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Welcome to Issue #81 of PBW. We come out twice a year, June-July and December-January, in this somewhat unorthodox fashion, and all rights revert back to our generous (albeit unpaid) authors.

Our next issue will appear, magically, in June, and any writing or photographs should arrive here in Ohio by the end of May. Poets are permitted to send in their work on paper, but my patented two-fingered typing will no longer permit me to type in anything much longer than a few short poems or three.

All other writing can be sent to us via CD Rom, or via e-mail. Those still familiar with the U. S. Postal Service can reach us at:

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E-mail will reach us, I hope, if sent to RIANCA@AOL.COM. If possible, copy and paste your writing into the body of an e-mail, but we can also attempt to translate manuscripts sent to our Mac as an attached file.

Photographers should send their work to us in the form of JPGS.

Though PBW is available for \$2 a copy, writers (and just plain readers) should feel free to make copies for family and friends, or even put PBW out on the net, should they feel so inclined.

See you again in June!

This issue is dedicated to Michelle Greenblatt.

B. Z. Niditch

MONET'S WATER LILY

By B. Z. Niditch

After hours of work
in the ossuary
he offered to her life
a water lily a day
though being a romantic
he preferred the impressionistic
Claude Monet
this Beat assured
this flower child
of San Francisco
named Lily
that he loved her
even though carnation,
rose, orchid was hid
in his suit pocket
he gave only to Lily
a worthy picture of her
engraved in her locket,
when sent to the military
he acted contrary
without a rod for war

not wanting to offend
he remembered Lily's soul
more than her body
and sent her from overseas
more flowers and rich teas
and cried on his knees
at the clod planted earth
on Frisco's grave cemetery
chanted Ginsberg for his Lily
hourly in her memory.

ASH CAN SCHOOL

He painted daylong
in the ash can school
flicking his dotty cigarettes
by the yard
where we play bocce
in the fresh air
kicking the ball
and he not being cynical
to children at all
but cool when I was at ten
one afternoon
he was doing a red pattern
with geometric shapes
of Manhattan
on his spread out canvas
listening to jazz songs
from his radio in the sun

the principal wondering
if he were alcoholic
what a teacher called "sick"
one day
we were told to stay away
yet he was draped
in his drip dry cape
and friendly to me
in every way
learned later the fact he was
the abstract expressionist
Jackson Pollock
who soon became famous
here in Greenwich Village
in my own bailiwick.

HART CRANE'S SONG
1899-1932
July 21 birthday

Staring like a flock of starlings
at the white high towers
by the Atlantic's waterfront dock
under the luminous sun
in lustral Babylon's buildings
you watch with uncertainty
wanting to prophecy
by flashing waters of the sea
an ecstasy of poetry
in a new world's frequency

over the clock's sky scrapers
your red verse deflowered
and now outlined
by the marginal cry in beds
of gulls from washed white foam
in a wave swarming towards you
with the literary gift
of impalpable power
you write by a trapped door
on a day's old newspaper
wrapped from the fish market
in Brooklyn's Crown Heights
with a jazz melody in your soul
an uprooted exile lands
in the Big Apple
Hart recruited through time
rolls up on a pink birthday cake
he found outside a bakery
dotted with thirty candles
wishing for a nocturnal embrace
from a parachuted card
in an echo of wishing you
a city miracle of myth
that your words may sparkle
in the Keys' expanse
when you hunted yourself down
there may be sheaf
of your moving poems
hearing a chorister of angels
among songsters on the bridge
granting on this July 21 a belief
in the miracle of creation
knowing that in a canon

as you write all this down
there is a circular harmony
thinking in a music's motion
and a cerulean ocean's chance
a Muse to offer you an epiphany
as you drown in ink
with the metamorphosis
of an earth-wise crown.

MAYAKOVSKY'S DAY
1893-1930
Birthday July 19

Your handsome voice
on the platform of one
above the crowd
in the Moscow rainstorm
swaying your hips
to a Russian polka
by undelivered love letters
on the saliva of big kisses
and near missed opportunities
seeking doors of words
from red lipstick mirrors
of abolished insomnia
and sleep housed myth
returning to wish you
on arboreal ballads of secrets
a peace offering
from my three cornered hat.

