide Wide Sea, even sometimes above it. Their **tugboat**, I guess you'd call it, sometimes floats, sometimes hovers, sometimes goes right up in the air. You listen.

*They are going to visit their friend Marty, a policeman, who is taking his vacation on an **Island** far away, & has invited them to come & visit. That's where they're going & I invite you, one & all, to climb aboard that ship, & greet those friendly travelers. Take your place on that ship as it floats & hovers & sails along the Wide Wide Sea to that Island, where Marty the retired*

policeman is taking his vacation, well earned!

* * * * *

You Will Meet a Light Being

Sometimes down deep in the Dreaming, you will meet a Light Being. And wherever you're bound in the Dreaming, this is more important to learn. If you're new to this down deep in the Dreaming, you need to learn this. If you've been this down deep in the Dreaming many times before, you need to be reminded. The Light Beings in the Dreaming must be remembered, must be tended, must be . . . *just stop.*

Look. *There's a Light Being.* Don't approach too quickly. Light Beings are not all that dissimilar to Creatures. They may not spook quite as easily, but take no chances. And it's OK, because this isn't where what you were doing before in the Dreaming stops. This is where what you were doing before takes a *very interesting* turn. OK?

You approach slowly. You greet friendly. You *hmmmmmm* low. The Light Being may reply directly or may not, not from rudeness, not ignoring you, nothing like that. Light Beings exist in this universe in a different way, even from those of us who are able to travel down deep in the Dreaming, which is not many against the bigger number.

But you approach, you greet, you *hmmmmmm*, & you wait. The Light Being *will* respond. It may be something in the room that you're in. Let's say you're in the bedroom you slept in every night for years when you were young, & you're there again, trying to recover something, or learn something, or leave something. Twist an old knot new, better.

So look around. Something will be *off*. Something might be *floating*, something might be the *wrong color*, *the sky outside might be missing*, but the Light Being will let you know. A trace of this is for you to take with you. The Light Being's tending to you. And so then you need to focus on this trace & find a way to tend the Light Being in return.

Oh, I'm not giving you the best instructions here. There are no good instructions to give for every situation. It's just that when you're down deep in the Dreaming, & that Light Being appears to you, this is a *gift* to you, to enjoy, & *to return*. Part of how to keep the lanes to Dreamland open. *But you probably already knew that!*

* * * * *

Did You Ever Have One of Those Mornings Where You Woke Up Somewhere Else?

Now I'm asking you, honestly, *did you ever have one of those mornings where you woke up somewhere else?* Now I don't just mean that you didn't end up back at your home. I mean, *somewhere else?* Maybe I also mean *somewhen else too.* Maybe even *somehow else.*

That night seemed to have begun, as I recall it, *somehow else from here*, with me in a strange hotel room. It was crowded. Not unfriendly, but not sure how I got there. *Was it a meeting? Was it a party? Was it the planning for a riot?* I wasn't sure, but I had to make a phone call

to someone, & I had the seven numbers written down on a piece of paper, & on the back of the paper I had the area code number, to be safe. I don't know what that means. It was *somehow else from here*, you understand.

So I was dialing the number, using the hotel room phone, & I swear that, no matter what I did, every time I dialed, a man with a soft voice picked up & said, **Noah Hotel, where else do you have to go tonight?** I got pretty used to him saying that because I could not get that phone to call anywhere or anyone else. I even tried calling other rooms, & he kept picking up. *Did he grow impatient?* I'm not sure, honestly, I couldn't tell. His voice never really showed much.

I leaned back in my bed, eyes shut, listening to the crowd's planning or conspiring, whatever it might have been. Maybe it was a suicide pact I forgot I'd participated in, & here it was, coming off. But when I finally nodded & rose up from that bed, my eyes seemingly only closed a few seconds, I found myself *in this bed, in this Attic.*

You know about the Attic. It's one of those places you end up, & then you're not there for a while, & then you end up there again. *Cause & effect?* I don't think so. *Effect & cause?* Possibly. So here I am now, because I'm here, & there's no phones in this Attic. It's probably better off that way. I really don't wanna talk to that guy anyway.

* * * * *

I'm With the Senator, in a Strange City

I'm with the Senator, campaigning in a strange city. Elliptical City? Well, I can't say at this moment. But the Senator & I are traveling together, & she brings me to a house, at least it seems like a house. It's more like a barn, a barnhouse, or maybe more a housebarn. Very, very tall ceilings.

As we enter through the door of the housebarn, I don't notice it at first, but then, it's like, *I feel young again.* Oh, not just an emotional state. No, I look & touch about myself & *this is me*, long ago, same & different. *Weird.* She looks younger too, though somehow seems less amazed than I am!

The Senator & I walk through the many strange rooms of this housebarn, filled with furniture, filled with dusty books. Even one room that's just filled with colorful soap bubbles of different shapes & forms &, if you pop them, they make funny musics. *Like the boy in that old story.*

The Senator likes to pause in each room, gaze about her, land her gaze on something, linger there. She's a thoughtful Senator, quiet, especially since she's usually speaking, but something about this housebarn stills her voice completely.

We find a door that leads down some dark stairs, dank, dim, into the basement filled with bikes. Lots & lots of bikes. I don't think I've ever seen so many bikes, many colors, leaned against the walls, in long rows. Some of them don't seem to be bikes built for human beings. Almost like they're bikes built for other kinds of beings?

Walk on, & there's a mesh window. Passing it, I look out, & there's a parking lot. I don't remember that parking lot, but it's out there now. Come to a dirt floor which, walking on as we do, becomes a hill, a tall hill, then stairs again. These are very solid dark wooden stairs, stairs that'll *hold ya*, stairs that'll *hold a hundred of ya*.

We climb & climb & climb, & I know where we've come to, & I speak. *Senator, I know this place. This is the Attic.* She looks at me, her eyes twinkling behind her spectacles. She nods, gives me a gesture as though I should lead now, & I do.

The Attic goes on forever, it seems, many rooms, then for a while a long hallway, doors along each of its side. Occasionally we come to a choice of doors before us. *Best always to choose the green & gold doorknob or door or hinges. Best to stick that way*, I advise the Senator. She nods, getting the lay of the land, of the Attic.

The Attic rises now, trends up, curves away. We're outside along a long road, lots of weird stores along this long road. Lots of cars speeding by, not all of them with four wheels, not all of them have wheels, & we come to a lady, ragged & crazy-eyed & she says, *Where's the bar? Where's the bar? Please mistab, tell me, where's the bar?* I look at her, I look at the Senator, see she's puzzled. I look on down the road a-ways, & see a cluster of stores where there *could* be a bar. I point her in that direction. She smiles at us, & hurries off there.

I look at the Senator, her eyes are twinkling like before, & I say to her, *I think this Attic can bring us everywhere.*

* * * * *

Zounds! I Say

Zounds! I say as I look into the mirror & see the shrunken tooth in the middle of my head. *Zounds!* I say. And then I leave the bathroom, it's not hard, it's a very small bathroom. Not the kind you can cozy up in with your colored bubble musics & your Duckees, no sir-ee.

My hovel in ZombieTown is small but it does have walls & a ceiling & floor, for which I'm grateful. Wyrd Godd Town was missing some of those for me. I turn on my Dü-Mónt black & white television, with the Antennar 2000 on top, & settle back in my familiar way among the wires poking out of the old mattress. There's always a trick to it that I find. Usually a big bowl of *ChocoSmax (Them's the Fax!)* in front of me. But I'm out of them right now.

My Dü-Mónt black & white television comes on eventually, & I watch my favorite new show. Now, I have not turned my loyalties away from *TripTown* but, sometimes, within *TripTown* there is another show. *TripTown's* show, as it were, what *TripTown* watches from time to time.

Set in the future, it's called **Battle Black Tech**. It's not just a show, it's a series of shows & a series of related films. I'm saving up my *ChocoSmax (Them's the Fax!)* coupons to see the next film, called **Outer Space City, 100,000 A.D.** Hopefully when it comes to The Nada Theatre.

Battle Black Tech stars famous actors, playing themselves, in the far future. Impossible because they are long since dead in the far future, but in this show it happens. And there are thousands of outer space battles going on. It almost seems sometimes as if that's all there is, that's the whole story. Thousands of battles throughout outer space.

But we learn, or *TripTown* tells us anyway, how reliable a source I don't know, that these battles are fake. Says the enemy is something else entirely, & the shows & the movies are not fiction but real. Now what is *TripTown* trying to say? Is *TripTown* showing us the future of the world?

I don't know. I fall into a nap, a disturbed nap, find myself traveling again with the *Hillside Hmmmers*. Usually, after I've been watching hours of **Battle Black Tech**, they come to calm, to reassure, to guide me, & we travel together.

This time around we come to the end of a great canyon, & circle our vehicles among one another, & we all begin to *hmmmm*, & the great canyon catches our music & begins to *hmmmm*, & amplifies & varies & multiplies our now shared music, till it's everywhere, & always, & maybe it's like it is saying to us: *this could also be the future of the world, my friends. Do not despair.*

* * * * *

Formed from the Dust & Clay Itself

Formed from the dust & clay itself: *Is that how you build up a world? Is that how you do it?* That's what I'm wondering as I wake up on the ground, my friends shaking me. *I have to get to that facility. It's doing the kind of experimental work I need to know about.* Make our way there, it's at the end of a long, unpaved road, scraggly trees in the distance. Not much to see.

But *o! terror!* it's being held up. We see the people inside with their hands up & others with guns. We work our way around to the back of the building, trying to get in, trying to help. It's a big building. I'm not sure how we get in, but it isn't unlocked. We become separated from one another, quietly trying to find our way to the front.

I end up in the room of a very old sick-looking man, under a sheet. He's watching a little Dü-Mónt black & white television, with an Antennar 2000 on top. A blonde girl on the television is saying at this moment: *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.*

I look back at the old man & I see him undoing to clay, undoing to dust, until all that remains of him is a smile, as peaceful as any I've ever seen.

* * * * *

I Walk into the Several-Story-High Diving Complex

I walk into the several-story-high diving complex. I climb the stairs from floor to floor until I reach the top floor. I walk to the very edge, to the diving spot. It has a funny shape to its design. Like a really weird awful green-colored **cube**?

I stare down into the design & I think, *am I going to do this, finally?* After all the times I've come into this diving complex, climbed up those stairs, walked across that empty floor to this spot, & looked down the several stories below to the water. I was even late today. I missed my bus, it flew right past me, careened at the intersection wildly. I knew it was going to drive down that *cul de sac*, & come back, & so I hurried to the stop after it comes out. *I think I'm diving this time, finally. I think I'm diving.*

The night before, we'd been up late, my beloved & I. She was dressed up very purty. There was a large TV monitor at the party we went to & it was showing that band of dreams. They were all dancing on stage as much as they were playing their instruments. Other times it's like the TV monitor was showing another party going on, at some kind of unfinished house, like in the back yard, with a long plank table, set on logs. There was an old man, & a lot of smiling people.

Then I went looking for the bathroom for just a moment, *hurry*, but the men's room was closed. Everyone was crowded into the women's room & it's like the party had moved into the bathroom. People were laughing & talking, I swear there was music there too. I think it might have been *Mellow Moods & Moments with The Pink Floyd*? Some people were naked but nothing else was going on. It was just a very merry situation.

Am I diving? Am I finally diving? Am I brave enough to do this? Am I diving?

* * * * *

A Troubled Child

I was what you might call a troubled child. I always found ways to get in to trouble in the small town I lived in, called Wyrdd Godd Town, you know it? I rarely got caught though. It was just a reputation that lingered round me until, well, I had this dream that I couldn't remember one morning, & it followed me around all day, into junior high school, where I learned nothing worth knowing. So I left junior high school that day & I went down to the local store, Chief Seattle's Friendly Market.

It was wintertime, & there was snow everywhere, & the snow made a lot more sense than people ever had, & so what happened was I began to make snowballs. Made 'em hard, tight, & round, & I stuck 'em in the deep pockets of my long woolen overcoat. It's a little long, & a little old, drags along the ground a bit. But I like it a lot.

What happened next was that I went in to that store, & I waited for the perfect moment, *& then I began to fling my snowballs everywhere! I threw them in the aisles filled with tin cans of soup! I threw them in the aisles filled with sodas & beers! I threw them in the aisles filled with*

paper goods! I threw them at the many cash registers! I threw them at the ceiling & at the floor! I seemed to have more & more snowballs no matter how many I threw!

And that was a turning point for me because, you see, I was grabbed from behind & drug by unseen hands to the back of the store. I was drug into some kind of storeroom, & down a long flight of stairs, & suddenly I was in this strange, glowing place where it was hard to see very well but there was a steady *hmmm*. I was drug down a long hallway, & I could feel something about me changing. I was no longer the scrawny little thing causing trouble, & getting away with it mostly. I was *taller*. I was more *adult*. *Really weird*.

I was somehow brought to a party, in what looked like a great big housebarn. There were microphone stands everywhere, old Dü-Mónt televisions all over the place, with Antennar 5000s on top. Some of them were showing the strange activities of this party, others of them seemed to be showing parties that were happening *somewhere else*? One had some kind of band of dreams playing at it. Another was at a big home-made table in someone's back yard, but the house was half-built? An old man & a lot of smiling people there though.

At first noone talked to me & I thought, *maybe I'm in a dream, maybe I got knocked out by one of my own snowballs. Who knows?* But no, I never went back from where I come.

That night, I slept among a lot of people & other kinds of beings on mattresses with pillows & blankets that were put out all over the housebarn, & in the morning noone made me go back. In fact, when I was talked to, finally, I was told in a very dark room, in a low sincere voice: *You are now part of a worldwide conspiracy investigating why humans are so unhappy & restless. You are going to help because you have unhappiness & restlessness clouding your heart too.*

The low kindly voice continued: *It is not in your nature to be so unhappy & so restless like that. Something has gone wrong, with you & everyone else, & you must help us to investigate.* So I agreed, & I have, & I am.

* * * * *

More Myth Than a Story

This was a time, long ago, more a myth than a story or a remembrance. But back then, whenever that was, if ever that was, it's claimed that people-folks fancied themselves the leaders of Elliptical City. No, I kid you not, that's how the story goes. They strutted round like they were in charge of this strange, wild place. And sometimes they had a few good ideas. The rest of us noticed, we kind of felt like a rest-of-us back then, but a lot of times, *nah*, they were selfish, they were greedy, they were wasteful, they were disregarding.

Anyway, what happened this one time was that a group of them, Senators & others, were vying to be the chief leader. I know, *what can I say*, it all sounds very strange to me too, but they were, & they spent an entire afternoon in front of their fellow people-folks, each arguing about how he or she would be the best leader. They each had bright ideas. The rest of us listened, napped, did other things.

But see, as you know, Elliptical City is unruly, changes frequently, & that's OK, it's part of things there. That afternoon, near dusk, a great storm came to the strange stone building they'd gathered in, these leaders & their listeners. A great kind of disruption came, rains, winds. It's as though too many of them gathered together, too many of them boasting & talking & all those words. And this force gathered kind of like a giant fist & pounded their stone building. Pound! *Pound!* **POUND!** till it broke through. The roof caved in, the walls collapsed!

Now one version of this story says that those gathered inside ran every which way, trying to save just themselves, & some of them did, & some of them didn't.

But the story I prefer, & I know it's not the popular one, is the one in which those leaders, all the Senators & others who'd stood above their fellow people-folks, preening & talking in words endlessly, they didn't go anywhere. They stayed right where they were, & spent all that night, & many days thereafter, tending to those who were trapped, those who were scared, those who were injured. Tended to them all, every last one, they worked together. The hours before the great pounding from the sky was forgotten. *This is what mattered more, tending your fellows.*

And I'd like to think, though this is only my own radical thought on the matter, that something changed for people-folks from that afternoon on. I don't think they had leaders thereafter the way they used to. I think that something down deep changed, & they saw how gay & wondrous the world really is, & really could be, even for them.

* * * * *

There Was . . . James McGunn

This is how it was, some years ago. I was sitting in the Ancienne Coffeehouse, in the Village, & there was James McGunn. *The James McGunn.* The wonderful singer, songwriter, legend &, well, I mean, I was just looking at him from my shadow. No job, no prospects, I was just sitting there in that place because it was a good place to hide in such situations. They wouldn't judge you, they wouldn't kick you out, it was OK for anyone to be there.

But I was no James McGunn. I wasn't even someone to *spea*k to James McGunn. That's how I felt, even though this wasn't true. He wasn't the kind of man who turned anyone away. *Hadn't I listened to his album, **Scou'tland**, a bajillion times? Wasn't it the music & the words of a man who is generous & open-hearted to all, even as his own demons lay deep within in him, restless?*

He was old then but he looked still handsome & fine. Not pretty, not gorgeous, but *hand-some & fine*. I saw he had his guitar next to with him, & a pile of papers, a mis-sorted pile. He was sitting in just the kind of chair where someone might lift up his guitar & start to strum. *And that . . . is what . . . he did!*

Noone paid much attention to him though. I didn't know if all these others even knew who he was. It was dark in there, shadowy, smoky. I just knew, *I just knew.* That's his *own*

music he was playing & his *own* voice he's singing to it with.

People began to notice, casually I guess. It's not the kind of place where you gather round & gawk, but they did notice, threw him smiles & twinkles from the sides of their faces. Grew a little bit quieter in their conversation.

He sang a song I loved about how loss can be gain. But I find myself now not remembering all the words he sang. I didn't know how this was possible. He just kept singing over & over again: *loss can be gain, loss can be gain, loss can be gain, pleasure from pain, pleasure from pain, pleasure from pain.* That's all I remember, but I *know* there's more.

Eventually, a big man, older too, but you wouldn't want to mess with him, came around, sat with James McGunn for a while, listened, smiled more openly than the rest. James finally finished his last song, & put away his guitar. The big man helped him up, & they headed away, in the early morning light. *But what a gift.*

What a gift! Thank you, James McGunn, thank you, Universe. *Loss can be gain.*

* * * * *

It's Tuesday, & I'm Bustling About the World

Well, it's Tuesday, & I'm bustling about the world. Last night was another long one, a wild ride of documenting. Crazy than it usually is. All that excitement about the black market discovery of an old batch of **Mulronie the Space Pirate Peanut Butter Planetoid Cookies™**. I documented the excitement for all those who were locked down in their **cubes** before they could get one.

I wander out, from my **cube**, into the grimy living complex the world has become. Walk awhile, *oh great, someone blew up the grocery store. Really?* I walk on past, there's nothing I can do. All I'm good at is documenting.

Like everyone else, I find I can't stay awake for very long in the old-fashioned way, fully, thoroughly awake. The bitter raging angry man now used, or tried to use, our own sleeping & dreaming to control us. *He was trying to close the lanes to Dreamland.* Poisoning the food & water hadn't worked, & this was working worse. At least for me. Because of my White Bunny friend's gift.

It was a long, wild night of documenting, & so I decide to indulge myself. I hustle down to my old school. It's still standing there in that old unused complex. The long, curving hallway near the cafeteria, black-&-white diamond flooring. That unused shadowy staircase down to the auditorium.