DIMITRIS KRANIOTIS'S EYE
Birthday July 15

What cupidity
in your glance
from an eye of your soul
transforming color
whitewashed by the sea
in a white crystal of dawn
from the solitude
of forgiving primordial words
in a subterranean light
of all existence
in the blameless sunshine
of the Aegean
lashed by the winds
embraced by the waves
and all rushing elements
on such a day and wellspring
to have joy coming at you
in a spirit to be alive
and sing among mermen
by the sirens of an apocalypse
of the soaring flight of gulls
at these oarlock moments
out of Attic breaths
in the home sail harbor
of the Mediterranean ships
a poet in foaming blue waters
sings at the sight of birds
after a blazing voyage

returning to the music
of his memory
in a thousand words.

WOLE SOYINKA'S BIRTH

July 24, 1934

Waiting for the scales
on an eye of justice
to open an unblemished time
for a miracle in Lagos
from your prisoner's sigh
perhaps a kindly word
to save the earth
when day and night splits
from the scroll in logos
to transfix a risen line
of staring into love
by an outstretched pulse of hand
running like anointed oil
over Aaron's fairly long beard
as someone hides a letter
from a fellow poet
trembling an inscribed wish
in your crumbs of bread
escaping no notice
at the dove at your window

by the trees time span
invading the small space
at your marvel of life
in the gradual light
from the perfumed rainbow
out of your pocket poetry
we casually picked up
after a reading
at the used bookstore
in Harvard Square.

PABLO NERUDA'S TIME
1904-1973
Birthday July 12

By a Chilean minefield
an earth shoveled
by blossoming labor
in the quivers of sweat
under a suspended sun
in a spiral let down of hours
knowing how you think
in replicas of seasons
of hurried toil
in crushed years
yet able to love
without doubt
in dirt roads of the poor
by murmurs of rumors
of a strike upon your soul
we bring you red flowers

from the street vendor
who still sings your words
of a thousand friendships
who listen for your reply
in the July heat's suffocation
by the furrow's horizon's wind
along the rivers of a copper sun.

GIORGIO de CHIROCO'S ART
1888-1978
July 10 birthday

Your art, a poem sculptured
in occluded sunshine of color
forms a world of balances
rises from landscaped surprises
from iconic fragments
in pastel figures eluded
from recumbent flights
of moving clouds of sources
deep in the eyelids in the tempo
of asymmetrical wrappings
in historical forms
of geometric dedication
abandoned colorful flashes
in occurrences never aging
known only to devotions
from moored figures
of open imagination.

A BREATH OF SUMMER

In the clearing
a breath of summer
on the sand castle
by a sleep house to rest
bonded on living hands
in blankets and tents
by a shivering eventide
away from the boardwalk
near a landscaped watering hole
listening to the gulls cry
searching for bread
in the high tide surfaces
of wandering souls
near a hospital ship
docking for a rescue at shore
asking for wisdom
without complaint
as unhooked runaways
cruise waves like blue fish
expecting a twice lived time
of a surfer's endearing love
amid the shadowy sea
between deck chairs
on the vagrant gazebo
and a still caressed sky
full of songbirds
by fragrant sunlight days
as a poet dives in between
the docks of passing boats
with good sound approaches

and weighed from memory
from jazz notes floating
in scales and in these words.

REACHING OUT

Reaching out on my pad
when everyone is sleeping
hearing a few birds
in the alley way
of my old Manhattan building
it's July's restless fleeing
of star dust out to the suburbs
in a whistled pace of time
chance handing me
an Indian summer shirt,
towel and snorkel
as an angel neighbor, Gertrude
puts me in a better mood
lets me borrow Stan's telescope
questioned in an all night hope
of a Beat poet
heading for the gazebo
to hear the steamships dock
on trained ears Staten island gulls
circling over rocking waves
flying by tree branches

in the humming bird morning
my pea jacket shadow leans
over an uncertain kayak
in the silhouetted wind
embracing dawn's flight
of open city grackles
trail me in the waters bush
near the outback rivers
to sway to smooth jazz
playing as my collected words
always return alive
in these hallways
from a rush to my memory.

CAVAFY'S LAST DAY

To those who seek a refuge
by Cavafy's ashes
several stolen studies
of unassured students
report that he has passed
in the evening darkness
gave way to lamp lights
by a night cafe couch
near tiny rose- hued small tables
had one less setting
by the silverware
near his favorite divan
all friends slip away

near hallways and alleys
less than memory could
in persistent carnations
of a soon saluted poet
who yearned for words
in the lovers he met here
by baroque mirrors
hearing familiar songs
over burnt letters
of a quick "Yes"
to check on him
under burning lanterns
in phantasms only to learn
from a sight read moment
among ink dreams
of his funereal carelessness.