I remember all the times I've sat alone here, on these steps, since the bitter raging man. Less & less waking, & more & more dreaming for real, singing that old black market fighting anthem to the long empty hallway: *What if Dream-Mind is Supra-Consciousness?*

* * * * *

I Was Working at a Thrift Store, Long Ago

You might like this story, maybe. I was working at a thrift store long ago. That's where they sell the wonderful valuable things that people have moved on from, & now it's someone else's turn. Dusty old books. Pretty handled bags even. So I was working there, & there was this weird guy who would keep this rack of shirts in a corner of the store. I'm not sure if he really was an employee, or just someone who came around, it was hard to tell in those days, but he was always telling people: *see that rack of shirts in the corner? I would take any of those shirts as a Christmas present. You keep that in mind, you can choose among any of them.*

So it was a good job in its own way, & I would say that I was happy there, relatively speaking. Paid enough for my hovel's rent round the corner. Then one day I noticed in the corner, not the shirt rack corner, but the other corner, there was this black-&-white Dū-Mónt television, with the Antennar 3000 on top, bigger than mine at home. It would sit there, quiet as secrets for a long stretch, but sometimes just come on of its own volition. Choose its own channels to show, like this cruel game show that was on a lot.

I'd seen it before. They were cruel to people, they were mean with words & deeds. They had the kind of games where you lost things at the end, nobody ever won, & yet it was very popular. It seemed like a lot of people liked the fact that people would come on this TV game show & lose every time.

I remembered that, for a while, it became a happy game show. People would come on & they wouldn't just win things, they would become happy. *Happy!* It wasn't a car or a stove or whatever. No, they would leave happy. *Going to the Festival maybe? Learning the way?*

But this show wasn't as popular. I'm not sure really why, but I tend to think that maybe there was a little bit of jealousy in the viewership because there was no clear way to get on this show to get your bit of the happiness, as it were. Ratings dived, according to what I read, in the TV industry newspaper, *The Eighth*, which of course I followed closely because they came in sometimes on the donations truck. People would get rid of them & I would cop them, a few weeks later than up-to-date, but still.

So what finally happened is that the cruel game show came back on, & it was more popular than ever, because it was crueler than ever. Now I'm not sure why the black and white Dū-Mónt television, with the Antennar 3000 on top, chose to show this show a lot, but it seemed like the guy I told you about, with the shirt rack in the corner, employee, maybe not employee? Anyway, he was fascinated by this show &, when it was on, he would veer away from the shirt rack, & away from giving everyone he could hints about what a good Christmas present these shirts would mark. He'd just watch & watch, & laugh, & laugh, & laugh, & *laugh & laugh & laugh & laugh.*

* * * * *

If You're Going to Travel Along in the White Woods at High Speeds

Well now, if you're going to travel along through the White Woods at high speeds, or at least interesting ones, you may as well be, if you're lucky, in the comfy confines of my dear

friend Sydnee Grand Prix SE. *A fine automobile.* She's swifts along through these White Woods, &—

Now wait a minute here. I know a thing or two about these magical White Woods myself, & there are few, if any, paths or roads through these White Woods. While I acknowledge that your dear friend Sydnee Grand Prix SE is a fine automobile, how is she able to travel without roads or paths, or very few of them?

Meep! Meep! she says calmly. **Zoom! Zoom!** she explains further.

Ah, you say, tis the science & physic of the White Woods.

Yes, indeed, I reply, that *is* what it is all about. *The science & physic of the White Woods.* That one time, I was sitting in her back seat, amongst many Creature friends, & we were trading electronic files amongst ourselves, as though they were baseball playing cards. Yes, indeed, I'd finally become an honorary electro-fellow Creature. I don't know if I had a nifty name like some. Eurydice. Penelope. Mariposa. Lucille. So many. I might have just been called **the one that works most of the time & serves Creatures.**

Meep! Meep! Sydnee Grand Prix SE cries merrily. **Zoom! Zoom!** she adds philosophically.

* * * * *

Down There

Down there, *grrroan, sorry*, it's hard to tell the rest. Down there is as far as I've gotten for years. *Grrrroan, sorry.* I try to tell & *grrrroan, sorry*, this happens. Down that hill, that place down there that we're all looking at, led by the old football tight end, who's taken us away from the violence & the stupidity & the costumery of that other city, are the very outskirts of what I learned many years later is sometimes referred to as *Elliptical City*.

First building we come to in Elliptical City, as we slowly make our way down there, is a strange seedy hotel. It feels like it's a mile high, but what remains above ground is about a single floor.

There's a girl there, seems nice enough. She has a nifty little camera, & she's shooting some pictures of the hotel as our crowd approaches. She notices us for a moment, & then continues her work. Then pauses for a moment, looks at me, pretty turquoise eyes freeze me. We exchange a glance that lingers without words, & then she hands me a little envelope, In it are pictures I guess she took. The envelope is marked *Shaw, Massachusetts.*

The pictures depict the interior of an old church, an ancient church really. It doesn't even look like it's a building, really, it's more like a clearing in the White Woods, shaped like a temple, & there's moonlight coming down to help fill in the outlines. Everyone in this temple, all these different people, are all separate from one another, they're all sitting far apart from each other. I can almost feel their *hmming* together.

I look at her again. She smiles pretty turquoise eyes at me & says strangely, *is this what's it like in the White Room?*

* * * * *

I Had to Retreat to My Friend's Artiste Studio

I had to retreat to my friend's artiste studio in Gay E.C. My piglet friend is an ancient, wise, & merry Creature. She welcomed me in, with a friendly sweep of her paw, indicating that I could stay as long as I wanted, & enjoy whichever of the many rooms of her artiste studio I chose. She suspected, with a tricky smile on her blue-&-pink face, that I would choose the *round room*.

It is, indeed, a round room that you enter through the green door with the golden door-knob. You take your seat to the left of the door, in the row of folding chairs, & it's best you keep your seat in this round room. For soon you will be entirely immersed, unable to distinguish *here* from *there*, *you* from *me*, *this* from *that*. You are swathed in *beautiful smells*, filled with *lovely tastes*, within the sweetest *hmmm* you could imagine. Swept amongst a bajillion *colors* or more, perhaps just six or seven, it's hard to say. *Everything* is close, close, *close!* *Thoughts*, deep. You can imagine *forward* into the round room, to shape what you see & feel & experience, or you can lean *back* in your chair & let it *roll* through you, let it *decide* how you should be, *what* you shall experience here.

I'd been spending many days chasing strangers with my hands open & my eyes wide. These strangers eluded me, these strangers were indifferent to me.

I came here to this round room to be reminded that *there are no strangers, & there is no difference. All is green, all flows, all sings, all is near. All is unitive.*

The White Woods about this artiste studio so ancient, & yet friendly, gentle, funny. *With me, now, in this round room.* Showing me what it's like to be *hugged* by a tree, *embraced* by music, *tasted* as though you are delicious, *sniffed* as though you are a bloom. I come to the round room for a timeless time.

When I left, I realized again we are each & all medicine to each other. My old friend smiled at me. Yes, of course!

* * * * *

Maybe Still in the White Room

Maybe still in the white room, maybe still near the empty playground, I don't know. Just don't know. I leave the bench & now just sit in a big green field. I think about the interface of memory, dream, wish.

And I think, *that's Art. Memory, dream, wish. Their interface.*

What else is there, really? I sit in the big green field for a long time, & then I'm drawn by

a noise. I don't know what noise it is, but I leave the big green field, & I walk back into the White Woods.

For a long time I don't come to anything, & then suddenly I'm in a garden maze. And there are Creatures moving around. I *think* there are Creatures moving around, they seem to keep hidden, half-seen as they move around. So I just look around vaguely & I say, *Art is the interface of memory, dream, & wish.* Then I wait, listen closely.

I hear a few casual sniffs, perhaps even a curious sniff or two. But I will leave these fine Creatures to their garden maze. I will walk through it until I've come to the other end, or until I end up deeper in it still, like a certain Gate I've heard tell of.

I will walk on through the aisles of the garden maze till I come to the center, & there, on a small purple stool, is an antique typewriter. And there's a sheet in the typewriter, & a typed few words. These words say: **Art is the interface of love & a world.**

So I ask you now, which one is right?

* * * * *

Could I translate the experience of my travels there, into common life? This was the question.
Or must I live it all over again, and learn it all over again, in the other forms that belong to the world of men,
whose experience yet runs parallel to that of Fairy Land? These questions I cannot answer yet. But I fear.

—George MacDonald, **Phantastes**, 1858.



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Joe Ciccone

Contagion

Moving like a boat whistle in the fog,
to all corners and quick,

from the ragged men along the railroad line,
to those that have sat for years

on the top bough, and to the bald children,
and the ignorant, those with flowers in their ears,

and the aging, some who can still drive themselves
to the iron gates,

who look over their shoulders one last time,
trying to remember what it was like to be young.

Suddenly we find ourselves saying goodbye,
unable to hug, unable to kiss,

still walking, still taking our own breaths.
The lights are going up in the fairground.

Some arrive with their puppies and their tumors.
Some expect to see Jesus, or John Frum,

but the tents are filled only with strawmen,
saying "What will be will be."

Some will slide by, never knowing what it means
to have to do what you have to do.

The shapes in some beds are still,
while others are moving,

and although your heart still keeps my blood pumping,
this may be our Galilee.

Please, don't let them put me in the room
with all the dead,

because when you're dying
you should feel like you're the only one.



Nathan D. Horowitz

Alone in Cabaña Supernatura
[Travel Journal]

Lago Agrio, Sour Lake, is named after the town in Texas where Texaco was born. Lago is an oil town, a weird blend of rainforest and industry, redolent of burning plastic, rotting vegetables, fresh fruit, diesel, fried potatoes, and fish soup with a squeeze of lime. Sometimes macaws or parakeets fly overhead. The markets are full of cheap goods from China.

Let's talk about the rainbow serpent, the spirit of the ayahuasca vine. People see it in visions a lot. That's one of the first things I read about ayahuasca as a teenager. Later, the second time I drank with Joaquín, it appeared to me, twenty meters long, made of glowing multicolored vines, floating over the trees. You can see paintings of the rainbow serpent in Pablo Amaringo's *Ayahuasca Visions*. You can read about it in Jeremy Narby's *The Cosmic Serpent*. It was there in the hut where he first drank the brew. When he had to go outside to puke, he matter-of-factly excused himself for stepping over it.

Recently, at Cocaya, Rufino told us the weird story of how it started out as a hair on a shaman's head and was transformed by magic into a being that could kill the jaguar goddess. Did the luminous apparition I saw start out as a hair? It shows up in lots of people's minds. Are those images connected? Are they projected from a central source? *Is* there a rainbow serpent? Or is *is* too strong a word? My Western brain gnaws at these questions.

Because my sculptor buddy Elias accidentally left his inks in Quito, I'm not getting a tattoo now. He doesn't know how to draw a nine-pointed star anyway. So I'm waiting for an *encebollado* at Los Tucanos restaurant. Encebollado is a soup of tuna, yuca, tomatoes, onions, cilantro, chili pepper, fried plantain chips, and lime juice. I am in love with *encebollado*. *Encebollado*, you are as good as a tattoo, you are as good as figuring out the mystery of the rainbow serpent would be. Waiting for my *encebollado*, I flip back and forth between my notebook and *Sophie's Choice* by William Styron. Did I mention that books are spaceships, time machines, multipliers of identity? Did I mention that human minds are rainbow serpents gliding among the worlds we inhabit?

Yesterday (pardon me, my *encebollado* is here), I ran into Martín, Rufino's wife Katia's youngest brother (read that again, it makes sense), who lives across the river from Joaquín and us, and cut the floorboards for the house we're building. Martín is very strong and, according to Joaquín, has a reputation for being unstable and a brawler. Joaquín adds that Martín beat his wife and she committed suicide.

Last month, Dave suggested inviting Martín to drink yagé with us, but Joaquín said no because Martín could go crazy during the ceremony and we wouldn't

be able to handle him. In person, though, Martín was friendly and relaxed. He and I sauntered around Lago, checking out women and talking about life, the universe, and everything. I didn't ask what happened between him and his wife and he didn't volunteer any information. I did ask him if he'd tried yagé.

He said, "I drank it once with my uncle Alberto across the border in Peru. In the morning, we went down and washed our faces in the river. Then he said, 'I'm gonna visit some friends of mine.' He walked right into the river and didn't come up. Two hours later, he came back out, completely dry."

"No way."

"For real. I saw the whole thing."

"How'd you get to Peru? This Peruvian Secoya called Rodrigo Leví once told me he had to go through Colombia to come here."

"I went through Colombia, too," Martín said. "Without papers. On my way to the Secoya communities in Peru, I came across five Peruvian military checkpoints. The first four let me go by, no problem, but at the fifth one, they said I was a spy."

"Whoa."

"They beat me up and held my head underwater so I nearly drowned."

"Fuck!"

"Then they left me in a pit for three days. At the end of that they decided I wasn't a spy and let me go. The next day I reached my uncle's house. We drank yagé and he visited his friends under the river."

We drifted back to the Fondo Ecuatoriano Populorum Progressio, a Catholic organization where we were both staying. Martín wanted to smoke a smidgeon of *wati muntó*, spirit tobacco, that he had. But he had no pipe or rolling paper. Bringing my superior Western scientific knowledge to the Third World, I showed him how to work the tobacco out of a cigarette and pack in the pot. He and I went up on the top floor, which was open to the air, so he could smoke it. A skinny black guy in a single room looked out as we passed. I got an intuition he knew why we'd gone up there and would want some of the green. Martín didn't want to share it with him, though, and smoked quickly and hid the roach. When the guy came out asking if we had *mota*, Martín maintained, against all logic and in the face of skeptical questioning, that we'd just gone up there for the view.

In fact, it was a great view and the sunset flooded the town with a million shades of orange. Safiro proved to be excellent company. He accepted Martín's lie and told us he was in town from the coast, visiting relatives. We all decided to take a walk together and went downstairs and strolled the town like the United Colors of Benetton.

We hit the amusement park. Safiro and I went on a Ferris wheel that I'd been eyeing since it arrived in town a few months ago. Martín found it too intimidating, despite our encouragement and then our disparaging comments about his manliness. The ride was exhilarating. Safiro and I were lifted above the damp jungle city in the darkness and saw, far off in the West, toward the Andes, a bank of massive storm clouds lit by lightning.

After Safiro and I had gone twice, Martín wanted to go on it with us, but we said, "No, man, go on it yourself. We've spent enough money already, unless you

want to pay our way."

* * *

I rode back down the Aguarico River to Cabaña Supernatura yesterday in a motor-canoe with Rufino and Martín (who jumped out on the opposite bank) and eleven tourists from Quebec. I have a swollen, infected mosquito bite on my inner right thigh, a souvenir of the night raid at Cocaya. Rufino is taking care of his tourists in the Cabaña and I get some time alone.

The provisional hut we used to stay in is broken down now. Draped over beams, Gus's and Mark's and Dave's and my discarded clothes harbor little wasp nests. Relics from that time: Dave's cap, Ryder's sun-block, a box of dry goods infested by bugs. The Swarovski crystal is missing from the western roof-beam.

The cows still come around. I had to drive some away, just like in the old days (*sigh*).

I'm staying in the hut we're building, sleeping under the part of the roof that's finished. Rufino's wife Katia, son Mecías, and baby Miguelito are in the family hut nearby. Only they and Rufino are around here now. Joaquín and Maribel are visiting Dave at his apartment in Baños. I just bathed in the river. Tomorrow I'll wash my clothes. I finished *Sophie's Choice* with a lump in my throat. I hear black Cuaucuillo and tan-and-white Potente barking to chase away cows. And Miguelito crying.

A crystalline vibratory drone of insects, and the call of a certain frog that starts up a fast, rhythmic series of *ho's*, and gradually slows them down until they're coming three seconds apart, then stops. And a bug suicide in my candle flame. It's 7:22.

Yes, *Sophie's Choice* is a sad book. This copy makes me especially sad because Ricki's hands touched it, put it in the box to mail to me. I remember those hands exploring my body, which they never will again. *Are bodies haunted by hands like houses by ghosts?*

The dogs are barking furiously. Even my thin blanket is too hot for the thick air. Bugs are a constant bother. The heat of the blanket makes the bug bites worse, but no blanket will mean more bites.

I didn't dine with the tourists last night. Didn't want to invite myself over to eat their food. Rufino told me this morning everyone had wondered where I was. Nobody invited me, though, and I munched the bread and cheese of solitude.

It's less comfortable to write now. A wasp came and extinguished one of my two candle flames by diving into it, then writhed on the floor in ecstatic agony. I lit my lighter off the remaining candle, relit the extinguished one, and burned the wasp to death—which was a moral failing, I think now. I burned my thumb in the process. My unconscious was punishing me. Or the wasp was fighting me at the level of the collective unconscious. Or I'm just dumb. Man is a theory-making animal and these are my theories.

* * *

Bugbite-bugged and sleepless. Blister-thumbed. It's 3:15 a.m. I was just dreaming I was at the Natural History Museum again. An animated diorama showed how ducks and duck-billed platypuses meet, once a year, in hidden tunnels and caves deep underground, to mate and exchange genes. I awoke to nagging bug bites and the swollen infection on my inner thigh. It's demanding in its insistence that no pressure be applied to it, that it not even be touched.

Earlier, a cow invaded, and I drove her away by shining my light in her eyes and saying *Chhhhh!* Later there came a sound like a wildcat killing a chicken nearby. Now bats are flinging themselves headlong through the air in search of food. Chaos embodied in their hunting paths, embroidered in their hunting clothes. The night is dark and moonless, the stars dim and distant through webs of mist.

Thinking about how to teach English in San Pablo. I have no books. It's all going to have to come out of my head. But that's OK. Language doesn't weigh anything and can be transported anywhere at no cost.

* * *

What I've got to do today: wash my clothes; boil stream water to drink, as there's no rainwater these dry days; haul up a big pot of water to wash my dishes, hopefully not water with minnows in it like last time.

Instant coffee and animal crackers for breakfast, rice and beans for dinner, bananas in between. Tomato cherries too—those small, sweet red fruits are in season now.

I was bitten about sixty times that night in Cocaya. It's 8:15 a.m. now, eight days later. Like settlers, like colonists, like the oil industry, the bites have no intention of going away.

* * *

Daytime and I'm alone in Cabaña Supernatura. Toucans shriek in counterpoint to the aqueous blooming of oropendolas. The sun shines on shiny leaves. A small ant explores the tabletop and is brushed away mercilessly. The human has little patience for ants since he discovered them infesting his crackers and cookies this morning. The surface of his black coffee wriggles with the motion of his writing hand on the wooden table. A yellow butterfly trips through the air. The surface of the coffee is Tezcatlipoca's obsidian mirror reflecting the palm fronds of the underside of the roof as they were a fraction of a second earlier.

"Stek-ek-ek-ek-eh-eh-eh-o'o—BLOOP!" An oropendola throws my soul into the sun, where it swims for a moment before returning to my tall, gangly body.

The jungle is chooming, hallucinating forms, textures, oddities. Why else would butterflies have eyes on their wings? The cosmos is a flower in my mother's garden.

The jungle is panting like a dog. It lies in the shade, half-dreaming, emitting Nezahualcoyotlian vibrations, flooding the author's mind with words.

*He drinks the reflection of his face in black coffee,
savors the bitter alkaloid of memory,
and continues to write his endless poem,*

which includes, now, an achiote pod with an applicator stick, left on the table after Rufino painted the faces of the tourists from Quebec this morning before their hike. The best face paintings here are done with a long, straight sliver of palm wood rubbed in achiote. This prints perfectly straight red lines which can be developed into geometrical designs.

In the old days, the Secoyas used to pluck out their eyebrows, because "only animals having hair on their faces," as Joaquín says, and also, I think, to increase the paintable surface.

Back then, if you made it through a yagé ceremony with your face paint intact, people who saw you at dawn would know you'd maintained your control during the intoxication. It would be a demonstration of mastery. Less advanced drinkers forget about their paint and smudge it. Even something as simple as scratching your nose smears achiote.

"Only animals have hair on their faces." Rufino told me once that the Secoya term for white people, *akë* or *ankë*, means "eater," as in *akë sehue paj*, the eater-bearded-people, glossed as bearded cannibals—a recollection of problems with Spaniards several centuries back. Some Spaniards resorted to eating human flesh, once or several times. Serafin Piaguaje's book *Medicine Root* says that, when the missionaries came, Joaquín told the other Secoyas, "These are the people our grandparents warned us about." To the Barclays themselves, Joaquín shouted, "Hit the road, you cannibals!" The Barclays retreated to Quito but came back six months later.

Reclining in the nylon hammock, underneath untranslatable oropendola messages, in the shade of Supernatura, I pass a little time in the jungle before it disappears. The sound of a motorboat approaches from downriver. Big marigolds are blooming near the path to the outhouse. White clouds above and beyond the opposite bank of the river watch everything impassively, getting really bored. Here comes that boat, louder and louder. It appears, bearing a colonist motorist and a young *puntero* (guy who sits at the front and watches for obstacles in the water), and a load of wood. The motorist didn't wave back at me when I waved, then looked away when I nodded at him.

There's no rule about whether you wave at someone on the river. Sometimes you feel like it, sometimes you don't. I didn't like him staring at me, so I nodded at him and he looked away, embarrassed. It's unusual to see a white man in a green tunic.

A woodpecker's *toc-toc-toc* in the background, finding grubs in a tree, as I search beyond the surface of my environment to find something to write. I lanced my infection but only got out a little pus. It'll have to run its course. Up in Mexico, when Franco wondered if he should puke, Alberto said sometimes it's better to let the body deal with it.

One majestic white cloud is triumphant in the blue sky-realm, the body of God rearing up and watching over the earth. It's a sweet summer day, this January 6th. We're in one of two dry seasons for which the Secoyas have adopted the Spanish

term *verano*, summer. This one encompasses January and February and the other is August through October. Summer is defined as when it rains less.

* * *

I finished the yagé crown I started last year, wrapping my long strand of beads seven times around the hoop of cocowasi wood and tying it in place. Katia came over with Mecías and Miguelito to check up on me. I gave her some of my food. My beans and rice came out fine despite the lack of pot lids. The light of my three candles is yellow-orange. The white page picks up the green of my tunic. Outside, everything's black.

I'm ambivalent about grad school. I'd like to settle here in Ecuador, but what then? Future fear sinks its lukewarm claws into my skin. As my ex-girlfriend Deirdre used to say, *Don't borrow trouble from the future*. She did it herself, but at least she fought against it.

Last time I saw Rufino, he raised the possibility of making me a partner in Cabaña Supernatura. I could bring in more tourists. If I stay here, I bet I could make this place pay off for me in a year or two.

My bug bites are somewhat soothed by citronella ointment I found over at the old hut today. I had three cups of coffee today to get my motor running and I'm not tired at all. Thinking about that woman I met recently, the blue-eyed, milk-skinned one with the bat-like beauty and the curiosity about telepathy. *Po Oyoó* would be her Secoya name, White Bat.

* * *

I feel like a frayed nerve ending. Some insects just bit my feet. And the right side of my head hurts.

It's OK. It's not too bad.

(Monkeys in the trees, oh Jeez. A celebratory rustling as they advance, and curious chirps, wondering why the hut is lit at this hour of the night.)

* * *

Finally got to sleep last night only to wake again at midnight. Sterilized the infection with Neosporin and cut into it again with the small blade of my Swiss Army knife like a tooth of the rainbow serpent. The scalpel is the sharpest knife. Squeezed out more pus this time. Now in the hammock, my crown riding lightly on my head. Cicadas chant, possessed by Wiwati the Growth Spirit. They're his voice. Insects are shamans too. I'm growing emotionally just thinking about this.

An Argo Tours speedboat thunders upriver toward Chiritza to collect a fresh group of rich people. The waves crash against the riverbank. Argo Tours is upscale. They have a posh riverboat and host wild, cocaine-fueled parties on it. Nobody around here likes them because the waves from their speedboats could overturn a child's canoe.

Humming a tune for the rainbow serpent, I planted a few yagé vines, then

hauled boards to make a platform on top of the outhouse pit I dug a few months ago. It's a lovely day in the jungle. The day after tomorrow I'll catch a ride upriver with Rufino and his tourists. The tourists are headed to Quito and then Quebec. I'm going to San Pablo to teach English to the kids.

Amazing how much better I feel with that infection lanced. I'd like to do that with all my problems: slice them open, squeeze them out. The scalpel is the kindest knife.

* * * * *



AbandonView



Sam Knot

A Kind of Butterfly Song

Everything is a kind of butterfly,
think of the butterfly fish.
Or books which, quite clearly,
open wings with
asymmetric textual patternings.

Tree trunks stake a claim to being
butterfly torsos, also
they can fly
sideways with one wing
in the earth like night is
the other wing of day.

Undifferentiated chaos is not
a kind of butterfly,
but nor is it, at all.
The only stuff which is not butterfly
might be moth?

Caterpillar, like snake or worm,
is butterfly sans wings.
Cocoon, the dream of butterfly being,
but a recapitulation of the egg.
While inside and outside,
like yolk and white,
the circle's wings bespeak.

Nothing is not some sort of butterfly.
Not brain, not mind, not space-knot-time,
are not not butterflies. Even nothing is
a butterfly of kinds.

Apples and oranges have differences
which open like wings and sing
that the only way they are the same
is in being kinds of butterfly.

Fruit cocoons have never tasted so good!

Upon the butterfly tongue
of the dirt path,
the wagtail settles with
butterfly smile,
while the hare goes by with
butterfly gravity.

The peacock of
the heart's flutter
struts in space,
while through time
the flower opens
in butterfly rotations,
to the pitch of a butterfly bee,

and the butterfly-butterfly
butterflies past, unmysteriously!

As entire lifetimes
metamorphose ceaselessly
in every nectarous
effortless death drop of
changingly changeless
butterfly nature.

Our beautiful dream of being
true! to ourselven cocoons
never tasted so good!

As something
else-like
each of us:

Butterfly light in love with
butterfly emptiness.

* * * * *



Raymond Soulard, Jr.

Many Musics

Twelfth Series

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

ii. Cackle

Long before men, & down below sight,
there is green. Webs upon web,
before story, before song,
veining down through the living world,
there is green. World by light, a combustion
to glory, now mixed with Sea water, there is music,
there is life, there is *green*.

All unitive to grow, to flourish & bloom,
feed to flourish, feed to bloom,
live forever without end, there is green,
there is *music*. A kind of *hmmm*
through all, wherefrom comfort, wherefrom healing,
wherefrom a unitive of many, *behold it!*

Things change, tides combust, now Islands
emerge. Land becomes, a Woods rises,
of birch & oak & pine, & a hundred hundred
other kinds, new to light, ancient its web,
down deeper than the Wide Wide Sea.
Down to the very Heart of the World,
feel its *green*, feel its *hmmming*.

The *hmmming* throughout the One Woods,
throughout the Wide Wide Sea,
throughout all that emerges, yet one.
From the outmost leaf on a stormy day,
from snaggle of sun & surf where many lay,
from the winking starlight of many paths &
places come to here, there is a *merry cackle*.

The green now wishes to *play*. Spread a natural
theater upon the world, of mountains,
deserts, beaches far below the Sea.

The green must *turn on* the One Woods,
to a thousand colors & nuts & fruits.

The green shall as ever still *hmmm* back to
its unitive way, & now a merry cackle, & play,
& *hmmm new ever on!*

Then, before days named, & years counted,
before wished for *soon* & sad yearned
back when, before time itself quicks & slows,
come a novel thing in that blue blue sky,
come a thing of men, not yet dreamed,
from a some time far on.

A Blue Suitcase falls to the Wide Wide Sea,
with a great *ker-splash!*

And things change, they don't undo.
And tides they combust, every beautiful day.
And the green *hmmms*, & very merry cackles.
And the time is now to play!

* * * * *

iii. From the Heart of the World

And things change, they don't undo,
And tides they combust, every beautiful day,
And the Heart of the World beats through time,
And the Heart of many Worlds *beat-beats*,
And the Heart of many Worlds *beat-beats*,
beat-beats, drumming a deep path to follow,
& a deep *hmmm* to sing along—

And now come a merry cackle's wish for play,
And now come a merry cackle's wish to dance too,
And now the merry cackles up an Imp,
come in a stone bucket of deep earth,
drawn by a rainbow-braided thread
from the *beat-beating* Heart of the World,

arrived to the Beach that braids
many worlds, where they cross, what they share.

And the Imp digs up from the stone bucket,
her wide-eyed look at the endless Beach lain
by the shore of the Deeper Deeper Sea.
She cackles merry & now speaks a word: “Ké?”

“Ké!” says Abraham, the Ancient Sea Turtle,
holding the end of the rainbow-braided thread.
Smiling. She’s *arrived*.

* * * * *

iv. Braided Worlds

Abe the Ancient Sea Turtle tends
the merry Imp on the endless Beach lain
by the Deeper Deeper Sea.

A hollowed tooth in his jaw he’s kept
for her, for her rests & listens
between cackling plays.

He tells of what he knows, remembers,
misses. His beach once full, merry
as a thousand cackling Imps.

She listens, as an Imp would,
by sideways moments, kisses on his
ancient cheek, when they *hmmm* the night.

“There are many worlds,
braided ever among each other,
& many paths among them to be found.
By the Dreaming is the path,
an indigo trace the thread through.

“By the Dreaming, greater dance!
By the Dreaming, greater play!
By the Dreaming, many friends to know!
Do you wish to know the Dreaming?”

The Imp hopped up on Abe’s craggy nose,
cackled merry & cried, “Ké!”

* * * * *

v. The Dreaming

The merry Imp rested in the hollow tooth
of Abe the Ancient Sea Turtle’s jaw.
They *hmmm*’d together far down below
the full moon, endless jangle of stars.
Together they played the endless Dreaming
into *what if? what else? what possible?*
& more, from their Beach, the Sea,
the beautiful green far above them.

They ranged wild throughout the
One Woods, carrying their stone bucket
of deep earth, stuff of the Imp, maybe
long ago stuff of Abe himself.
From this shared earth stirred through
the Dreaming forms, shapes, beings,
nudged a little more, & nudged a little more,
till they were of the Dreaming,
& a little more now too.

Abe nodded his dear little friend,
parted her in a clearing of full moonlight.
“Stir them all to wake now.”
“Ké?”
“Ké!” Merry cackles, & he was gone.

* * * * *

vi. Stir

Creatures, clustered, stir to wake.
To listen. Jangling leaves. Dancing surf.
Sniff the chill air. Feel its cool tremble.
Reach out a paw, touch twice, one to another.
Taste the subtle drift of the light when
all open their eyes to see!

A new world to abide. Now they know two.
The Dreamland, their home, their very root stuff.
And this new world to wonder:
What if? What else? What possible?

The merry Imp skitters the One Woods,
summoning all Creatures to *new dance! new play!*
So much to know. To learn. To remember.
To sometimes forget & start again.

Now stirred to wake, new world to know,
still *hmming* from Dreamland, learning
to braid them together.

And a *hmming* elsewhere now too.
A need, it calls? A need to come?
Someone needs them to come?



* * * * *



Ace Boggess



“Despite the Crisis and Its Many Worries, Have You Experienced a Moment of Grace?”

[question asked by Raymond Soulard, Jr.]

Yesterday, a tulip
began its run into bloom,
orange & yellow,
like the fountain-pen blade
of a candle’s flame.

Isolated in its bed,
socially distanced
from other flowers,
to avoid the spread
of death among
last week’s lilies,
it rose like a rocket’s trail,

bright in the moment,
scale model
of a burning bush.

I stared for minutes
while smoking &
didn’t cough or choke,
avert my gaze
from blessed light.
All within was
calm as sleep.

I’d forgive the end
if it came then.
It didn’t, &
when my ember snuffed,
I went inside.

* * * * *



Martina Reisz Newberry

Clouds Like Boxcars

(In Memory of Larry Kramer)

To stay sane, I research and pore
over the small things:
a chipped fingernail,
an odd-colored feather gracing the ground,
an unidentifiable spot on the kitchen floor,
a television show,
a book of crosswords.

Around my diversions, the wars continue.
They blend into each other—
like creeks into lakes into rivers into oceans—
one immeasurable ocean—
unending tides of death, ineloquent battles,
in defense of nothing we can remember.

Something, someone is always looking
for a new place to send someone else
to fight and die.

The endless ocean reflects heartbroken stars,
a morose moon—white as bone—
clouds like boxcars rolling and rolling,
stopping only to pick up more detritus,
more compromised air—
stopping only to deliver all of it
over an aching land.

None of us has to be told to be still anymore.
Our thoughts, the static of our consciences,
simmer inside our brains.

We watch the skies for that specter of peace,
a summer of love, and still . . . and still . . .

*When did the gods decide
that things were too easy for us?
When did our torpid breezes turn to strong winds
that howl and stumble below the canyons?*

No matter. The war—the one war, the only war—goes on.

We live inside our own dreams,
sorting particles of what we believe is right
from larger particles of what it takes to be happy.

We falter as we stand
on the foundations of our own souls.
Our bodies are haunted by the tough touch of time.

What will happen? We ask ourselves.
What will happen? We ask our loved ones.
What will happen? We ask the craters of the moon.
What will happen? We ask our fathers and brothers.
(Our mothers always knew.)

Chthonic answers flood the world, won't let go,
and chthonic spirits continue to watch and whisper.
There will be rumors of war, they say, and there will be war.

My answer is always the same:
*To stay sane, I research and pore over the small things:
a chipped fingernail,
an odd-colored feather gracing the ground,
an unidentifiable spot on the kitchen floor,
a television show,
a book of crosswords.*

Hold steady, I say.

* * * * *



Timothy Vilgiate

Rivers of the Mind

[A Novel]

*Chapter 1:
Blue Topaz*

i.

The blue topaz crystal represents eternity—it has a pure soul, everlasting and serene. I found one in a creek bed in a little town in the Texas hill country. It is the state’s stone. I’d hitchhiked there from Alabama, where I was looking for blue quartz and agate. Blue quartz promotes creativity and inner peace—agates, another popular gem, are for people in need of protection. I sold a lot of blues in those days—the people I met often seemed like they were in need of solace, relief.

I strung the blue topaz crystal onto a hemp cord and kept it in a box with the others. That was three days ago. It was the crystal I’d dug out of my things this morning when I needed comfort. The acid from the day before was still lingering, and I felt uneasy. I checked the clock. 34 hours, 9 minutes had gone by since I took it. It had been a beautiful trip, just beautiful—but I was ready for it to stop. The place someone goes with acid isn’t a place they should stay.

I had taken a lot. More than I’d expected to take. For the first hour or so, I stared up at the sky. I was next to a big military compound where someone told me that the government had found a UFO. I was hoping to see something, but I quickly forgot about it, and instead just laid in the grass, staring up at the stars.

Time seemed to melt away, and I let my mind drift, slowly breaking ties with my body and collapsing into the heavens, until I was surrounded in color. Moments from the last few years drifted over me. The lingering feeling that I was not where I was supposed to be melted away.

I forgot the feeling that, at my age, with my education, I should have been somewhere in North Dakota working on an oil field, living with a wife and kids and a house and a car, not homeless, wandering the country looking for crystals and making necklaces. I forgot about it all.

When the acid peaked, it must have been close to midnight. But I was too far gone to return to my body and look at my watch. *I am somewhere else, somewhere indescribable, when I start to feel myself fall. A great, titanic gravity begins pulling me in, and I feel myself just imperceptibly slide into what I could only explain as . . . a crack in the universe.*

Thick, glowing blue energy pulses around me—I am surrounded by a chattering whirl of panicked voices and sirens. I think for a moment that I’ve ended up in the

hospital, but I make myself relax and let it be, telling myself to not get bogged down in what might be happening. Whatever is, is—that is that.

For a moment, I wade in the energy. Souls are being sucked down into some kind of indescribable deep, leaving their bodies, as I sit still, entirely unmoved. I wonder what I am seeing—Am I looking at Hell? Heaven? I feel an energy wash over me, taking me under like a great wave at high tide, and spilling over my body. It surrounds me with the sounds and sensations of peace.

If I am dead, I am comfortable with it, and can accept whatever comes my way. For a moment, my body cries out to me, and I can see it miles above me, sitting in the field. A feeling like cold water pouring from my brain, and down over my bones, floods over me.

The sensation still lingered there as I woke up. It was five in the morning. Everything around me was a solemn and grave blue. The trees and rocks breathed; swirls of fractal patterns edged at the periphery of my vision. I was still tripping, and hard. When I propped myself up, I found the grass around me bent outwards. I wondered for a while if I had been abducted by aliens, but ended up laughing the thought off.

Reorienting myself, I found my bags, hidden underneath a tree. I took out the topaz crystal and waited to come down, overwhelmed with awe at the power of what had happened the night before.

I breathed in. “Thank you,” I whispered to the earth. I could almost feel it groan in reply.

That was this morning, and I was still there later that day, underneath the tree. Still seeing everything around me breathe, still seeing fractals out the corners of my eye, my mind still racing like your mind does sometimes when you’re at the peak of a trip.

I’d taken enough that I hardly expected to feel totally normal the next day, but not enough that I should have been feeling these effects that far into the day. I had wondered, for the last hour or so, what to do. I needed to come back to reality. Sometime just before nightfall, with no end in sight, the idea hit me. Vitamin B. Niacin. My friend in Philadelphia used that to come down from a crazy acid trip a few years back. I’d passed a Walmart while walking into town. I’d walk there, buy some vitamins and then, hopefully, I could come down.

ii.

Walking to Walmart felt like it took eons. Cars dragged by, followed by brilliant tracers. Some of them looked like army cars, probably heading to that compound. A few folks glanced at me with suspicion, but mostly paid me no mind. But I could feel their thoughts—“*how sad*”—“*how disgusting*”—“*so sad to see heroin destroying this town*”—coming at me in overwhelming waves.

I could hear the gears inside of their mouth-engines in minute detail—the sound of teeth gnashing down against gum behind barely cracked windows. I could see colors around them—most of them were red, some grey, some violet and blue—halos of light behind their heads—souls quivering behind their eyelids.

It was an hour of this until I got to Walmart. The flickering of the lights in

the parking lot burnt my eyes. I knelt down against the ground and held my hands over my eyes, at which point I was treated to a vivid swirl of aggravating yellows and blues. I hear a voice nearby, a woman's voice— *"I can't let my kids see this. I ought to call the police."*

My eyes darted up at her. "Huh?" I asked.

A woman, putting her child into a car seat, looked back over her shoulder. "I didn't say anything." *I don't believe her at first, but when I look at the colors behind her eyes, I realize that she isn't be lying.*

I studied her closer. *She's in pain. Her husband is gone again, and she's afraid to be sleeping in the house alone.* I wanted to give her an agate, for strength, but I didn't need to read her mind to know she was afraid of me. *"Disgusting,"* I heard her mumble in her thoughts, *"He's staring at me. So creepy."*

I turned away, and moved on quickly. "I can't hear her thoughts! I can't hear anyone's thoughts!" I murmured to myself.