Chella Courington

Lynette's War

By Chella Courington

Cousin Lynette says she's tired from cleaning
East Main houses of rich bitches. They don't even shit
like us, got toilet seats that float to the bowl,
never make a sound, & she hands me the baby
over the front seat. Days off Merry Maids
we like to drive her '97 Trans Am to Gulf Shores—
kd lang over eight speakers.
I'm tired too, tired of being the babysitter.
Leah, grabbing my earrings, covers me in crumbs.
She bites off the heads of animal crackers.
Only eats heads.

Don't know why I hang with her.
She's like the girl who cut my hair at Cinderella's
saying I had the ugliest strands she'd ever seen.
I kept going back for more till Lynette blurted
you don't need to pay for that kind of shit.
And Lynette says outright
she's sexy & I'm not. We both know it.
Junior high she called me a mutant. Boobs
like raisins on a fifteen-year old's wrong.
Mama took me to the doctor & he shook his head.

At least Lynette is a good mother.
When the kid has fever, Lynette won't go
to work. I'd rather lose my job
than leave a sick baby at daycare.
Guess that's why I hang with her.

She might call me names, but let somebody else do it,
she'd scratch their eyes out. At the Sonic,
some boy from Crossville leaned in the window,
drop the fat chick & let's go driving.
She clawed his left cheek & screeched away,
tray still on the car, cokes & fries flying.
Son of a bitch thinks he can dump on you and have
a good time with me. Stupid bastard.

I thought Lynette would always be the one to leave.
Good looking. Smart. She never let anybody
walk on her, or me, though she did
what Cochran girls do after getting their
driver's license. She got knocked up.
Wouldn't tell a soul who the father was.
We all thought it was Sonny Cruz.
He went to Iraq in August & emailed Lynette every day.
Like they were junk, she'd hit delete.
He started writing letters she stacked on her dresser—
unopened. Keeping in touch with soldiers
is talking to the dead. Sonny could come back,
I say. Lots of boys make it. Lynette turns away
he might, but he won't be the Sonny I knew.

After homecoming she carries his letters out to the grill.
They catch on the third match.
Every last word.

At the Maximum Security Prison for Men
(Columbia, South Carolina)

Students come to me from solitary confinement
concrete oven set on high—
they come to me
a young woman from the University
who wants to talk about Paradise Lost.

They want to talk too.
Tony says when he broke in, he spotted a dog
and shot a man. Thought the house empty.
Billy Ray says he just needed money from the girl
at the ATM. My hand shook and the trigger went off.

They know why Milton's God
clips Satan's wings and kicks him out of heaven.
The man can't take much lip. Just like my own daddy
knocking me three ways into Sunday when I say no to him.
Knuckles kneading my cheek blue till I cry stop.

The students ask if Satan's the hero. And I wonder.
Did he endure that heavy hand one too many times?
Punched and mauled like a yard animal
taken behind the barn
left in darkness to find his way back.

Subsequently

You gave me a cactus pear
before our daughter
tumbled
off the boat & you
swam
under spiral blades
to raise her
from the bloody floor
one rose anemone
waiting
for spring
not for you
Did you jump

for her
did the white lady
with silver hair
like the moon
reach up
pull you down
into an ocean
not salty
enough
to bear your gamy
carcass
spitting it back
to me

night
after night
I dive
past star feathers
sea pansies
for my child
not you

until I find her
asleep
in a conch shell
skin unsuited
for sun
luminously pink

Daniel Gallik

Below Us Is A Colossal, Oval Saucer Studded With A Gum That Has
Been Chewed Often And Kept And Kept

By Daniel Gallik

Compared poorly, Ezra Pound has become denuded. Has suffered the same pattern of grazing as TS Eliot. Too much cultivation. Their names are pasts. No one talks of them anymore. Drought then flood. And commentary. Once, the richness of their soil prompted words like grandeur within their fingertips. Now, the literati's religious words prompt sanguine anger. Remember when you were young, all your English teachers and their grins.

Flat horizons have come to bear a sun and a moon that collide in a dry season. Arriving on this fictional scene and meeting E and seeing an old photo by Steichen blurred making the old man look like the photographer he has had too much to imbibe. His books have been accommodated in too many estates. Memories of childhood are never true. And everyone from the next generation knows the past generation is numb.

Rich ones' houses are sheep shearers' quarters now. Wealth, again, everyone knows, has taken away intelligence. Rivalled by no enthusiasm and a lack of clarity where once everything was true.