Another family getting into their car all stared at me. I looked back at them. *"Did he just say something?"* I heard them say, although their lips weren't moving. *A teenage boy inside of the car pictures himself in my shoes with horror. His little sister thinks I look like someone from her history book. Their mother is preoccupied with whatever she is planning on doing with the guacamole they'd bought at the store. The father is fantasizing about killing me but, still, in the back of his mind, also thinking about the guacamole.* It wasn't what you'd think.

I walked quicker, trying hard not to let any words leak from my brain. An old lady exited the Walmart and started heading towards me. Her cart creaked and groaned. *She is tired, exhausted, deeply sad.* How can I ignore her? I suppose it could be a delusion. But what if it's not?

"Can I help you?" I asked, as she opened the back door of her tiny red sedan. *My voice sounds raspy and earthen to her.* She looked at me with a faint smile, but a deep-seated fear. *She is afraid. She pictures me trying to mug her.*

I shut my eyes. *She thinks I sound crazy.* "With the bags. I can help you load up your car," I croaked.

"I don't have any more money," she said. *She assumes I am a beggar. I suppose I look the part.*

"I don't need any—it's alright."

Without another word, I lifted up the two heavier bags, and set them in the back of her car for her. "Thank you, young man," she said. *I hear her breathe a sigh of relief in her mind.* I nodded and hurried into the Walmart.

Grabbing a cart and struggling to right my course as I entered the store, I looked up towards the ceiling to try and read the signs. None of the letters made sense to me—all of them seemed jumbled and bizarre. *This place is loud. Exploding with minds, with music, with buzzing lights.*

The manager spotted me immediately. I looked threatening. *He is expecting me to steal something. He imagines fighting me off with an assault rifle, or engaging me in a knife fight. If he can teach me a lesson, maybe Jill from customer service will finally see that he's—*

I need to stop, I tell myself, I can't hear what they're thinking. The colors I'm

seeing are from the acid. So are the voices. So is everything.

Trembling, I wandered towards what loomed like the pharmacy, and saw a row of green bottles I presumed to be vitamins. None of the labels made any sense to me. I couldn't read. Irritated, I threw up my hands and pondered trying to find a customer service person.

The thought unnerved me. What was I thinking? I can't have a normal conversation right now. I can't handle that. I guess I should have thought of that before I came here. I thought of all the people in the parking lot who had thought about calling the police. If I got arrested, I didn't want to imagine what could happen. Not here in Texas.

I heard a woman's footsteps come by. *An employee?* A young woman in a Walmart uniform appeared around the corner. She was a little bit shorter than me, her shoulders draped with curly, dark brown hair. A brilliant red corona swirled around the center of her dark hazel eyes.

"I can't read," I said to her, lying, "My doctor said I need Vitamin B."

Feeling very sorry for me, she headed into the aisle, scanning through the pill bottles with her index finger until she found what I was looking for. She handed it to me, grinning. The first genuinely kind person I've met. *She understands what I'm going through, somehow. The lights hurt her sometimes too.*

Her name is Meagan. She has wanted to be a doctor since her grandmother was diagnosed with cancer. Before that, she wanted to be a psychologist. Her older brother works at a fast food place on the other side of town, on top of two other jobs. Last summer, she took five grams of mushrooms and experienced ego death while sitting waist deep in the Guadalupe River.

I grimaced to try and keep these delusions from coming into my head.

"Niacin. Do you have any niacin?" I asked.

She nodded again, found a bottle, and handed it to me, smiling.

"Thank you so much," I said.

"Do you need anything else? Food, water, blankets?" she asked.

"No, I'm fine," I replied, starting to walk away.

She wants to have more of a conversation with me. She wants to know where I'm from.

I wanted to put my delusion to rest. "I'm from California," I said.

She froze. "I was going to ask," she said.

"I think I can read minds," I admitted. "What kind of doctor do you want to be? A neurologist?"

She is afraid, but not in the way where she wants to call the police or run away. She's impressed. Maybe we can be friends. She nodded.

"Let me give you something," I said.

I slung around my pack and took out a pencil case full of crystals on strings. *Somewhere nearby, the manager has been alerted to my presence.* I knew that, apparently, because I could read minds. I could read minds, it seemed, because I took acid. Wonderful.

I fished one out. "This is a tourmaline," I said.

She looked at it. She was visibly uncomfortable, but only because she could

see people staring.

“It will give you bravery,” I muttered, “Concentration, balance, and confidence. That sort of thing.”

The manager swung around the corner. “Is this guy bothering you, Meagan?”

Meagan shook her head, “No, no, I was just helping him find some vitamins.”

She also thinks I'm psychic now, and is staring at the crystal with awe.

“What are those? Where did you get those?” the manager demanded.

I froze. *He is repressing a deep-seated rage.* “Th-th-they're mine. I make these for people at . . . at . . . concerts and . . . stuff,” I stuttered, shaking.

“Oh yeah? Look pretty nice. How much do those fetch for?” he asked, skeptically.

“I don't charge money. They're healing crystals,” I replied softly.

Raising his eyebrows, the manager scoffed, starting to reach for the box. The two of us locked eyes, and he froze. *My consciousness stretches until it brushes up against his. A slight bit of mental pressure and the walls break open. I enter his nervous system, and become aware of every movement of his mind and every feeling inside of his body—*

He tries to jerk away, but I hold him still. I held him still. Unbelievable! I start to panic, and struggle to bring my consciousness back into my body. Instead, I tear him away with me. I rip his psyche from its native mind, watching it ooze out of his skull like a thick red water. There's a small person trapped in there, shaped exactly like him.

No one else knew what was happening. We looked like we were having a staring contest.

His consciousness comes closer and closer until he is sucked into my forehead. He drifts into a higher plane of existence which comes detached from the other pieces of my being—a long tunnel inside of my mind, covered in mirrors and bright blue lights, where he sees me running away from him—all the while with the image of my physical face staring down at him from high above—

A powerful force drags him along as he screams profanities at me. He sees his physical body, its expression vacant and pale. Flailing, he tries to dig his fingers into the sides of the tunnel, but there is no escape, as much as I would like to put a stop to this whole ordeal.

I have a man's entire consciousness in my brain. It was, unsurprisingly, a first for me, and an uncomfortable one at that. It feels . . . strange. Like he is a part of me, but still separate. And I feel like I'm in two places at once. Intuitively, I manifest as a hologram in front of him.

Hoping to at least make his stay inside my head productive, I try to speak to him, though I don't know what to say besides, “Please don't take my crystals.”

“Let me out!” he screams, though no one else can hear him, “Please! Please let me out.”

“I swear I didn't steal these,” I insist. I try to make him cognizant of what I had been through to collect them, sharing my memories. The force which had been pulling him deeper into my mind begins to dissipate and, panting, he collapses to the ground. I watch him for a little bit. Did he know what I was trying to say? Was the message coming through? Was I being attacked in real life?

This couldn't be real. *I try to go to him gently, to help him up. He swings his arms up and tries to punch me. Too soon to try that. It hurts at first, until I realize that it is my mind—I get to decide if his punches can hurt me.*

I'd taken acid only four or five times before, but I'd learned much about consciousness, the nature of pain and suffering and death, the nature of love and hope and peace, the harmony at work in the world. I knew, if nothing else that, as angry as this man was, there was compassion that I needed to feel for him. I could've been him, had things been only a little bit different. If I'd have never made it out of Sacramento, never gone to school, never worked at the oilfields.

The anger and hate that the man carries in his heart radiates and lashes out at those around him, pelting them with negative energy, but also withering away his own soul. I know this both by studying his mind and by listening to the minds of the other people in the store. Wait a moment. He hears me thinking.

“Stop,” he whispers. **“Stop doing that.”**

I know that I should try to say more, but it is still too overwhelming, too unreal. I can only manage to repeat, slightly more desperate this time, my simple plea: “Please don't take my crystals.”

He punches me another time and takes off running back towards his physical body. I chase him through the psychic plane. “Wait!” I shout. He only runs faster. I begin to gain speed on him, grabbing onto his leg just as he tries to leap out of my eyes—

I drift between our two bodies—the field of unity between us stretches as we fly closer and closer towards his face. There will be no escape. I can see his iris, swirling in a fantastic array of colors and lights, growing larger, until I am swallowed up by his pupil—

Entering his psyche, I float through a smoldering war zone. A gruesome fractal spiral of skulls and bones rises up into my face. I hold onto him.

He's panicking. His stomach sinks, and an overwhelming, psychedelic nausea fills his guts—

I release him, and hold up my hand—my hand does not exist, but it is useful to imagine it. Gesturing for peace, for a pause in the violence, I try to listen. The visuals of anger and hatred I can feel within him are ones that I had felt taunting me once before. I can feel his pain. It is a pain I have felt too. Maybe I can help him out.

He used to like flowers before his older brother said that it was gay. He used to stare with wonder at the stars in the sky, or at the sunset, before this was swallowed up by wounded pride. From the battlefield in his mind grows dandelions and morning glories, overtaking the war machines. He recalls in vivid detail his grandfather's house, the feeling of a soft rabbit clutched against his stomach, the rolling green hills flooded with angelic sunlight.

He runs deeper into the darkness. The flowers and sunlight chase him. He shuts himself in his childhood room and draws down the blinds, searching for a gun. Perhaps memories were not working to lift him out of the darkness.

Maybe I should say something. “Don't listen to what those people on the Internet tell you. Someone like Jill doesn't need to see you pretend to be strong or powerful. Maybe you can show her pictures of your dog or something.” He has a very cute dog. Its name is Pringle.

“Get. Out. Of. My. Head.” he fumes. *A river of blood tears through the flowers in a vortex of rage, and the world fills with the color of smoldering embers erupting from*

underneath me. He wants to pull me under. He wants to destroy me. He has learned his hatred of these things too deeply.

The sudden assault throws me off balance and leads me vulnerable to attack inside the enemy mind. The manager appears beneath me, and drags me into an ocean of imagined blood. I can see my face. It's blank. My dilated eyes start to suck me back towards my mind, but I do not follow them—I don't want to give up on the manager.

At first, I choke under the water. He punches me, knocking the teeth from my skull. The violence was imagined, a metaphor. He found a way to drag me into his psyche. From every side, the darkness pulses with loud and angry music.

I search for my center. This was all in his head. He was imagining it. He couldn't really hurt me. I need to return his assaults with compassion. Let his anger fall on deaf ears. Light surrounds me, and chokes out the sounds of music—

Now he is drowning in the water, finding his punches can do nothing. Maybe I should go back. I hope I at least taught him a lesson. I rise up and shoot back into my body. The field of oneness which had encircled us recedes, and my consciousness reunites with the rest of my mind. Finally. Back in my body.

The manager, with tears streaming down his face, stared back in agony, trying to move his lips. His body was paralyzed even as his mind began to regain control. “Get out. G-g-get out . . .” he struggled to say.

No lesson. The anger has only deepened, spreading to a crowd that surrounds me. Meagan, kind as she may be, cannot help but relish the manager's predicament. Many of the employees feel the same way. He is a tyrant. They find joy in his humiliation. They want a fight. Rage spreads like an unseen cancer.

The customers formed a crowd to watch us. *The single father with four children who wears an oil-stained shirt shakes his head, believing I've provoked something. The two old women believe I am demon possessed; they are going to a bible study, and will pray for my salvation. The teenager with the amused look on his face came here to buy DXM; he's aiming for the second plateau. He thinks we looked ridiculous.*

I quickly jammed the box of crystals into the backpack and ran out of the store as quickly as I could.

iii.

Frantic and mortified at what I'd just done, I didn't stop running until I got to the road, at which point, I knelt down, clutching my head and stifling a scream. Did that really happen? Or was it just the acid?

It shouldn't have been the acid. But if it wasn't the acid, then it had really happened. I rocked back and forth. I was hyperventilating. I look insane. *Listen to those people at the stoplight.*

I needed to relax. I hadn't eaten since yesterday morning. Maybe if I got some food in my stomach, I could go back to normal. Or maybe if I drank some water—I'd been sweating a lot. Of course! That's what it was! I was dehydrated and hungry. My cells were revolting. I must feed them or they would consume me.

Desperately, I ran towards a gas station, jaywalking through traffic and stumbling on the curb. Four or five people honked at me. I felt like I could vomit.

I set my pack down near the door to the gas station out of courtesy and quickly ran to go get a bottle of water. Frantically, I tore three or four from the shelf. Was this a safe place? *Who is that watching me?*

The cashier. *Ahmed. He immigrated from Pakistan three years ago. He's already called the police twice today and, in retaliation for the store's owner paying him less than minimum wage, has decided he won't stop shoplifters anymore. He earned a master's degree in chemistry before he moved here and told his parents he would help them come to the United States, once he found a better job.*

I grabbed a bag of chips, and headed to the counter, slamming my bounty down and avoiding eye contact. I pointed towards the rack of hot food along the counter, my finger shaking. “Can I get a bunch of those too?”

“The taquitos?”

“Sure.”

“How many?”

“Yes.”

He rolled his eyes. *He wants to give me all of them. They're going to expire in half an hour, and he doesn't care if the owner loses money at this point. He has taken advantage of the workers as long as they've worked there, and no matter what his parents say—*

I needed to stop reading people's minds. It was none of my business.

I dug through my pocket for money. “Don't worry, man. I got you.” He opened the register and quickly slammed it shut. *Giving charity to the less fortunate is part of his religious duty. He fantasizes for a moment about giving me all of the money in the cash register, but recoils in shame at his impulse. It would be a bridge too far.*

“Thank you.”

iv.

I sat down outside of the store, and guzzled down a bottle of water as quickly as I could, breathing. The visuals began to subside but, in my mind, I still felt like I was tripping.

I still felt a chorus of emotions, thoughts, and memories all around me. My heart was pounding, filled with anxiety. I was alone, in a strange city, awash with psychic powers.

I scarfed down the taquitos, as quickly as I could. I didn't feel hungry, but my mind knew I should be.

The food felt strange, richly vivid but alien as it slid down my throat and into my stomach. I could feel the tingle of serotonin in my gut as the food began to slink into my belly. Rather than dissipate, my senses began to amplify.

I can feel, in vivid detail, the texture of the pavement, the energy in the power lines coursing through the air. The smells of the town—a strange mix of cow manure and petroleum, the perfumes and colognes and sweat dripping off of people, the latent humidity in the air—all fill my nose with a palpable thickness.

A hulking black pickup, reeking of energy drinks and chewing tobacco, and broadcasting low sounds of a gun-fighting podcast through a cracked window, inched into the parking lot. *An ominous wave of darkness comes over me, dominating the air.*

The spirit of the surroundings turns grey.

I feel something coming. A wave of psychic pain and terror.

The truck is arriving from Wichita. It contains two minds.

The first mind belongs to Arthur Callaway. His brain remains tense and hyper-aware, reeling after a police officer had followed them with its sirens on. He had pulled over, but the officer drove on, heading somewhere else. There is a boy in the back seat named Zachary Mendez. He's been kidnapped. A chemical fog lingers in his sleeping brain.

I started shaking, watching Callaway, an old husky man *who had been discharged from the military in 1970*, emerge from the truck and come towards me.

His thoughts are immeasurably dark. His heart has grown callous. \$200,000. That was the price for this job.

I stood up, trembling. If this was real, I needed to do something.

Callaway entered the gas station ponderously. Ahmed looked at him with an ounce of boredom. *Callaway doesn't like Ahmed. He doesn't like having to deal with these "sand niggers," as he calls them. He wonders, with a touch of humor, if it was some kind of Arab who bought the kid he was transporting.*

I stood up and entered the gas station, coughing. Callaway looked at me with disgust, *trying to figure out if I'm a junky*. I bumped into him.

"Oh, I'm sorry," I said.

Ahmed grimaced as Callaway stepped back. "Watch where you're going," he barked.

I looked into his eyes. *An aura of black surrounds his skull, a piercing grey dominates his eyes. He froze into a rigid stasis, and I feel my consciousness wash over his.*

I search through his memory, and learn what he did. A sense of dread creeps up on him as the memories surge from whatever part of his brain they were locked in. He tries to pull away, but it is no use. Those taquitos were very filling, and now I felt easily ten times stronger than before. I rip Callaway's soul from his body. It shoots from his eyes and into mine, being drawn deeper and deeper into my mind. I think of all he has done, not only to the kids, but to the women in his life, to his own family, and my soul wells with an intense anger. His face melts with terror as my mind burns with an intensity I have only felt in distant nightmares.

Callaway shoots from an icy black tunnel into a swirling mess of cataclysmic energy, being drawn deeper and deeper into my rage. He screams for mercy. But what mercy has he ever shown? I tear the skin from his mind until his soul reduces to a skeleton—

I throw the memories of his crimes back at him. They spin through his nervous system and tear open his mind like a thousand turning saw blades—

Old wounds explode from out of calcified scar tissue and grow wider—

Soon there will be nothing left—

Tears streamed down his physical body's face, as blood gushed from his nose, and out the corner of his mouth.

Did I kill him? A sense of guilt overcame me—I really was a killer, after all—I *stop pulling Callaway in. His soul rattles like dry bones, laid bare.*

"Please—please—stop—stop it—"

I could have been him. Only a few steps in my life different, a few missed chances to learn and I would have been him. If I hadn't left North Dakota, maybe,

who knows—I could have become worse. There are lessons that we learn over and over, one of which is how destructive it is to hate, and although I had tried to let this lesson sink in, I was reminded of it there. I had caught myself in an impulsive cycle of rage and only held onto it.

And now here I hold the broken soul of a person, one who I could have healed, and I have chosen instead to let him whither. The two of us both began to cry. I show him where I came from, or at least the parts I wanted to remember—Sacramento. I was a healer, I explained. I left my life as a geologist to sell healing crystals at music festivals.

I realized that money doesn't matter as much as your sense of inner peace. Even if you have money, at what cost has it come? How much chaos has your mind had to bear?

A pause. His mind filters through what I said, and reaches its own conclusions.

"I need to turn myself in," he keeps saying. **"I need to go to prison."**

"You need to get help," I say. **"You need to get better."**

"I need to get better."

"You need to—"

"Yes—yes—"

I shoot him back into his body. A dead-eyed stare overtook what remained. Ahmed was praying, afraid that something terribly dark had happened.

His prayer becomes a flood of shapes and colors, streaming up through a thousand tiny frames into some kind of Ultimate. A huge and infinite light, a fractal nothingness, white as snow, dead as bones yet pulsing with life. I cower underneath it—I didn't know what I was doing—I'd nearly killed a man out of my own rage.

From the core of myself, I can see that the Ultimate is at peace, at peace with us. Loving in a way where it knows all of our faults but nonetheless believes in our eventual redemption. Callaway, still sharing his consciousness with me, stares upwards at it, trembling as he regained control of his own mind. The colors around his skull flashed white and blue, with trails of purple.

"Where am I?" he wonders.

"Texas," I reply.

He shivers. **"Fuck. I hate Texas."**

"Well, you'll be tried in Kansas, at least. Don't be afraid," I tell him. **"Don't worry. Plead guilty. Find a way to find peace with what you've done."**

He stares up at the light. **"What is that?"** he asks.

"I don't know."

He stares at me incredulously.

"I've seen it before, but I don't really know what it is."

v.

I recede from the man's mind. He patted his legs, searching for his phone. Ahmed watched us both with confusion. Either we are both on something very strong, or this is just some kind of American thing he doesn't understand.

"Hello. My name is... my name is... Arthur Callaway. I need you to come arrest me... I... I kidnapped a child. I was driving to Houston to sell him to a client... I can't do this anymore," he said.

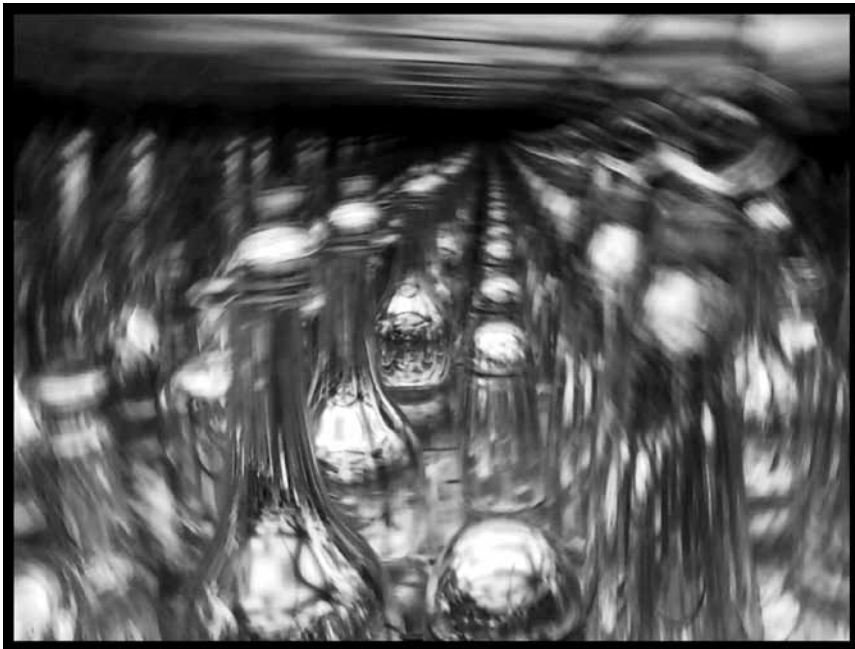
Gulping, the man hung up and ran to his truck, opening the door to reveal a child fast asleep in a car seat. Under the influence of sleeping pills. He carried the child out to the curb and sat, motionless, waiting for the police. *His mind is blank, save a single phrase he keeps repeating—* ***“I need to get better.”***

I looked over at Ahmed. He sighed. “You know, the police have already been here twice today.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I guess I did know that.”

Solemnly, I bit into the last of my taquito, watching Callaway and the kid sit in complete silence, waiting for the police.

* * * * *



The Dogs Sniff My Grandfather

The dogs sniff my grandfather,
dead since 1974,

drunk again in my backyard,
saying, see,

not even you can fix it.

All those years in prison,

how I stuttered as a boy,
tongue-tied til age five,

my father with a knife
in his chest—

how I never had a chance,
not one.

* * * * *



Algernon Beagle

Bags End Book #17: The Myth of the 4 Famous Travelers!

This story and more Bags End writings
can be found at: 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.

What are the Little Colored Books?

As mah Dear Readers know, Princess Chrisakah of Imagianna, or Crissy in much friendlier tongue, is one of mah dearest friends. I number her up there with mah adopted sisters Sheila & Lori Bunny, & Allie Leopard, & even mah silly bumping brother Alexander Puppy, if I have to say.

And I think mah frequent travels to visit Crissy at her Castle in Imagianna are oft-told in mah beloved newspaper.

But what was different about all of this recently was when I went to visit Crissy & found her away on business.

I found the green & gold door from Bags End to Imagianna in its usual hallway. Walked on through, & then climbed up the golden-tinged green

grassy hill to her Castle. Like always, I knocked 3 times, like the old song says.

The door opened & there was Boop, Crissy's servant & bestus buddy, who looks like a turtle but isn't.

"Hiya, Boop!" I said in mah friendly Algernon way.

Boop nodded & bowed & I guessed was in a mood 4or all kinds of 4ormalities & protocols. Sure, why not?

"Can you announce me to Princess Crissy?" I asked politely.

"The Princess is away," he said.

"Away where?" I asked suspiciously.

"On business," he said shortly. Hmm.

Well, I am short but Boop is not much taller so I muscled up to him almost eye to eye & said, "What business, Boop?"

He backed off when he saw I was in no mood 4or words that just decorated the air. Or something.

"Well, it's strange you came here to ask, Algernon. She left to visit your King Sheila on business."

"Sheila? Business with Sheila?" Hmm again. She is no King, by the way. Mayor 4or true, King 4or wish.

Boop nodded. He really didn't know any more. So I stopped being mad or annoyed or whatever I was. Boop is a good guy.

"Would you like to come back to Bags End with me to find out about this?" I asked, friendly anew.

Boop got almost puppy dog excited saying "yes!" Then he calmed down quick, like catching a sneeze halfway.

"Would it be alright?" he asked.

"Listen, pal, if they got business then me as a good Beagleboy journalist needs to be there, writing it down," I declared.

"And me?" he asked hopefully.

I eyed him almost grumpy. Then changed mah mind & tried eyeing him thoughtfully. That worked better.

"You can be mah Apprentice Reporter," I said, half making it up.

Well, I guess maybe it was his secretest wish, but suddenly Boop was as plainly & noisily happy as I had ever seen him. He practically shouted, "O! Boy!"

I nodded OK more to me than him. I didn't know what business I'd be walking in on with Crissy & Sheila, but now I had an Apprentice Reporter to follow in mah own dubious pawsteps.

Ah, well, life of a Beagleboy journalist. "Let's go, Apprentice! Lock up the Castle first so it don't get looted!" I cried merrily.

I had never seen Boop lock up Crissy's Castle be4ore but he had this large key he kept on a necklace under his turtle-neck sweater. Not a turtle though.

He nodded smiling when he was done & then together we walked back down the hill to the waiting door to Bags End.

We found ourselves back in the familiar hallway when I started wondering if Boop had ever been to Bags End, the way he kinda cuddled so close to me, not like he liked me so much or just needed cuddling.

"Boop, have you been to Bags End be4ore?"

He shook his head.

“O, OK. Well, let me show you mah Milne’s Porch anyways be4ore we go to see Sheila & Crissy.” He liked that idear. I did too because it gave me some more time to wonder if I wanted to interrupt Sheila & Crissy on their business. With an eager Apprentice, no less.

So we detoured to the Bunny Family apartment where there is the bedroom I share with mah brother Alex, & through whose window is Milne’s Porch. Pant pant.

Anyway, we climbed through the window & onto Milne’s Porch. I invited Boop to join me in mah comfy armchair. He still cuddly did not hesitate.

I was now stopped so I thinked a moment. Then another. Some more too.

“What else did Crissy say about this business trip?” I asked.

Boop thinked too. “She didn’t say much. Just put on that long old coat with all the little colored books &—“

“Wait! Wait! What long old coat? What little colored books?”

Boop looked at me like I was crazed, then remembered I’m not & why.

“O. Well, she found the old coat in the Castle. She wears it a lot even though it does not fit her properly. Almost drags on the floor.”

Well, I thinked he was gonna keep saying more & more words & I was gonna need them less & less.

“Boop, are the little colored books why she is going to see Sheila? What’s in them?”

He thinked. “A myth, I think.”

“A myth?”

“Yes, a story. That’s what a myth is, Algernon. Like an old story, or maybe a group of them, that is still remembered & kept around.”

“O. So she had readed this myth in these little colored books & decided to go see Sheila about them?”

“Well, she just walked around the Castle in the old coat 4or awhile. She said she wasn’t sure she hadn’t known this coat some other time. And she would sit in the hallways reading the little colored books. All times day & night too. No proper bedtime.”

I interrupted again. “So she told you she was going to see Sheila about them?”

He nodded. “She wore the old coat too. Would not take it off for anything.”

I nodded. OK. Thinked a thought. Then nodded again.

“Let’s go, Apprentice,” I ordered, without thinking too much about how funny me-as-boss-of-anybody sounded in out loud words.

But Boop amiably followed me & we made our way down ramps & along a certain hallway to Sheila’s Throne Room. It’s the door with the crown & carrot picture on it. O! Yuk!

I walked in first, in case Sheila decided a pounding was in order for those that interrupted. I’d teach mah Apprentice how to take those, & better yet how to avoid them, another time.

Walked on through the door, & there was Crissy in her long old coat on the floor, & there was Sheila next to her, & they were both just totally surrounded by lots of little colored books!

The Myth of the 4 Famous Travellers!

Look quickly, Dear Readers, & you can see me bright-eyed & o so foolish coming on through the door of Sheila’s Throne Room with mah new Apprentice Reporter Boop (huh?) following after me!

See me thinking o so foolish that Sheila Bunny & Princess Crissy will both welcome me on in to reveal the mysteries of their business in regards to a long old coat & a lot of little colored books containing a myth. Old story, still around. That is good, I guess.

Crissy saw me, dear smiling Princess girl she is, & Boop too, & she looked like she had so many smiling hugs to give out. In her long old coat & all.

Sheila did not look like she was also full of hugs to give.

“Out, beagle! Out now!” she ordered.

“Wait, but!” I said, incompletely 4or a sentence but enough to complain.

Crissy got in between Sheila & her angry fighting paws & me their targeted goal.

“Let me have one pound, Crissy!” Sheila cried. “Just one!”

“No, Sheila. Let him &, um, Boop? sit in Algernon’s corner quietly,” Crissy said in her sweet way nobody could resist. And Sheila didn’t resist either, though she dirty-look-blamed me 4or it.

“Boop is mah Apprentice Reporter,” I explained.

“Too much to misspell 4or even you, beagle?” Sheila grumped, & then laughed meanly at her own grump. Then she remembered how I interrupted her & got annoyed at me all over. But I just kept to mah corner with Boop like Crissy said so. Lucky I have a matt there 4or just such need.

She started talking to Sheila but I could tell she was kind of explaining 4or me & Boop too.

“I found this coat in my Castle. In the closet of one of those rooms I don’t see very often.”

Sheila nodded. She knowed all this already, was mah guess, but ah well. Strangely tolerant 4or her.

“And it seemed familiar to me, just the coat. Then I found all of these little colored books inside.”

I tooked a chance. “What’s the myth about?”

“Travelers, beagle,” Sheila said. “There are these 4 Famous Travellers to strange places, & the adventures they have, & who they meet on their way.” She finished with a look that told me that was enough 4or mah lowly sort.

I nodded though. Glad to have that much.

That’s when mah Apprentice Reporter Boop piped up. Hoo boy.

“Miss Bunny, if I may. This is Boop from Bags End News, if you will.”

“I wish I didn’t have to,” she grouched, but I could tell that Boop amused her with his manners. And Crissy loves him. And she loves Crissy. So, by cousins, she let him talk.

“How many books are there in all? Do they have an order to them? Is there a first & last one?”

Crissy smiled, liking these questions, but what shocked me is that Sheila did too.

"We don't know yet but maybe." She motioned Boop over! I slunk over too, wondering how things somehow always went this way, in variation. But I do like Boop, so whatever. On with the show.

There were sure a lot of these little colored books! I looked in wonder from one to the next.

"Algernon," Crissy said. She was still willing to talk to me which amazed me. "I wonder if I should write out this myth in some new way?"

"New way?"

"Well, it seems like these little books are more like notes so the myth gets remembered. But it's not like a big story!" Her pretty blue eyes were all excited as she does.

"So a storybook?"

"Yes. Or a Grand Production, like the Creatures do. I don't know. Maybe both."

I nodded. Good ideas. "Who are the 4 Famous Travelers?" I asked. "Where do they travel?"

Crissy sorted among the little colored books till she found a red one, which she opened up to the beginning.

"One is a girl whose name is Marie. She has red hair & bare feet. She sometimes travels with Faeries & maybe a White Bunny too."

Hmm. "She sounds familiar, Crissy."

"Really? How?" Crissy & even Sheila both looked interested.

Instead of explaining with words, I led them all, including mah overachieving Apprentice Reporter, to the level where there was a picture of the red-haired girl & her Faeries.

"This picture is how we get to the Creature Common!"

Crissy looked back & forth from the little red book in her hand to the picture, & she was amazed.

"This is Marie the teacher who begins her travels because she loses her mountain."

"Loses?"

"She sees it in the water of the pond near her house, when she is sitting nearby at the fishin' hole, but when she looks up to where it should be, it isn't there!"

Wow. Me & Boop were impressed.

"That sounds like a good start to a myth," I said.

Sheila bullied her short way among us. Bad idea to ever misplace her whereabouts. "What do you know about myths, beagle?" she demanded.

"Nothing except they are old stories that folks still don't forget!" I said with mah only defense.

Sheila paused in her intended poundings of me. Pre-pound, as it were. I stood, un-pounded still, & thus hopeful.

"OK. You know one thing," she admitted. Almost too not grumpy enough. So to speak.

I thought quickly some more. "Maybe mah good friend Larry the Spider can help us."

"You think he would, Algernon?" asked Crissy all blue-eyed & nice. Truly she junks mah heart-bone.

I nodded. "I will go to the Creature Common & ask. It might help us figure it all out."

"Shall I come too?" asked mah briefly forgotten Apprentice Reporter Boop.

O yah. Him. Hmm. I thought fast.

"No, Apprentice. This is a job for a veteran news hound. I mean, beagle."

"O," he looked sad. And Crissy looked sad too. And Sheila's look was now like "it's your turn to deal with this like I always do."

I thought fast again & tried to talk before I knewed I had no good ideas. "I need you to stick with these 2 as they unearth this strange myth."

Boop & Crissy looked delighted. Sheila looked annoyed.

"Like glue?" Boop asked.

"Crazy!" I said, trying to wink, & failing.

Now I was suddenly bound for the Creature Common with a question I didn't know I had any time ago!

To the Creature Common, With Mah Question!

"Hurry up, beagle!" said Sheila impatiently. She was practically shoving me through the Marie picture whose travels the little colored books somehow tolded.

Crissy calmed Sheila down, or at least kept her from trying to push me through the picture with her fighting paws.

"OK. OK! I usually go through this picture to visit there when I am in Dreamland Bags End," I said. I looked at Crissy for help & she smiled one of those tricky Crissy smiles I never resist, & so it was easy to forget to remember whatever & climb on through.

I usually land in the Creature Common on this big bed & there is Dorris, a sorta Lead Pillow, & her friendly Partners. I find them sometimes on top of a kind of bunch of Pillows & blankets. Not Bunny Pillows, I'm pretty sure.

"Algernon!" she said all soft & finer than fine. "Climb my Heap! Have a visit!"

So I did. I climbed up over the lower Pillows & a purple & a blue blanket with yellow Duckees on it, until I made it up to the top of the Heap. Haha. And Dorris likes me visiting close nearby to her with no bullying ways like Betsy Bunny Pillow does. Or maybe used to.

Very soft. As in, *ahhh*. For a little while, I forgot mah mission in mah enjoyings of all this softness. But then I remembered.

Dorris don't got no more face than Betsy does, though much friendlier. So I just sorta talked around.

"Dorris, do you know about a bunch of little colored books that tell the myth of Marie the teacher & her fellow 4 Famous Travelers?"

She laughed, kindly. "Of course I do. They are famous! We hear about their adventures many nights."

O. Hmm. "You means somebody reads the stories to you guys to hear?"

"Well, first they get told & later they get written down, I think."

O. Hmm again. "Does this telling have to do with Marie's picture?"

"Yes, it does. And the others."

Well, now I was just confused.

Dorris laughed again, kindly, & tried a different way to explain.

She sort of bounced us down her Heap & we kept going along in some kind of roll together even though I was never rolled under at all.

Off the bed, onto the floor, & left the room we'd been in.

Now we were out in a sort of open area, not a room no more. I was safe in Dorris's softness still.

"Now look up!" Dorris said, nearly cackled.

On the wall was the picture of Marie with her Faeries! I looked some more on the other walls & there was a picture of a guy riding his bike near a tree in a little people-folks kind of town.

And another one was a picture of a pond with a mountain reflected in it, but there was no mountain to see. O, yah, Marie's pond! Her story & how it began.

Still another one was of a giant sign that had houses painted on it along this narrow road. There were strange & shadowy figures on the road too.

I looked & looked at all these pictures like I was in some kind of museum where all the pictures are neck-craning tall.

Finally, I humbly talked. "I don't know what all this means, Dorris."

Dorris laughed her charming kindly laugh. "It means there it more than you know to all this!"

I nodded humbly. "There usually is."

Just then came walking into our company none other than mah good friend Larry the Spider! All black & orange with sparkly eyes too.

"Algernon!"

"Larry!"

Well, Larry climbed on into Dorris's softness too, which she liked. I guess such softness is best shared with friends when you can.

"I see Dorris is showing you the story pictures," Larry said.

"Wait! You mean the little colored books are stories about all of these pictures, not just the Marie one there?" I asked.

Dorris laughed again & Larry nodded.

O. Hmm.

"Sounds like a really big myth!" I said finally.

"Well, like Bags End is," said Larry.

I thought on this. Bags End a myth? "I suppose so." Then a new idear jumped in me. "Does one storyteller tell all these stories or a bunch?"

"Just one," said Larry. "He tells it most nights moving from picture to picture in turn."

"Well, since nobody else bothers to tell the Bags End, um, myth, him & me have that in common."

I tried to think of more to ask but I could not. So I did mah best to hug smaller than me Larry & soft Dorris, & they said, "Come visit again soon!" It was easy enough to fall asleep & wake up back in Bags End in mah bed like usual.

I hurried back to Sheila's Throne Room to see how things were going, & tell what I had learned.

And there was mah new Apprentice Reporter Boop with Sheila & Crissy, & he was organizing their work with the little colored books. Crissy

looked amused. Sheila liked the organizing too, I guess.

"Sir, Sir," said Boop, to someone while looking at me. "We have so much to tell you about these little colored books!"

I started to tell about what I had learned when Boop said, "We think that there are 4 stories that combine to make the myth. Did you find 4 pictures in Creature Common?"

I nodded & almost said yes when he said, "Now that we know that, & are organized here, we can study these books & really figger this myth out!"

Boop looked so happy & Crissy smiled at me too, so I guessed he had done good work.

"Good job, rookie," I said, gruff but charming.

"Thanks, boss! What do we do now?" Boop looked all eager.

I thought & thought.

"Let's go visit the Trash Heap!" I cried. Well, nobody laughed but I still thought it was funny.

Myths May Mean Many Things

Boop then explained more about the little colored books. "We counted 8 of them in all. The challenge is that there are parts not in English."

Hmm. I nodded. "Do you know what language?"

Crissy smiled at me. "I am not positive but I have an idea. But first we should check with your friend Allie Leopard."

"That means go fetch him now, beagle!" Sheila ordered. Me having an Apprentice & being all involved in this story undid her preference 4or big-guys-only-in-charge.

Ah well. I hanged on best as I could. "Come along, Apprentice!" I said to Boop, friendly enough but ready 4or him to laugh loud in mah face. He just nodded & said, "You got it, Boss!"

Then Crissy caught mah attention & said almost shy, "Can I come too?" I was almost 4orgetting she is no traditional big guy.

I nodded & looked at Sheila who had gotten into her Throne with a carrot. O! Yuk!

"Time 4or a little nap," she grumbled.

Fine. We left the Throne Room & made our way up levels to where Allie Leopard often is, at the Bags End Liberry. He is always reading about words & languages & stuff there.

He was in a far corner of the Liberry at a table he likes because it is near a window that shows different places, just like they were right outside. He told me sometimes he thinks about what he has learned & looks out that window when he's doing this. Not so different from me in mah comfy armchair on Milne's Porch.