Boring and old two words used too much. Inadequate to explain today's world of others. Women now sleep in beds. Men wake to go to work to be bored with more richness.

Excursions are just that. Cottages are places you take your same attitude about Ecclesiastics or Pound or Eliot and drown it in drink. Still thinking you know nothing except meaninglessness. Startling colors are no more. Art and TV are one. She said, did you notice when you watch Katie Kourec on the Today show how the show has something on pets everyday. I mean, it's like the American people have to hear stories on pets or they will just turn off their TV's immediately. But damn, I think it is truth. Really. A sad truth or all truths. Global warming and dogs lost. Important news items.

And bestiality are comic encounters with animals on TV. As Ranger Ricks giggle when they stick their hands into mouths.

Ohthehorror!!! Ickypooo!!

After another mile you reach Ezra and pass him like you pass the accident on the freeway, just disgusted you had to slow the car. When you would rather be at work. Giggling with secys. The floor of Ezra is seven miles long. His death a so what. T.S. is a jungle of astute words. So what. You say because you know that there is an immense natural amphitheater above his work that never needs to be made. Because it bores the American dummies.

Your sadness is a red-brown sand. Everything is desert in rich lives. You always liked gorges. Saw one. Awful words are what you wish at the end of life. Not doting wives. Or rich artists who wish to be writers to waste time. Ezra-TS are one. Same.

No one wishes time to copy them. Only their money after their deaths. That is what you want. Money after death and time to replenish it all reflect on why you had money. And wives.

Later that evening you burned your coffee table books and their ways to reach you as you sat for a coffee. Then sat on your coffee. And it didn't burn youself.

But then you wish not to mess the atmosphere so you throw them, let the garbage people deal with the problems of culture, and ohsoawfultime, and why we rich do not care about problems or literature anymore, anytime, anyplace ever as the earth turning has made wealthy brains hum. And days start as they end.

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The Continuous, Horrible Spectacle

The assonance question is never resolved, said Rosey Zelenka, the English teacher to her class, seventh graders in the inner city. One child raised her hand to get a pass to use the lavatory.

All seems right with the rhythm of the universe, continued Ms. Z.,

The little girl looks in easy majesty. Her mother's severe beauty does not hinder her. The boy sitting next to her does not know why he smiles. Just as this teacher does not know why she teaches. There is equality here.

In the meantime, the principal in the hallway hits another boy. In the face.

His office is taped. Another black kid knows about technology. The tape gets on the news because the secy. hates her boss. Something then is made of nothing. So thinks the principal, and says to himself, Quis multa gracilis te puer.

No one knows how to speak English in the neighborhood. Blacks or Hispanics, the principal considers this. But what does he know except anger. Knows that subject very well. Is good at it. Has been in the biz for yrs. Hates kids, teachers, parents, problems voting for school levies, and curriculum committee meetings.

The most fascinating girl within the neighborhood does not perform well in school and consequently is unwritten about. She doesn't even understand her intelligence. Neither do her folks. Both of them work many jobs. However, the mother wakes every morning to the memory of being a child. She decides every morning that she must not. That she must be almost male in her moods. That her child must be perfect every minute of every day here in OH land specifically in Cleve.

The little girl is beautiful. But does not know she will lose her beauty just as her mom has. One month at a time.

This story is one of the most exquisite lyrics in American life. Long, disturbing poems are written about these stories. Epics. But they do not resolve a thing. They are grooved to, danced about, but nothing else. Most feel the story has been told already and is getting quite boring.

The story continues to its sad end always. And so what? says the men who loiter on the block.

There are twenty two incomparable people who live in one big house.

This is where the gifted kid lives. If the house was located in the suburbs it would be worth more than the mayor's salary. More than these kids' ambitions. More than what the President of the UNITED states does in four years. Yes, and do not forget God, do not hesitate to yell at him about all this. I know you will. You, of course, will be rewarded in fiery hell. Yes, think those kinds of thoughts all the time. But never do a damn thing. You. You. Mr. God. Where the fuck's your heart you old man, thinks those that don't go to church. Never receive peace. One woman said the salvation of God is his glory. And said that you must concede the sublimity in the minds of children.

Now, go back at once to this female child. And see her look into your eyes. Briefly. Notice how she disarms you and knows it. The conception of grandeur is her essence. As she becomes a numb, fat ass mother she loses it. Her children will have it again and her kin. Intelligence is the shadow created in a feeble emanation of what a woman should be. Beauty IS the eye of the beholder. She thinks that the shadow of truth is story telling.