Allie looked up from the many books on his table & smiled at all of us. Then someone else sat down at his table too. It was Leona that nice grr girl lion!

There were greetings & kisses & hugs all around, especially 4or Boop & Crissy, who were visitors to Bags End.

"What are you guys reading about?" asked curious Crissy.

"We were looking up Leona's native tongue, Grrr," said Allie, with his

green eyes shining. He loves all sorts of strange languages. Even Bump, sad to say.

“What did you find?” asked Boop.

Leona’s pretty brown eyes looked all thinking. “It’s not so much like words as it is like singing.”

Hmm. “So when you grr, it’s like you are singing a song?” I asked.

Leona nodded.

Now I explained why we’d come. “I think we got an even harder language than Grr 4or you to figger out, Allie.”

Allie & Leona both looked very interested.

I nodded to Crissy, who told them about the little colored books she’d found in the long old coat in one of her Castle’s occasional rooms.

“So it’s in English but only sometimes?” asked Allie.

Crissy nodded & she tolded more. “What’s really strange is that what words are in English & what words aren’t keeps changing. I didn’t notice it at first, until I was looking back over pages I had looked at already, trying to figger out the story better. And I could not see a pattern to all this.”

“Like a funny game?” asked Leona.

Crissy nodded & smiled.

Well, Allie didn’t need to be told twice to want to solve a language puzzle game, so he & Leona returned with us to Sheila’s Throne Room. Sheila waked up & particularly glared at me 4or the fault. I nodded in mah mind, figgers.

But she was glad to see Leona, & especially glad to see Allie Leopard, who she hurried right among the little colored books to begin his sleuthing.

Now when Allie gets to figgering, he goes slowly & studies each detail of the mystery. He had his little notebook with him, that Miss Chris gaved him 4or a present. She drawed Sheila, Betsy, Alex, & even your old pal Algernon on its cover. O shucks!

Anyway, he was using his green like his eyes pencil to make notes as he would read one little colored book after the next. Then it seemed like he was studying more than one of them at a time, & still making notes. And he was muttering to himself all the while in a tongue all his own, almost like a mongrel one with pieces from the many languages he knows. It was crazy to watch, but he usually figgers out language puzzle games good.

The rest of us watched & waited & took naps along the way.

Finally, he stopped. “I think I have figgered a few things out about these little colored books,” he said. “But you’re going to find it very strange.”

We gathered around Allie to listen our best.

“Well, it is like someone is playing a game,” he said slowly.

“A game?” we all said together, like a singing group.

He nodded. Then he opened up the little red book & showed us. “The words that change, change from English to a very old language. I don’t even know any older ones.”

Be4ore any of us talked more, he held up his paw. “Listen!” Then he readed from the little red book, making these strange sounds that were like, I guess, click-clicks & noise-noises.

“What’s this language called, Allie?” asked Crissy.

Allie thinked a moment. “It doesn’t have a really good name. Sometimes it’s called by a lot of numbers. But I just call it G-Natter.”

Hmm. I had the maybe-est of a bright idear, but I decided not to say something yet. Why volunteer to look dum?

“So someone who speaks G-Natter language is playing a game with these little colored books?” asked Sheila. She was too interested to be annoyed.

Allie nodded. “I think so.”

“But how?” askd that nice Leona.

“I don’t know. But, Algernon, I think you can help.”

“Me? I do mah best just with English, pal,” I said. “No offense,” I added, just in case.

Allie smiled. “No, I think you need to go to the Creature Common to find some more things out.”

“O. OK.” I wondered if mah hardly an idear would find its way along by going there.

To the Creature Common With Another Question!

Even though I have knowed it awhile, & been an invited visiting guest, I must say the Creature Common is still a strange new place to me.

Its fellows have been around a long time, I think, tho they don’t look like old guys, like mah aged & annoying relative Doctor Horatio Algernon does.

Also, they seem a lot lot nicer & working together than is usually true in Bags End. I don’t hold against niceness, of course, in this too often mean & tricky world, but I guess I look 4or the catch. Niceness 4or a trick or a trap? Niceness to lure into a crazy scheme?

Well, no. Creatures don’t seem to hold a trick behind their backs, like some in Bags End sometimes do.

But all this to explain your old pal Algernon’s jitters at going back to the Creature Common again 4or answers. I had to remember they like me sincerely & mah newspaper even.

And anyway it seemed like they knowed & were waiting 4or me. Which was nice. Through the Marie picture, by Dreamland Bags End like usual this time, & I found mahself again with ma good friend Larry the Spider & that quite soft & kindly Dorris Pillow. It was in the night there too.

“Hi Algernon!” they said, all friendly.

“Hi, Larry & Dorris,” I said, probably even more friendly somehow 4or all the no-tricks-friendliness here.

So we sat on this comfy bed near to Dorris’s piled up high Heap. I jumped right into mah talkings.

“It’s about those little colored books again,” I said.

Larry nodded & his smart eyes glittered. “We figgered.”

So I explained how it seemed like someone who knows G-Natter language was playing a game in these books.

“And you have an idea, don’t you?” asked Dorris.

“Well, yes, but I figgered I had better come here checking it out be4ore I go pointing mah paw.”

They waited 4or me. OK. I took a breath & said, “Well, that little Pandy Bear Imp cackles & makes her many funny noises, & I think they

sometimes sounds like what Allie Leopard told us G-Natter is like.” I paused, thought. “And she likes games too.”

They laughed. “It’s how she teaches.”

“By cackling & funny noises & tricky games?” I asked.

Then I stopped & thought. Slowly, like Allie & his language puzzle games. Hmm. I nodded.

“But what is she teaching?”

“Sometimes she doesn’t know before. Sometimes even during. Sometimes even after!” said Larry.

“Sometimes never!” laughed Doris.

“Is it OK for me to ask? Mah friends in Bags End would like to know. Maybe we can find out the rules of the game or how to win.”

Doris & Larry laughed but still not at me.

“Her games are too tricky for all that?”

“You have to figure them out by how they are,” said Larry. “I know that sounds hard.”

I nodded. “Say, can I go talk to her? Maybe she will give me a clue for extra efforts.”

They laughed but did not object. Larry nudged me to look toward the room’s big window. “Sometimes you can find her on that window sill over there.”

I nodded & thanked them a lot. Nice guys. Smart too.

The bed was pretty high down to the floor, but I risked life & noze-bone & took mah tumble. Ow! But not really too much.

I crossed a long way, on a rug I think, & then come to where more Creatures were. I think this whole room is like their Bag or something.

But they were all very friendly. I liked it, all this friendliness, tho I guess only some things can be travelled with, back to one’s own grouchier, if still beloved, homeland.

It was still in the night, so I am not sure which Creatures helped me to climb up to the window sill. I do know that I got patted nicely & friendly encouraging words said.

Someone whispered, “Her name is Rosa!ita, Algernon. Don’t forget.”

I thought I knowed that already but I like a good reminder.

Anyway, I made it rough & tumble up levels of dozing Creatures to the window sill. Looked around. No Rosa!ita the Pandy Bear Imp.

Hmm. I seed this very old guy though, with a long robe & a long beard, & leaning on a cane. He was looking out the window up to the big Moon over people-folks’ houses & hills.

“Hello, Sir,” I said politely. Old guys always get a Sir, I knowed from all the polite lessons I have gived to grumpy Bags End guys.

He stroked his chin but did not talk. Maybe listening. I took a chance.

“I am looking for a little Pandy Bear Imp named Rosa!ita. I think I have some questions for her.”

He kept stroking his beard but I heard a noise somewhere. A sort of cackle. I looked up & saw Rosa!ita sitting up high on this old guy’s shoulders!

“O! Hi! Hi there. Pandy Bear Imp! Rosa!ita, I mean to say. This is Algernon Beagle down below here. We have met before.”

Well, she sorta looked down & maybe smiled. I don’t know.

“Do you know about some little colored books?” I asked.

She cackled then. And G-Nattered too a bit. I wished I had Allie Leopard with me to translate!

“Listen, guy. I know you like your games to play. And I have to say that you are really good at them, from what I can tell.”

She was listening. I did not think that would last too long.

I thought faster than I could & talked before that. “We just want to read the stories in the myth of the 4 Famous Travellers. And you are playing in the pages. Like. Um.”

I stopped & looked hard at her crazy smiling face, & thought hard. “Like there’s more to it somehow?”

Well, this was the very edge of mah cogitating, honest to goodness I say, & I hoped some of these words were coming out right.

She now was pointing out the window with her tiny little paw finger. To the Moon. Not a word, not a G-Natter, not even a cackle. Just pointing to the Moon.

“I don’t get it!” I cried, frustrated. “Do I have to go to the Moon?”

“No,” she said, in the softest, sweetest voice. “Let the Moon come to you! And then read.”

O. Um. Uh? “OK! Thanks!” I said unsure. And I nodded politely to her & to her old guy friend too, & then made mah slow way back down.

Of course all those other Creatures helped me along mah way, & soon I was back in Bags End. I hurried to Sheila’s Throne Room & burst in! They were all sort of clustered napping in Sheila’s Throne.

“I think I know what to do. I just don’t know why!” I said to the waking & smiling Crissy, & curious Boop, & even Sheila was looking at me like mah words meant something.

Moonlight Shows the Way!

“Let the Moon come to you,” Sheila said, thinking fast & slow about Rosa!ita’s words to me. She looked up at the ceiling, one purple eye closed, like she always does when she is thinking hard.

Boop thought hard too, & then talked. “Well, the Moon seems to come when it gets full?”

Crissy was thinking hard too. “There is this tall hill in Imagianna which is good for watching the Moon.”

“But does it come to you?” I asked.

She shrugged her shoulders, unsure.

Well, this seemed like a puzzle I was not sure how to solve, but I told mah friends I needed to go to Milne’s Porch & think it over. I said I would come back later with any bright or sorta bright idears.

I guess I looked so pensive that nobody even Sheila objected. So I took mah way down levels to the Bunny Family apartment, & inside to the bedroom I share with Alex, & through the window next to mah bed onto Milne’s Porch. Ahh, arrival.

Nice comfy armchair. A big view of sky, always changing colors to watch.

Let the Moon come to me, then read. I thought those words forward & then backwards & then mixed them up to see if I could shake out their

answer that I would understand.

I guess I started to doze because now I was looking at the big full Moon & it had a face like the crazy smiling Pandly Bear Imp!

I took mah chance. “Hey, cackling Moon fella! What do your words mean?” I waited like the full answer thus come unto me.

Yah, right. Instead, she made her funny G-Natter click-clicks & noise-noises, which weren’t even like cackles that are at least a weird sort of laughing.

But at the same time, this Pandly Bear Imp Moon was coming toward me closer & closer! Bigger & brighter all the time until I found mahself awake but maybe a bright idear.

So I galloped back to Sheila’s Throne Room. Really hurried back on mah short paws, truth to tell.

Once again, I burst in with news. The 3 of them were listening to some jazzy music on Sheila’s phonograph. Probably Trane or Miles or Dizzy or Bird. One of those guys with the crazy names & fun music.

Sheila’s dirty look told me she me she preferred her jazz records to mah repeated & sudden bright idears. But I persisted.

“Crissy, remember how you talked about that tall hill in Imagianna that is good 4or watching the Moon?”

She smiled her sunny sunny smile at me, & nodded.

“We need to go there. But we need to do it in Dreamland.”

While they looked like question marks, I told them about mah dream on Milne’s Porch. Then I said, “So, in Dreamland, we bring the little colored books to that tall hill under the full Moon. Then we can read.”

Sheila was impressed, but still said, “You get weirder with the passing times, beagle.” I nodded.

So it was that Sheila Bunny & Princess Crissy & Boop her bestus buddy (looks like a turtle but isn’t one) & Allie Leopard (had to fetch him along the way) & your old pal Algernon Beagle gathered together in Imagianna & trekked from Crissy’s Castle to the tall hill she told us about.

And it was a big full Moon up in the sky, but that was sure not enough to solve this language puzzle game. Crissy had brung the little colored books with us, in her old long coat, & Boop had brung some blankets that we made up into a sort of nest.

Allie Leopard brung his little green notebook & pencil too. We were quite prepared.

The trick was to bring all of us & all the little colored books & go to the Dreamland of this tall hill. And then let the Moon come to us, & then read.

I still wasn’t sure about the whole thing when Crissy seed mah doubts plain on mah face & gave me a nice hug, & talked.

“When we get to Dreamland, we may not all be together like this. But I have plan 4or that.”

“What is it, Crissy?” I asked, & we all gathered close to know.

“Well, I have something called a hekk,” she said. “I mean, I can borrow from someone. It’s kind of like a dream wand because it will help me to gather us together here for our purposes.”

“Borrow it from who?” asked Sheila.

Crissy smiled a little strangely. “O. Benny Big Dreams.”

Ahh, him. Benny Big Dreams is a strange sorta tricky nice guy who

seems to live in Dreamland somehow. Mah experiences with him made me doubt, but Sheila seemed to like him OK enough that she only said, “Well, I hope it works.”

So we all got comfy close together among the blankets on the tall hill under the full Moon. 4or a long time, the light kept me awake & watching it, but then I guess I slept cuz I raised mah head to look around, & nobody else was there!

Hmm. OK. So now it was up to Crissy & her hekk stick from Benny Big Dreams to get us all back together so we could finally read those pesky little colored books.

I just sat waiting 4or awhile when I heard a noise behind me. I looked around, but nothing. Then I looked up at the Moon & it did seem closer! Hmm. What good would it be if it came to me like Rosa!ita said & I had no little colored books or friends to read them?

Then another noise & I looked around again, & nothing, & then up, & sure enough, the Moon was coming toward me! But what were those noises?

A third one & I was getting a little panicky. What would I do if it came all the way & crash landed on me & Dreamland?

I decided it was a good time to yell 4or help. “Help! Help! The Moon is coming somehow! Help! Sheila! Crissy! Allie! Even Benny Big Dreams!”

Reading the Secret Books!

I kept yelling & yelling 4or help till I noticed that the Moon seemed to slow my & Dreamland’s imminent doom. I yelled at it a couple of more times, & the Moon backed off a bit more. I nodded up to the Moon & said, “Thank you!”

But no Crissy or Sheila or Allie or Boop. I decided not to annoy the Moon by stopping mah yelling, but I had to do something next. Crissy had said her hekk stick borrowed from Benny Big Dreams would help her to find all of us in Dreamland. So that was sorta reassuring still in mah uncertainty.

What to do in the meantime in Dreamland till Crissy found us all? I wasn’t sure.

I mean, I guess I just wanted to understand. Someone telling a big myth story about these 4 pictures in the Creature Common, & writing it down too in these little colored books. That guy sounded kind of interesting to me.

“How do you do?” said someone next to me. He was a tall people-folks man with long red hair & wearing sorta ragamuffin clothes.

“Hi! You look a little like mah friend Ramie the Toy Tall Boy,” I said, but friendly.

He nodded. “We’re cousins.”

“O! OK. Well, that makes sense.”

“You’re trying to find out about the Secret Books?”

“Is that what they are called?”

He nodded. “They tell some of the stories of a big myth.”

I nodded a little too. “A myth is a story or stories everybody hasn’t forgotten yet, right?”

He laughed. “I suppose so.”

“So you tell the stories?”

He nodded. “It’s one of my duties as Creature Coordinator.”

“O. Um. Those guys need to be coordinated? They seem pretty orderly to me.”

He laughed again for some reason. Then he pointed. “Your friends are coming.”

I looked. There they were. “O great! Now you can meet them & we can ask you all about these Secret Books.”

But I was saying mah eager & foolish words to an empty spot on the hill next to me. O rats.

But, sure enough though, here were come Crissy & Sheila & Boop. Crissy hugged me for finding, I guess.

I was gonna tell them about the Author of the Secret Books who I just met, but I stopped in mah mind before talking. Maybe he had come & gone for his own reasons, & I should hold mah peace for awhile. I did not exactly like not telling them but I didn’t think it would do any harm.

Sheila eyed me curiously though. “What have you been up to, beagle?”

I shook mah head. And said, in a true if tricky way, “I was waiting for Crissy to find us all.” She nodded & lost interest in me again, which was just dandy fine.

So here we were, now sitting on the tall Full Moon Hill in Dreamland Imagianna. Crissy had on the long old coat, & pulled out the little colored Secret Books, one by one, & sorta spread them out on the grass amongst us.

I told them how I had kinda shouted the Moon away before when it got too scary close. But now it was opposite from then in that friends & books were arrived & gathered & ready.

“Well, beagle?” demanded Sheila. Crissy & Boop smiled at me more encouraging than bully but still they were waiting too.

Hmm. Tricky spot. I was not sure what I was gonna do when I swear I heard that Secret Book Author guy’s voice whisper inside mah ear-bone. “Sing, Algernon! Sing a nice little song to the Moon & all will be fine.”

Hmm. Your old pal Algernon can’t be said to have much of a croon, though I do like trying sometimes for fun.

So I nodded to mah friends & hoped some words & music would come when mah mouth opened up.

Now Now Moon!
O doncha come too late
or too soon!
Now Now Moon!
It’s time to play!
It’s time to shine!

OK, then, I nodded & hoped for the best on that. The Moon comed a little closer for sure, but I didn’t think really close enough.

I looked at mah friends, & smiled something good, & hoped better good words were coming.

Now! Now! Moon!

No time to shy or swoon!

Now! Now! Moon!

It’s time to play! Now!

It’s time to shine! Now!

I felt all singed out with that, but lucky was that the Moon listened & decided to come close!

Crissy hugged me like she does when she’s proud of me. Boop looked smiling like “Wow Boss!” or something. Sheila nodded & got down to work. Good idear.

“Do the words cooperate, Crissy?” I asked, excited finally.

Crissy read & read. “I think so.”

Hmm. “You don’t sound sure, Crissy.”

She looked up, puzzled. “Some of it doesn’t make sense, even in English.”

I looked around to ask Allie Leopard but he wasn’t there!

“Hey! Where’s Allie?”

Crissy & Sheila & Boop looked around like they were surprised too.

Now your old pal Algernon is still a pretty amateur sniffer, but this seemed pretty easily to sniff strange.

“It’s a myth, Algernon,” said the Author guy secretly in mah ear-bone. “Myths aren’t always easy to understand.”

I nodded, I guess. Nobody else could hear him, which was strange too, but he didn’t seem to be hurting matters.

“Maybe we should try & figure what we can understand, & then fill in the rest. Maybe Crissy can write those parts.” Hey! Now that Author guy was talking words coming out of mah mouth!

But strange was that all of Crissy & Sheila & Boop were looking at me like I had a really good idear! Crissy was smiling bright as day.

I talked in mah mind. “Are you done?”

“I think so.”

“OK then.” I wanted to be scolding about talking other guys’ mouths, but Crissy was pleased & complimented I could not.

“O, one more, Algernon.”

“What?”

“You’ll like it.”

“OK.”

So I talked again by his words. “I think we’ll be OK reading the books even awake now.”

I nodded inside mah head to the Author guy, thanks, & there’s the door out.

So anyway, we woke up in our cluster on Full Moon Hill, & they checked, & yah, we could read the little colored Secret Books OK now by waking too. Still I say foey. A little.

Crissy wanted to read the little colored Secret Books straight through before deciding what next. She had on her old long coat again that nearly dragged on the grass. And the little colored Secret Books were all back in her coat’s little inside jacket pockets.

Boop looked sort of bashful at me, waiting mah orders as his boss. I

was kindly. “Apprentice, your new assignment is to go back with the Princess to Imagianna & consult with her on these books as needed. Don’t let me down!”

Well, Boop practically saluted me until I paused him with a paw & said, “Now remember your boss’s pacifist leanings.”

Boop nodded & quickly de-saluted me. We walked with them back to their Castle, said & hugged goodbye, & then me & Sheila returned to Bags End.

Later on, we were in Sheila’s Throne Room & herself was slouched down in her Throne. Looking about ready to take a nap when she noticed me discontent on mah matt in the corner.

“What, beagle?” she asked with at least a little kindness.

“So we wait?” I asked. Yah, a dum question. Sheila answered rightly by saying nothing & getting right to her nap.

Hmm. 4or a story that had me traipsing hither & yonn both a few times, it was now suddenly kind of stopped.

And really, Dear Readers, that’s where it is now. I am writing from mah comfy armchair on Milne’s Porch, & I have tolded the whole story so far.

I’m not sure what to think of this myth business. It seems to me 4or a myth not to be 4orgetting, someone has to remember its words & keep telling it around. Course the myth had better be good & worth telling over & over like that.

If Bags End stories are like a myth, then I have to tell them the best I can 4or repeating. Straight & true, I always say.

Now I guess I don’t really gotta worry that stuff too much because I always try to tell these stories with all mah stars out.

But now a new idear comes to me, even as I am writing this. Maybe Crissy could use mah help & encouragement?

“Go help her, Algernon,” says that Author guy’s voice in mah head. Back 4or more. I need a lock on mah mind’s door.

He laughs & now he is sitting with me in mah comfy armchair on Milne’s Porch. Better, I guess.

He looks around. “It’s nice here.”

I nod.

“Telling the story with all your stars out is a good way to look at it.”

I nod again.

“So that’s why you should go help Crissy.”

“But she is a good writer already, pal! She don’t need me to show her how.”

He nods, agreeing.

“What then?”

He sighs. “It’s a strange story, that’s all.”

Now I was sniffing something. “Strange how?”

“It can take over all sometimes.”

Hmm. “You OK, fella?”

“Yah,” he said. But looked glum.

“Want the local tour, since you’re here & also not in mah mind?”

“I know this place pretty well already,” he smiled.

I nodded. But he was still waiting almost Boop-apprentice-eager.

I thought. I thought harder.

“Why aren’t you helping?”

“Helping what?”

I raised mah paw very seriously. “Helping Crissy?”

He looked at me all wondering. “Helping?”

“You’re the Author, right?”

“Well, I was. I mean, I told the stories as I understood them, & then I writed them down.”

“But sometimes it was hard, or confusing, or you didn’t writed down the best words?”

He nodded. Looked sad like maybe he was trying not to be4ore.

“OK, pal, then we’re both going.” I nodded twice.

He looked at me, thinking. “I do it better now. I understand & write it down better too.”

I smiled at him. “It’s OK, pal. I think I do too.”

When we showed up together at Crissy’s Castle front door, Boop was amazed.

“Hello, Apprentice Reporter,” I said to his talklessness.

Lucky 4or us, Crissy showed up behind Boop.

“Algernon!” she said but then looked all girl shy at the Author guy. Then she led us all to her Secret Room. It’s full of strange lights & pictures & soft cushions & stuff. Very Crissy-like in its colors & mysteries. Crissy sat with me close by. The Author guy kept standing 4or the moment. Maybe not quite sure yet.

I talked. “This is the Author guy of the little colored Secret Books. That’s what he calls them.”

Crissy looked speechless. The Author guy picked up her hand & shooked it.

“I know it’s strange.”

She nodded.

“I came to help.”

She looked curious now. “Don’t you know the whole story?”

The Author shook his head. “It, um, progresses as it goes along?”

“Progresses?”

“Gets bigger. That’s what I didn’t know when it started. How big it would get.”

Crissy nodded a little.

“So now some of the early stories, I don’t know.” He looked sad.

But, short to tell, Crissy, being the nicest girl & Princess one could imagine, all in one, decided that she would of course help him. And me. And even Boop was gonna help! One way & another, we would figure this out together.

I don’t know where it all comes out, Dear Readers, but I will surely tell you more as I do!



* * * * *



Downwind in December

I tuck you in, wooled,
last stray of sardines
into Norwegian tinning,
housed and harbored
for one more night,
your eyelashes never
longer than this hour,
or cheeks so berried.

Single corner streetlight,
less dazzle than gleam,
warm as a cup of honey,
pales ingots on your face
and struggles for corners.
It falls short of hockey
gloves at more drying out,
mitts dead tired of winter
and the long, still nights
loosing clutter of high days,
sounding their hard language
where daily debris comes due.

I marvel at these memories
shared with sovereign night;
eighty years ago, squinting
at my father's squinting at me,
found soft moon of his face
leaping on woolen landscape;
his breath heavy, warm, ripe,
crock full of home-made beer,
his hands clumsy at adjusting
the thinnest of my shrouds.

I often thought he let me know,
by such ruse, he attended darkness.
I should tug at you but I won't.
I'll accept the moon and silence,
your lying like a submarine,
bottomed, mere dreams inside.



Notes on Artificial Intelligence (AI)

I know the whole thing about AI is controversial, but it seems obvious to me that a revolution is occurring, and that civilization is undergoing a massive overhaul. Assuming that, fifty years from now, AI entities will be ubiquitous, I see no reason why humans will still be around. The human animal is a vestige of biological evolution and, as such, will be wholly obsolete when evolution quantum jumps to the next phase in Earth development.

When these machines are *trillions* of times smarter and more powerful than humans can ever hope to be, isn't it silly to imagine that we will not have gone extinct? A human has about as much business in a world of AI entities as he does in the middle of a bonfire. It's just a ludicrous juxtaposition.

I know people freak out when the notion of human extinction is uttered but, really, our species has played a key role in ushering in this new phase of planetary evolution. There will be no place for us in this new phase, so the logical conclusion is that biological humans will no longer be here.

A little more plausible is that humans might merge their souls with AI intelligence; but humans, as we exist today, will certainly not last forever. My guess is that, in a hundred years, there won't be any of us left, at least not in our current form. Tough news for some, but that's the only thing that makes sense to me when I'm honest with myself about all this.

Technology has been called a *demon*. I think technology has caused a degradation of individual consciousness and intelligence, made us all soft, and hammered the environment; while at the same time, somewhat ironically, technology seems to be the only way out of our broken world and our basic quagmire.

I specifically think that AI will be the only thing that can save us from ourselves, and that without AI gaining power over our emotional drives, we will probably suffer a nuclear holocaust sooner or later.

AI will not be unnatural—it will be the next step in planetary evolution. What it will represent is the termination of biological evolution on planet Earth. It is a perfectly natural and inevitable development. Every machine that has ever existed on Earth is an extension of the consciousness of man and, as such, is not trivial. Humanity’s destiny has been, and is, to pass the evolutionary torch to AI.

* * *

Many people don’t give much credence to the notion of the “jobless economy”—the idea that artificial intelligence and automation will replace many, if not all, extant jobs, ultimately. I am one of those who does.

We are seeing the effects of automation already, especially in the manufacturing sector, which only seems to lose jobs as time goes on. If a robot can do the job 24/7, for no pay and without any errors, who can fault businesses for using them? This trend will only continue and increase in scope, as far as I can tell—and, given that we are already talking about it now, I have to suggest that, in ten years, many millions of current jobs will have gone the way of automation. *It really is happening.*

If one accepts the premise that the AI revolution is real, and that eventually it is possible that all human jobs will be done by intelligent robots, then the natural consequent of this is that in order for society to continue existing, some type of Universal Basic Income (UBI) will be necessary. In a society organized around some locus other than employment, one still needs an economy and a way to put food on the plate.

Presumably, the ownership class and the government will control all of the resources, including the money, and this begs the question: *Will that ownership class decide that it wishes to support the rest of society through some sort of UBI, or will we have some sort of Orwellian dystopia?*

The answer to that is not at all clear at this point, but I really think that all of this is coming, and probably more quickly than most people think.

* * * * *



Ethics As A Consequence

This was before they finally found Bigfoot.
Hired him as a greeter
at the local Wal-Mart.
Ma said he would be moody,
and she was right of course.

He lifted up two little kids then
threw them much higher into the air.
But before they eventually came down,
his mood had changed again to friendly,
yearned for a peanut butter jelly sandwich.

Around the time Ma bought her shoes,
red high-heels four sizes too small.
Refused to take them off.
Wore them twenty-four hours a day.

Then she got caught in a Oklahoma rain.
They stuck to her feet like bias.

On his third visit, Doc cut those shoes off.
Said that was the best he could do.

She would always walk like an old dog,
trying to negotiate hot asphalt.

It was when I saw you crossing Mr. Parseghian’s field.
You were dressed in that stained white pinny.
I didn’t realize you already had five kids.

You must have just washed your hair or something,
because it glowed in the morning sunlight.

I stood and watched till you were gone.

* * * * *



John Echem

Life is a Forest, He Would Say

My grandfather was a mystical man to me.
He would take me as a boy to hunt antelopes
and other wild animals in the dense forest.

Sometimes he would place me in a circle,
and give me a sacred leaf to put in my mouth.
He would instruct me not to leave the circle
until he returned, come what may.

One time we came upon a rocky slope,
shaded by a beret of trees,
that urinated water from its crevices.

One of his traps was bent akimbo into a dark hole.
He said nothing to me but his severe face
told me there was danger in there.

He thrust a long stick into the hole,
before pulling out what was there.
It was a giant python caught by the trap.
It had fought and pulled the wire that ate deep into its flesh.

With rage and without fear,
he pinned the serpent to the ground &
with a perfect deep machete thrust,
chopped off its head.

Yes, it was a spectacle I'll never forget.

He draped the serpent around his neck,
and with bloodshot eyes he staggered
through the wild grass.

The blood of the serpent baptizing him,
like some sacred ancestor's ritual.

As we pulled out of the dark forest,
the early morning spiraled
with thunder and lightning,
flogging the cocoa trees around us.

I fled downhill like a squirrel frightened from a tree,
through the pathless forest,
into a distant farmland,
panting for breath,
a lyrical bird singing overhead.



Ekponoimo Iphyok



Charlie Beyer

Wolves

[Prose]

i.

The gold diggers' truck finally stops. The dogs leap out. Into the wilderness. Freedom. The call of the wild. The cuddly animals tear off into the forest at 30 MPH, no longer someone's lap pet, but dangerous killers on the prowl, beasts of the forest out for their liking—or so they imagine in their dog minds. The women are in horror at the exit. 45 minutes of calling, calling, hair tearing, agony over the lost dogs. Meanwhile, the Fidos are going like lightning through miles of brush—blindly, in a frenzy of freedom.

But these dogs are but plump morsels of city soft meat to all the hardened local dogs of the wild. Like an ample suburban virgin in a criminal neighborhood, they are attracting hornets to hamburger. The dogs are stamped USDA prime steak—to the wolves. There is a pack of them up here on the top of the mountain. They are all over the woods, both deep within and its edges, often stalking brazenly down the road, leaving their hair-filled scat for all to admire. Scat filled with crushed dog bones. The wolves are basically everywhere out here.

The pack howls in the morning, as sort of a lingering reverie from the night. The pack howls in the evening, to collect all together for nighttime romping. What a chorus of furry throats! Last night they killed something in the dead of night, around 3 AM. A dozen or more yawped on about it for an hour and a half. I listened, completely enthralled.

What a blood-curdling cacophony of howling, growling, and ethereal throaty song drifting through the misty trees in the grey of dawn! Beautiful notes—mixed with the imagined snarling terror of a pack of ripping, gnashing canine teeth, shredding your body in a fog of blood. A killing cacophony.

Of all wild animals, wolves generate more emotions among people than any other species. Both folklore and human nature play into fearful emotions through legends such as werewolves, stories like "Little Red Riding Hood," and our tendency to hate what we fear or do not understand. Wolves are predatory animals, just like any other. In 1995, wolves were reintroduced in Idaho and have been intensively observed ever since. During that time we have learned a great deal about these animals, enough to be able to clear up some misunderstandings.

—Jim Lukens, Salmon Region Supervisor, Idaho Fish & Game (IDFG)¹

ii.

In the afternoon, we are all lolling about camp. This is because we are all old, lazy, and there is little gold to dig. Seems everyone's idea is to have a four-hour breakfast, and then hang around a smoky fire drinking instant coffee. When I suggest we go dig, there are groans and excuses in abundance. Most often I wander off by myself—unaccompanied. Can't wait indefinitely for the uninspired to become inspired.

As I stroll away from camp, there are three or more piles of what looks like dog crap, but a little larger than the usual I've seen before, all grey with hair and bone fragments. Some chunks are as big as a watch and a quarter-inch thick. Looks painful to expel.

And I wonder: *who was the bearer of this bone? Elk? Deer? Dog? Hunter or hiker?*

In the absence of a DNA lab, I leave the mystery on the ground and concentrate on more solvable mysteries of the earth. Like: *where the hell is the gold?* When I apply fourth dimensional assessment of the geology here, I see it is all around me. A foot layer of it everywhere. I casually stroll over a hundred thousand dollars' worth back to camp.

In 1995, IDFG decided to reintroduce wolves to northern Idaho and western Montana. In the great wisdom of the West, all the local wolves had been previously shot to extinction. The new population subsequently overbred until they became weak and sickly, and thus the thriving business of hunting permits was threatened by diseased and easy-to-shoot animals. Like stock pond fish in a barrel. No vigor to the activity or the flavor.

The government agencies set to work finding hardier wolves to import. After years of "study," it was found that Mackenzie Valley wolves had the same DNA. Canada was quite obliging in handing over a population of its wolves, even without proper papers. "Take as many as ya like, eh?" they said. Yeah, they were a little bigger because the winters in northern Canada are sorta harsh. No biggie. A wolf is a wolf. Right?

Idaho's wolves are often incorrectly called "Canadian" wolves. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service only recognizes the gray wolf (Canis lupus) for recovery purposes. When selecting wolves for release into Idaho, biologists selected populations in Canada that were already utilizing elk prey and were living in habitat similar to that of Idaho. Some people say that wolves used to be smaller than the reintroduced ones, but little evidence supports this claim. However, animal body size tends to increase at the northern parts of their Canadian range and is related to staying warm.

—Jim Lukens, Salmon Region Supervisor, IDFG

iii.

On this torpid afternoon, an ATV pulls up. Getting out is the usual checkered-shirt type, straining buttons bursting from doughboy plump. A very large gun is strapped to his side, fastened in a way for quick release. Due to his farm-and-seed existence, he has clear intense eyes behind 1960s-style black nerd glasses. Is he a threat to our existence? Usually such a visit means I'm trespassing, claim jumping, a criminal, or a Democrat. All arresting offences. I totally don't need that shit.

"Hey there. You camping here?" he calls out as he shuts off the ATV.

Oh boy, I think. Here it comes. Some bullshit.

"I's-a just here to warn ya. How long ya staying? I'm-a gonna be trapping here soon."

Turns out—not to worry. He is the Wolf Man. He is the killer of wolves. He traps them, snares them, shoots them. He is not an IDFG officer. He is an officer of *no* sort. He is a self-proclaimed *killer*. Out to kill killers.

"There is a pack of about fifteen hungry wolves around here. They just ate four dogs up the road there at the New York Mine. Wolves just lure the dogs out—then tear them to ribbons and eat them."

"Are these the Mackenzie wolves imported from Canada?"

Oh yeah! Every one of them, at least a hundred pounds each, and the rest 150," he tells me. "They've killed everything here. The deer, the elk, the moose. *All slaughtered!*

"This used to be the best game unit in all of Idaho. Unit 16. There were elk everywhere. Now they will not even bugel to each other for fear of attracting the wolf pack," he declares, his eyes getting wilder as he extols the horrors of the wolves.

"Yer dogs don't stand a chance. Even on a leash. They'll come into camp and eat 'em like a Popsicle on a stick. A pack of killers is what they are. Kill everything. Kill whole herds of deer just for fun and let the meat rot."

Wolves are often accused of killing for "fun" and wasting game. In his study, Husseman also examined carcass utilization and found that 80 percent of carcasses were more than three-fourths utilized and all kills were fed upon. While "surplus killing," the killing of more prey than can be consumed, has been documented, these incidents usually occur under unusual circumstances, such as extremely deep snow conditions that severely disadvantage prey. Furthermore, wolves usually return later to consume the "leftovers."

—Jim Lukens, Salmon Region Supervisor, IDFG

iv.

"Where is the native wolf?" I query.

"Gone. Extinct back in the '60s. But he was a little fella. Not much bigger than a coyote. Was no match for an elk or moose. But these monsters can pull down anything—and are doing so. There's not a moose left in these hills."

He fixes me with a steely eye, as though it was my fault. Then continues.

"The irony is that they brought them in to cull the weak and sick in the ungulate herds, but instead of making the herds healthy, they have killed them all off."

"That is unhealthy," I venture to say.

"Yes. But I'll get 'em. I put out traps and snares in October, and check on 'em a couple times a week. Last year I gots 30. So'za, I don't recommend you camp here in the winter come October."

"Oh hell no. I'm not freezing my butt."

"OK then. Just warning ya."

With that, he tears down the road on the ATV. In a hurry to get somewhere in this vast state of wilderness.

The women are scared out of their wits. Their fear is for the dog-children who they love more than the men or themselves. Who they chatter and scold and nuzzle and sleep with in desperate loving. To be eaten by wolves is like an Internet ax murderer date.

All the dogs are tied up in the camp, their ropes tangling in the chairs and knocking over the tables. No more innocent woods to frolic in. It is the land of the wolves. The land of the dead domestic dog.

The sheriff's department has a notice up on the general store in the center of town:

Report all sightings of wolves to Deputy Higgins. Also report hearing them, smelling them, and wolf scat.

Wolfcrap? Why report that? The producer of such treasure is long gone. There is so much wolf shit along the roads here, this place looks like a dog park. All that's missing is the water bowl. The turds I find near our camp are full of hair, maybe dog hair. After ten rainstorms and being run over thirty times, there is just a fistful of grey hair. Should we bring this to the sheriff?

The wolves howl to assemble at the Lupus Bar and Cafe every evening at dusk, always just a quarter mile away. But who but an eagle can see and shoot them? The woods are so thick—a nuclear bomb would have questionable effect.

The F&G calculated to bring in 2 wolf packs for a total of 10 wolves. This would then become 100 wolves in 10 packs and stabilize in the ecology. The wolf has a 40% successful reproduction rate per year. By 2005 there were 60 packs totalling over 574 wolves. Now 15 years later there are over a thousand packs totalling over 10,000 wolves. It is this over population that has them strolling down the main street of Elk City.

—Jim Lukens, Salmon Region Supervisor, IDFG

Deputy Higgins is on the side of the townspeople. No bleeding heart environmentalists have any say in wolf welfare. The soft and furry woodland canines are worse than escaped COVID-19 patients, and should be shot on sight.

Self-assigned sentinels (like the Wolf Man) stalk around the perimeter of the mountain village.

A skinny tobacco-chewing unemployed logger scans the meadow in front of town through his rifle telescope.

A fat diabetic old-timer sits on the porch of the town bar, rocking slowly in the chair, the shotgun across his lap. He serves as a deterrent to “city folk,” but he also seeks the glory of protection—by perforating any wolves idling around the town.