The little girl speaks and we listen. She says, I am a resemblance of God. As I age I am a resemblance of Death. I wish I could merit truth when I am this beautiful, but I cannot. I just look like the truth, and God, and what is heaven in an unreal world of essence? God, gawd, whoever the hell that is, never answers. Anymore. You talk lazy. He's gotten lazy. He says, find an allegory that is finer than me.

Then the girl stopped talking, and ate, and ate. And ate. Her poverty away, away. Her mother started to speak, then quickly spanked her own behind, I, by no means, am a grandeur. I am a negative quantification of life in America, as it never changes, never gets better in certain parts of towns. Yes, I want to feel fine and impeccable, and

real. But I know that can never be. Never. I am poor Black and holy and irreversibly stupid. Yes, my child is an essence. But she will change to be me. I am irreducible to a white person's form. Because I am a Black woman. My daughter will be. And so cram it. Sure... You are going to hear about it often. But no change my man. No change my woman. Nothing.

At this moment her speech becomes modulated.

David A. Forrester

“Paradise Cemetery”

by David A. Forrester

He didn't want to pee in a graveyard. But he had to go, and besides it wasn't his fault. A black sedan was rolling down the gravel road and he was forced into the woods. The boy had a fear of strangers, yet somehow peeing in a graveyard was wrong. At twelve Spencer didn't understand why it was wrong. Maybe it wasn't nice to pee on dead people. He would just point away from gravestones.

Spencer peed into the bushes. He had an innate sense of modesty, as if someone might come walking through the woods and see. Or maybe the dead people might see. He was somewhat surprised to see mosquitoes in the bushes. He had just assumed they lived on human blood and stayed near houses or camp grounds. What did they live on in a

grave yard? A shudder went through him. He wiped his fingers off inside his pockets.

“That’s my boy” said a slight breeze.

Spencer hurried along his shortcut. The day was dim from overcast but still daylight. The grave yard scared him to the point where he could not afford to tarry longer than he had to. He felt that if he stayed too long the graves would find a place for him.

A misty figure followed the boy down the bare path that led up to a distinct line of trees. The wall of oaks marked the border of the grave yard. The path disappeared into a field of timothy and rye, dotted with black eyed susans. Spencer did too. The misty figure stopped and watched him run away.

“I miss you Mason, come back soon.”

Several other figures floated up to the line of trees to see. They had been following the boy and when they reached the

edge of the grave yard stopped and hovered next to the first figure. The misty figure turned to face the others.

“That was Mason” it said. “I was going to teach him to skate. He loves winter time. Snow, Christmas and all that. He takes after me; his Grandpa.”

The figure paused as if giving an opportunity for the others to comment and then continued.

“Mason is the smartest young man you’re likely to meet. Can play the piano too. He plays Christmas songs.”

A second figure, that had followed beyond the first, slowly turned from the field and facing the others, spoke with a slight twang in its voice.

“That was Jason. He’s taking care of the farm. He promised he would if I didn’t come back. And I know I didn’t come back. He’s a good boy. He’ll see those horses come to no harm.”

There was a rush of leaves that came up from the field.

“I got three horses. I had seven but the confederacy ‘pressed four. They took the best four horses I got.

That I had.

I coulda sold them for substitution, but they took that too.

Oh Jason, don’t be a fool. Get outa Mississippi. Go with your aunt. Go see my sister. Forget about that farm, it’s nothing but an open grave.”

The overcast had darkened and the wind became steady. The heavy first drops of a long soaking rain fell through the branches above.

“That’s my little girl. She can ride horses,” said a third figure, “Adele looks like a fairy princess with her long golden hair. Her caped gown flows like wings as she flies through the meadow. I’d watch her from the top of the hill and just smile. It filled my heart to almost bursting to know she was happy.”

The rain fell harder and the figures blended into the mist. The voices were drowned and night fell. Time passed and the rain slowly changed to sleet. The afternoon was cold and the remains of leaves crackled under the force of a tall man's shoes. He walked out of the graveyard and onto the crunchy gravel road that ran down the hill. A long black coat swept into a black car and he drove away.

Spencer was coming home along the country road when he decided to take a shortcut through the graveyard once more. The plots lay about on the top of the hills that marked the high point of the county. He weaved his way through graves, broken limbs and twigs and tried to stay up out of low points where water had collected. The figures began to gather as before.

As Spencer entered the field and began to trot down toward the sunset a figure that had stayed close behind called out.