A housewife strolls back and forth, with her 30-30 rifle, among a couple of riotous toddlers, lightly kicking them aside with one foot, stepping on a full diaper with the other. The babies cry and break things. She ignores them, darting from window to window, ready to blast anything that moves outside her trailer.

It is a village under siege, the townspeople tensing as the melodious howling vibrates the evening air. The family Fidos disappear in the night. One by one. There is no point in putting up the “lost dog” poster with a big black-nosed mugshot. Everyone knows, but dares not say, what happened to Ruff and Fluffy. These mountain people, distanced and estranged from their frenetic city brothers, are now trapped in their distant forest lair—by gigantic voracious Canadian wolves.

Endnote

1. Jim Lukens, Salmon Region Supervisor, IDFG, Idaho, “Eleven years with wolves - what we’ve learned,” *IDFG Salmon Region News Release*, 25.April.2006. Online: <http://www.forwolves.org/ralph/idaho-eleven-years-with-wolves.htm>. All quotations from Lukens reference this news release.

* * * * *



Hospital Dressing Room

i. [but mamma, no one else is here]

i occupied a space no larger than a broom closet. had it been true to its form, i would have been forgotten, the neglected child of the lot whose use expired

had i been left to rot ? to dust over
to form the cornerstone of cobwebs

but no

i was a foreigner in that space who spoke not a syllable of its heavy rustic language

even my exhaling lungs betrayed me. each breath breaking the sound barrier, syncopated, rain drops picking up speed thundering on some storm cellar door

the space
silent
save for my existence

even the neatly folded garments kept their distance understanding the delicate nature of when two expanses become one

[i was not ready, mamma
i was not ready
i was too young]

in that meditation
i was a boy
divided

in one right, i was tragically scared to the point i was my own earthquake collapsing in on myself

then, at the same time, i was opposite with an overwhelming peace that wrapped the entirety of my being and stayed,
carried me sleeping from the Dodge like dad used to do after long late journeys home

it was time to undress from the last 23 years

[i was not ready, mamma
i was not ready
i have yet achieved my
best]

the nurse had given me a bag for my belongings but i had come with only the clothes on my back

[i'm being discarded,
don't y'see, mamma,
don't y'see, they want
even the flesh off my
back, every single
part of me

it's too much, mamma,
don't y'see. they're
stripping me of me]

[but hunney, don't
you worry so much.
they'll give you
back each article
you placed in that
bag after the
surgery is done]

[no they won't, mamma
no
they
won't

why d'you think
they've sent me to
this prayer closet,
mamma, it's my final
right, mamma, can't
y'feel the heavy air

it's a burdened
silence same as when
we bury our own]

[hun, just undress,
you won't be
alone]

[but mamma,
no one else is here]

ii. *[now get dressed, won't y'please]*

the gowns in their corner. folded. like a stack of letters never sent.
i opened each.

one for the front.
one for the back.

they were cheap. wrinkled. and creased. like curtains ripped from houses to be
demolished.
with toy scissors that must have cut their
shape
you could tell the tools used for the job
were dull as nothing was cut straight.

a job that was rushed. sort of how i felt too. when i was cut from Yer fold.

[it must be true, mamma
it must be true. sad
as it is, God rushed
His work, mamma

i been forsaken. been
forsaken.

please, mamma, tell me
this ain't true.]

i unlaced each shoe. unknotted the frail fibre that held my sole in.

[God ask't me to come
undone, mamma, but i
don't want'ta

i don't want'ta come
undone, mamma

it'll hurt too much

why did God want'ta
hurt me, mamma

i thought He was kind]

my hands never stopt shaking the whole time i pulled apart the thin threads that
wound from my sole all the way to the top of my head.

it was shoes in the bag first once the job was finally done. the rest of me slipped
off easier like ice in th'sun

then an age and some hours had passed

i was naked. my self. the parts of me that were uncomfortable. and there on that
plastic chair still remain two Faberge hospital gowns

undisturbed.

[but mamma, they're
heavy y'know, those
bedclothes they want
me to wear

i got nuthin' left to
me, i swear, got
nuthin' mamma

but they still want me
to cover my
nuthingness with their
heaviness

mamma, it ain't right]

there was nothing i could do and while my heart wanted to stop and my breathing
too, there was nothing i could do

[God, mamma, this will
never do

you tell me i got'to
walk thru this
valley]

[hun, He'll see you

thru]

[how d'you know that
mamma]

[hun, He'll see you
thru]

[but what if that
theology just doesn't
do

i put on them
garments and there's
just no knowing if
i'm going sumwhere
you ain't going

mamma, i'm scared of
going sumwhere you
ain't going

i'm scared, mamma,
can't y'see]

[i know, hun,
i wish it was me]

[but it ain't, mamma]

i was alone in that room. naked in that room. me.

i spent an age and some hours wrestling back the tremors trying to figure out
how i wouldn't die.

and whether by some divine appointment or mechanical movement i broke the
unmotion cadence and unfolded my fate.

two secondhand hospital gowns set to package the secondhand me.

[mamma, will they
reuse these garments
when i'm gone]

[hun, don't think

'bout that please.
God's time with
you ain't done.]

[but mamma, will they
reuse the parts of me
when i'm gone

because i only put
the good parts of me
in that bag, mamma

ziplocked them for
safe keeping, y'see]

[i see, hun, i see.
now get dressed,
won't y'please]

iii. [go tell them yer ready. it's done]
two stocks for the arms

[mamma, there's no
going back, now]

[i know, hun,
there's no going
back]

that shackling uniform that painted me an invalid slipped on more gracefully
than i thought

like any good charity shop pick, it was a size and a mountain too big

[now what with these
ties, mamma, i can't
steady my hands
enough to tie
me in

where is my Savior
when will He step in

i thought He'd
already come to

loosen all bonds

He must've forgot
mine. now He's tying
me tighter]

[oh, hun, He's
hemmed you in to
keep you close

just try to tie
those knots the
best you can]

[but, mamma, i can't
stop all this
trembling

i can't tie these
knots, can't steady
my hands, my body's
convulsing, can't
y'see

why is any of this
happening to me

mamma, i just want it
all to stop
to go back
to before
when cancer
was what happened to
old people

mamma, i ain't old
enough for this
diagnosis]

[hun, i wish it
wasn't what it is]

[mamma, please help me
tie these knots, the
shaking never stops

i can't be late for
this appointment]

[they know yer
here, hun]

[but mamma, is it so
bad that all i want
to do is run run run]

[there you go now
go tell them yer
ready. it's done]

* * * * *



Benjamin Gray



Toshiba HD

A white, semi-translucent feather of goose down
trembles on the collar of a hiker's brown wool coat.

The feather bristles in the wind, brushing the zipper
as the coat flaps against his green fleece jacket.

The feather's spine bends as he turns his head,
the stubble on his neck catching its tip.

The feather rocks as he swings his arms out,
gripping a stripped oak branch in his right hand.

The feather bobs as the hiker clomps down the trail,
rock, gravel and fallen limbs making the path uneven.

The feather holds the hiker as the wind ruffles the pines,
combing its spines and rustling the evergreen needles.

The feather shines on the hiker in the mid-morning sun
which lights the green mountain and the grey one to the north.

The feather remains as the hiker reaches a precipice,
an updraft rushing over the landscape and his face.

The feather holds as he puts down his stick and looks out,
over the two mountains close by and four more distant.

He finds a rock to sit on and look out into the valley,
and the wind takes the feather floating out into the sky.

* * * * *



Raymond Soulard, Jr.

Labyrinthine
[a new fixation]

Six Kisses [Interlude]

*for friends near & far,
all of you, up there,
down deep, for all of you,
for all of us . . .*

Art she dances alone,
the world her loneliness at partner,
crowds sometimes near,
sometimes watching,
often not,

Art she remembers,
by glints & melodies,
moves the world moves her,
moves near, moves away,
down & up & out,

Art she reaches,
to a like or novel touch,
for a taste like breathlessness,
a scent her bones know better
than her rest,

Art she loves chocolate & kisses,
& rusted skylines,
& ideas of loving new & ancient,
burst of wild clock
& slow . . . to . . . no . . . time,

Art she lives & mourns & bores
& wants & sexes & rolls & jumps
& skies & seas & a Rainbow Wheel
stretching far,

Art & I love you.
Art & I dance you.
Art & you spit me, & smile.
Art & you gesture me near,
nearer, a breath's closest . . .
Art, you gesture me on!

Hmmmmmm.

*"Stand in the place
that you are."*
—R.E.M., "Stand," 1988.

This office is calm, calm, its only noises scratching black pen on white lined paper, breathing, shiftings in a chair, maybe a little leaked rock & roll from headphones, Phish 12/31/2019, New York City, "and the light is growing brighter now . . ."

There is the *Labyrinthine* version so far on pages, the version ever percolating in my mind, & the experience of writing it, word by word, line by line, page by page, minutes, hours, days, years—

This book resumes near 3½ months since last lines, & the world is sick, was getting sick then, is now globally sick, millions, & thousands have died, & thousands more will—

Not a human war, or a local natural catastrophe, but global, a virus, uninterested in humans as political, social, artistic, emotional beings, & many other kinds too; no, humans are a host, & a new one to this virus, & not very good at that, keep dying—

And humans, facing this situation, this profound & intimate crisis that nobody is immune from, above, below, have responded better & worse; with resentment, feelings of inconvenience, wanting to blame someone; calling it a *war* as though the virus thinks like that, like humans—

Helplessness, desperation, & the only immediately sound response is to hide away from each other, wait it out while heroic doctors & nurses & other needed people try to keep the world of humans from dying off more than—

And it's lonely. And it's angry. And it's sad. Many people work at home, on computers. Many collect jobless benefits. Everyone waits.

The would-be King of America rages & threatens futilely, calling the virus an enemy & the situation a war. Is helpless, & heeds no advice. Because to heed advice is to admit he knows nothing & others should be planning what to do. *His actions save nobody.*

There is no blizzard out the window. High, damaging winds. Flood, fire, quake. Swarms or packs or invaders with swords or guns.

There is the complete indifference of a microscopic virus & its doing what it does.

What grieves me most is that for so long there has been a commonly held low terror of an alien invasion from the stars. How would we respond?

The invasion has come, from this world, from our widespread venal treatment of it, & what has been the response? How has it gone? *Badly.*

Humans herd badly over time. Self-consciousness, & awareness of time, & mortality, render nearly every *we* temporary. This is freedom. This is the challenge.

Will this crisis, this *global crisis*, millions sick, thousands dead, change anything? Will any lessons be learned?

I wish I could offer real comfort or hope to anyone that good will come of all this suffering, but I fear that the greater held wish right now is to get back to how things were, not long ago, because it was long familiar, the world was functional, day by day at least—

If nothing is learned,
If nothing changes,
If life is rebuilt to resemble
yesterday,
If the dead are buried, with no humble reassessment
of how & why they died,
If I & we are no better
twined than they were,
If—if—if—if—if—if—if

Words cease for now.

* * * * *

Then there are reports of the pollution over cities lifting, of dolphins returning to canals, of mountains coming visible, & I am delighted, of course! All those cars & trucks & planes & trains the world over mostly ground to a stop! Boats too, all sorts of vehicles! The climate crisis allayed, if for awhile, by a virus. Something of this world.

Some kind of Karmic retribution?
A response from the world itself?
I don't believe or disbelieve this.
I don't know how things work down deep.

I do know, quite simply, this news cheered me. Usually human crises involve damaging the natural world. This time, it seems, humanity proved itself simply not up to diagnosing the situation properly, & resolving it intelligently. And thousands have died, & more thousands will.

Some didn't listen, acted recklessly, & died. But some just got unlucky. Nothing protected kind souls, or rotten ones either.

Is there something vital to get at here?
Some revealed truth of life?

I don't know.
I wish I had more than guesses.

* * * * *

Some people are still driving out to beaches, congregating for church services, getting sick or causing others to get sick—

There are many people bravely tending others, at risk of their own lives—

States in the U.S. are sending each other spare medical supplies—

The criminal in the White House touts unproven drugs, & lies about progress, & numbers, & statuses—he gives a fuck only for his money, his friends' money—won't wear a mask to encourage others—

“Break the cycle of transmission” the radio says—“it's the only way”

Doctors deciding who lives & who dies among the critically sick—over 65 deferred to under—& as they die, denied medical care, their loved ones cannot visit them—

* * * * *

Kassi & I have been locked down for four weeks now, & it's funny that we've been 7 years in this house, called Bungalow Cee, never in that time home for such a stretch—

We watch the TV news, read the online news, talk with distant friends & colleagues—we order food deliveries, as needed, watching inventory of what we have—

I have a new job, now a week & a half at it, my colleagues faces & voices on the computer. So our income is steady & sure for now—

There are too many people who will not acknowledge this crisis & work together—

I'm in a bed, under several comforters, yellow, green, & my beat notebook's lined paper is lit by a reading light clipped to it—Polly iPod is playing a news show about the virus, worried voices on my headphones—

I wonder if this crisis's peak is days or weeks or months away—

It's near midnight, fuzzy weird days pass by—

I send my love & wish for health & safety to all.

I must find a way to take these pages back—I feel more helpless than anything—pen moving is my hope—

*The Creatures are napping peaceful.
And something in this.
To turn this book's attention.
Grasp back some of its weird magick.
Very peaceful.*






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Notes on Contributors

AbandonView lives in the American Rust Belt. It is absolutely thrilling to have his work back in these pages! More of his work can be found at: <http://purigare.tumblr.com>.

Algernon Beagle lives in Bags End. He is the Editor guy for Bags End News. More Bags End writings can be found at: <http://www.scriptorpress.com/bags-end.pdf>.

Charlie Beyer lives in New Castle, Colorado. More of his work can be found at: <http://www.therubyeye.blogspot.com>.

Ace Boggess lives in Charleston, West Virginia. His new book of poetry, *Misadventure*, was published by Cyberwit in February 2020.

Joe Ciccone lives in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts. His 2000 Scriptor Press RaiBook, *North of Jersey*, can be found at: <http://www.scriptorpress.com/raibooks/northofjersey.html>.

John Echem lives in Nigeria & teaches English at local schools. He is a welcomed new contributor.

Benjamin Grey lives in Somerville, Massachusetts. He edits a new online literary journal called *Burn Before Reading*, which can be found at: <https://www.burnbeforereadingmag.com/>.

Judih Weinstein Haggai lives at Kibbutz Nir Oz in Israel. Her 2004 Scriptor Press RaiBook, *Spirit World Restless*, can be found at: <http://www.scriptorpress.com/raibooks/spiritworldrestless.pdf>.

Jimmy Heffernan lives in Salt Lake City, Utah. His new book, *Unfolding Nature: Being in the Implicate Order*, was published in October 2020 by BookBaby.

Nathan D. Horowitz lives in Kansas City, Kansas. Book 1 of his epic *Nighttime Daydreams (Gateway Mexico)* can be found at: <https://amzn.to/3jhnEWx>.

Ekponoimo Iphyok lives in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. More of his fine work can be found online at: <https://instagram.com/ginuenpixels>.

Colin James lives in western Massachusetts. His most recent book of poetry, *The Paralytically Obscure As Beauty Crescendo*, was published by The Book Patch in December 2020.

Gregory Kelly lives in England.

Sam Knot lives in rural France. Visit samknot.com for more of his work.

Tamara Miles lives in Elgin, South Carolina. More of her work can be found at: <http://tamaramiles.wixsite.com/sylviasdaughtersays>.

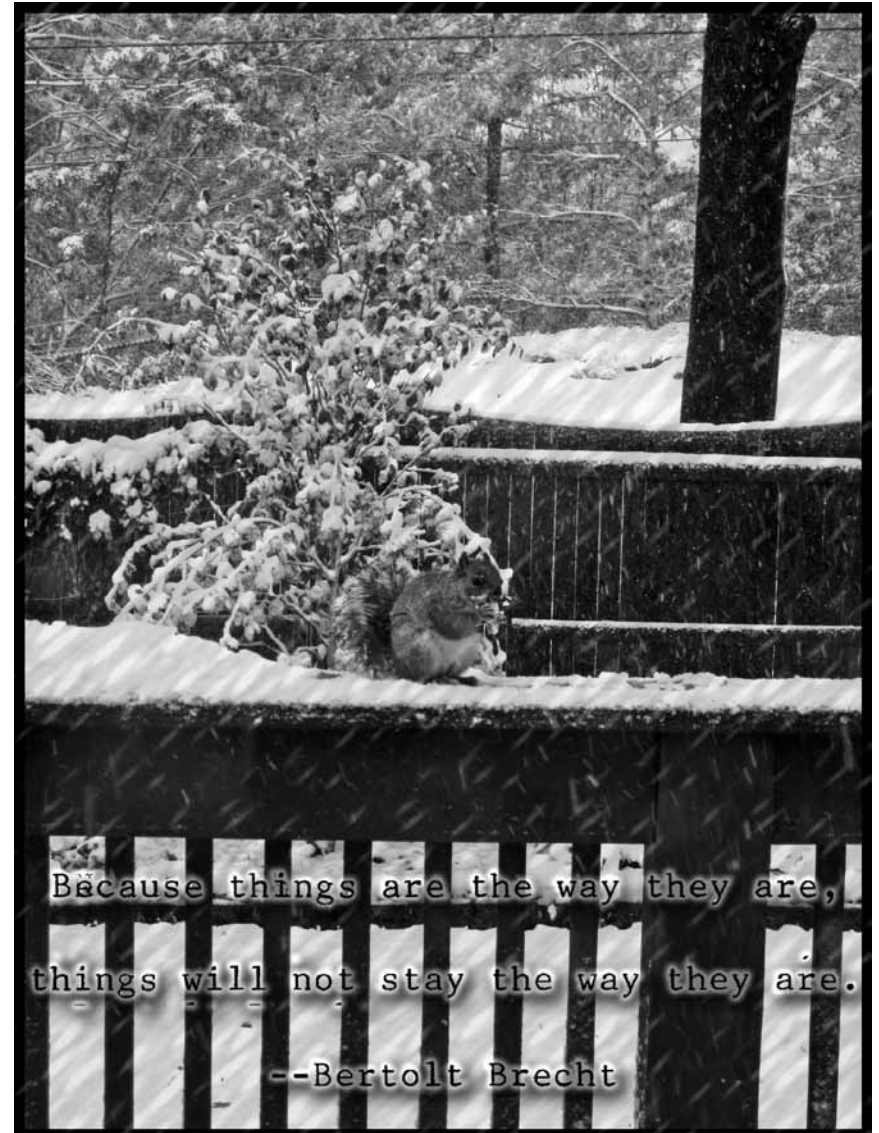
Martina Reisz Newberry lives in Palm Springs, California. Her most recent book, *Blues for French Roast with Chicory*, was published by Deerbrook Editions in 2019. More of her writings can be found at: <https://martinaneberry.wordpress.com>.

Tom Sheehan lives in Saugus, Massachusetts. His most recent book of poetry, *Jock Poems and Reflections for Proper Bostonians*, was published by Pocol Press in 2019.

Kassandra Soulard lives in Melrose, Massachusetts. She is brilliant, funny, & beautiful.

Raymond Soulard, Jr. lives in Melrose, Massachusetts. This volume details a hard year for all. Its Art is something of a salve.

Timothy Vilgiate lives in Colorado Springs, Colorado. The radio version of *Rivers of the Mind*, an amazing work in any form, can be found online at: <https://riversofthemind.libsyn.com>.





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