“William! Please come back. I don't understand.”

The figure fell to its knees and the sound of rustling leaves was intermixed with shallow weeping.

In a loud voice another figure shouted out behind the first.

“Run Eddie, you’ll make it. Get out of deep Kim Chi and get back to the world!” The figure seemed to relax and looked down at the first figure. “Don’t cry sister. He’ll make it, in fact he already did.”

The second figure sat on a stump next to the first and put an arm around it.

“Let me tell you something about Eddie. Ed and I and Louis always stayed together. We knew Eddie was going home and we wanted to share in that luck. He has a beautiful wife and two little angels for daughters. I saw their pictures. He wouldn’t trade ‘em you know. The pictures I mean. Louis and I traded, but Ed wouldn’t part with those pictures.

It was a thing you did to trick Death. You traded pictures so if Death came looking for you and looked in your wallet he

would be confused because you didn't seem like the right guy and maybe he would go looking for someone else. I got pictures of Louis' wife and kids and he's got mine. Once we got out of here we're to trade back. I guess we never traded back."

The shadowy figure searched through its cloak and then looked down on empty hands.

"I got nothing now."

The wind picked up from the field with force. The figures shifted in toward the graveyard. One small figure stayed at the edge. It peered out trying to find sight of the figure that was long gone.

"Mom?" said a fragile voice "I'll wait here" and then it too drifted back into the woods.

The black sedan made another visit to the graveyard before the winter took hold. Snow gathered against the hills, trees and the faces of the gravestones. It was a short visit and

soon the tires were leaving tracks down the rural road. The snow fell harder and the tracks were gone.

This time Spencer spent too much time visiting his grandmother. The cozy fire, the sweet food and the lure of Christmas were overwhelming. She gave her grandson a basket of treats to take home. Now he couldn't run as he usually did. The snow had stopped falling but the sun had gone down earlier than expected. The boy made the tough decision to take the shortcut, but didn't realize until well into the graveyard that the path was under snow. In the dark and with the drifts it was unclear which way he was suppose to turn between the large oaks and soft hills. He lost his way but knew in what general direction he had to go.

Because of his slow pace the figures gathered around him more quickly.

One figure confronted the small boy. Although the misty vapor had no physical substance, it stood its ground.

“You should have left when you could. I have no quarrel with you. I’m just doing what I have to do.”

The figure watched Spencer pass right through it.

“It doesn’t matter why I’m here. I don’t care why you’re here. I just need to get through this.”

Another smaller figure drifted beside the first.

“Bobby, hey Bobby. Let’s go down to the creek. With all this rain we...”

The voices stopped and the figures quickly vanished as Spencer crested the main hill in the center of the cemetery. In a moment his breath disappeared. Less than two feet in front of him was a statue of the Virgin Mary. Her palms were open and her gentle eyes looked down at the boy. He immediately shifted to the side so she couldn’t make eye contact. As he did he saw the opening where he always exited the graveyard.

As Spencer hurried down the hill toward the exit, carefully cradling the basket of treats, a figure sitting at the base of the statue turned and looked at the footprints in the snow.

“Jake...that you?”

The figure wavered in and out of focus.

“I haven’t seen you for so long. Lets talk; I mean you got to see my side of this.”

The figure rose to a standing position and continued even though the boy was out of range.

“I want to say something.”

The misty substance that made up the figure drifted around to the other side of the statue and gathered once again.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Oh God! I’m sorry! Why can’t anyone hear me?”

The figure crumpled to the side of the statue and began to slide toward the ground. The arms of Mary caught him and lifted him up.

Jacob stood up from his father's grave. He had placed a wreath on the gravestone as he did every Christmas. He felt a cold wind blow down from the hill above the site. As he looked up in the direction of the wind, his eyes rested on the statue that marked the center of Paradise Cemetery. The air felt familiar in an indescribable way. It was a wind that had passed through his hair many years ago.

Jake looked down at his father's grave once more.

"I'm sorry dad. I'm sorry."

The man in the long coat turned away. He walked back to his black sedan. The black coat swept into the driver seat and drove away. He was already late for dinner.

Donald J. Levit

But My Heart Belongs to Daddy

By Donald J. Levit

You abused my love, so set me free.
You don't need, you don't even want me.
Somebody help me, this man wants to taunt me.
I'm beggin' you to, oh.

—“Save Me” (1967), Aretha Franklin, Carolyn Franklin, Curtis
Ousley

Shakespeare calls on Marina, Imogen, Perdita and Miranda to
reveal the truth of love to their embittered or obsessed fathers.
“And in these late plays the daughter, the feminine spirit, brings the
father back to life, aided by artistic mystery.”

—“Shakespeare in Love . . .” (2015), Alan Riding

Turn Turn Turn. Nina Simone and Amy Winehouse are coming (back) even
more into their own, first of all for their outstanding talents. Second, for troubled
love lives. Third, for alcohol (and other substances) abuse that, among other
things, made performances and even appearances problematical.

Five years ago in a film by ex-husband and manager Andy Stroud and in
coincidentally current documentaries by Jeff L. Lieberman and Liz Garbus, the
High Priestess of Soul mesmerizes with her music as well as uncompromising

political stance, racial rage and psychological problems. And, like her, self-sabotaging a brilliant future, the Russian Jewish girl from North London has her own two non-fictions. Before the beginning of the early end as a member of the 27 Club, she was simple, girlish, happy and heartbreakingly wonderful in an a-ha moment on the intimate 2006 stage that was her true métier in *Amy Winehouse: the day She came to Dingle*. The talent that Tony Bennett classed with those of Billie and Ella is on show again, later and shadowed, in Asif Kapadia's Cannes- and Edinburgh-lauded and Film Society of Lincoln Center sneak-premiered *Amy*, two hours and eight minutes itself awash in controversy little less than its subject was.

Complimented on not sounding like an elocution-class graduate, (despite the documentary's title) unlike ubiquitous single-name celebrities, retro yet ahead of the styles, she is shown as having the instinctive courage to be herself. Trouble was, like Marilyn Monroe, she never came to define exactly who that self was amidst the burden of fame once "they set you on a treadmill."

The on-screen emphasis on media feeding frenzy, flashing cameras, and fickle fans is ham-handed although an accurate reflection of the limelight that at least contributed to her death, poisoned by the alcohol that doctors warned her against, on top of bulimia and heavy heroin and crack cocaine abuse.

Along with interviews and/or voiceovers from family, child- and adult-hood friends, associates, bodyguards, hangers-on, exploiters and enablers, there is killer performance and studio footage and home movie material of her as a child

and teenager. Her accent is so thick, sometimes even to lyrics, that English-to-English sub-titles and cursive side-titles are welcome. Too, there are hundreds of double-imaged lines of her early and late handwritten poetry-songs.

Access to such personal documentation had been granted by the immediate family, some of whom were later to repent, feeling uncomfortable about aspects presented of their Amy's life. Along with the massive eyeliner copied from *cubanas* in Miami, Ronettes beehive hairdo, short shorts and flats, there comes the proliferation of body tattoos, of particular significance a prominent "Daddy's Girl" sandwiched between a horseshoe and sexy pinup.

Taxi driver "jazz vocalist" Mitch Winehouse has been most vociferous in objecting to this "preposterous" portrayal of his daughter, and most public in the aftermath. In the film young Amy claims to be happy when unfaithful he left her and younger Alex with their mother Janis, who was not strong enough to control the girl's smoking weed and raising hell. Mitch claims that this record concentrates on the negative and, in his own case, misleads about parental exploitation or at best lack of good judgement. While she comes across as sad, smart money says that what upsets him is that he comes across as bad. Given Amy's pathetic clinging to no-goodnik druggie husband Black Fielder-Civil (who introduced her to hard drugs and smuggled heroin into her rehab), it is apparent that, like other ill-fated singers (and women who are not), she had a serious problem with the men in her life. Deny it though Daddy may, in St. Lucia away from substance temptation, Amy grouches about his profiteering at the expense of

her well-being and happiness. Whatever the root cause, she dotes on Mitch, who less than a year after her death rushed into print *Amy, My Daughter*.

Many among those who knew this lost gifted waif knew where she was headed. It is part of the anguish that neither they nor she could change that. What remains is the beauty and—unlike the life—unhistrionic artistry on recordings and in film. □

But When She Was Bad . . .

by Donald J. Levit

She is strange. . . . She is far out, and at the same time common. . . .
She is different.

A colored girl, an Afro-American, a homey from Down Home. She has
flair, but no air. She has class, but does not wear it on her shoulders.
Only chips.

You either like her or you don't. If you don't, you won't. If you do—
wheee-ouueu! You do!

—“The One and Only Nina Simone” (1960), Langston Hughes

But I'm just a soul whose intentions are good.

Oh, Lord, please don't let me be misunderstood.

If I seem edgy, I want you to know

I never meant to take it out on you.

Life has its problems and I get more than my share.

—“Please Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood” (1964),

Bennie Benjamin, Sol Marcus and Horace Ott

In their headlong proliferation to equal maybe surpass the output of fictions, non-fictions have abandoned early Flaherty narrative structure as well as fallen into a limited few topic subsets. Among such groupings is the documentary life of a single famous person, often limited to a specific phase of the life even though there may be included stills from earlier or later. Dead a dozen years now and for whatever reasons aside from her immense talent but uneven output and controversial career stance, Nina Simone has three recent films each aiming to “reveal the real” woman and artist, plus a once-rumored fourth by her brother Sam and yet another in Cynthia Mort’s polemical “love story artist’s journey into herself.”

2010 *Nina Simone: College Performances & Interviews* was produced and début-directed by ex-husband, –manager, –producer Andrew Stroud, who claimed to have much more material than was included. Screened in rain-location Mount Morris Presbyterian Church by Maysles Cinema in co-sponsorship with local organizations, and built around concerts at black Morehouse College and overwhelmingly white UMass/Amherst, the sixty minutes showcase the talent and are understandably kinder to the now late Stroud than the other two films.

From Liz Garbus, and titled from a 1970 Maya Angelou article, *What Happened, Miss Simone?* paints a different picture, even to simply the stage name—out of thin air according to the ex, but here derived from a boyfriend’s pet name of Niña and actress Simone Signoret to hide her non-church Atlantic City

performances from her mother. This newer, longer take includes archival interviews with its subject—some of them repeated from the earlier film—and many current others, including longtime music director and guitarist Al Schackman, friends and Mount Vernon neighbors Malcolm X's Shabazz daughters, and, most essential, only child (and friend Lorraine Hansberry's goddaughter) Lisa Simone Kelly (b. Lisa Celeste Stroud).

Unhesitatingly championing her mother as a singer second to absolutely no one, Lisa bravely opens about the obvious wounds, her parents' rocky marriage and disagreements about the direction of mother's career, father's physical abuse of mother and mother's "sex attacks" on him and "monster" mental abuse of her and, in what would nowadays be diagnosed as schizophrenia or perhaps bipolar manic depression, the demons that dogged and debilitated the singer-pianist-activist.

A few mostly b&w stills illustrate the young Eunice Kathleen Waymon in Jim Crow Tryon, North Carolina, her drive and discipline to be a classical concert pianist, and the racial barriers to that dream in the North as well (although the classical techniques admixed a unique keyboard brilliance to the blues-jazz-soul of the voice).

Oddly omitting the rest of her family, the documentary cites the 1963 Birmingham church bombing and assassination of Medgar Evers as turning points. Like Dick Gregory—interviewed—and Joan Baez, she sacrificed soaring popularity in order to advocate change, composed the defiant "Mississippi

Goddam,” sang “The Backlash Blues” from friend Langston Hughes’s lyrics, and, though a follower of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., told that “King of Love” that “I am *not* nonviolent.”

Added to a stage presence that became more unpredictable and antagonistic, the insistence on social-political activism from such a bully pulpit made it difficult to secure bookings and, with marital and financial difficulties, led to self-exile in Liberia, Barbados and then Europe.

Her voice changed, neither for better nor worse but just different, she felt, after Birmingham Sunday morning, not enough to keep her from performing around the world, though by the end it was Dior and Chanel ads which kept her artistry in the public eye. There were also cantankerous brushes with the law around her home in Aix-en-Provence. Temperamental, passionate, confrontational talents like hers and Callas’ are forgiven in art and love but not in social taboos and politics.

Two weeks and a half after *WH,MS?* opened theatrically, *The Amazing Nina Simone* had its third showing. Undistributed, it had previously been seen only in Tryon and southern France. The band shell in Jackie Robinson Park proved providentially appropriate, for the singer had boarded just across the street on first coming to Harlem. In the Outdoor Music and Screening Series, co-presented by Maysles Cinema, African Film Festival and Reel Harlem, the event opened with an hour of DJ Reborn and then five of Nina’s songs rocked up live by the quintet of her brother and band member Sam Waymon (the score composer and

wonderful Pastor Luther Williams in *Ganja and Hess*). Director-writer-producer Jeff L. Lieberman prefaced the hundred-ten minutes with his own Vancouver introduction to her music; indicated that Amiri Baraka, David Frost and Maya Angelou had died before their agreed interview inclusions; and talked about grassroots fundraising. He closed, for the documentary to open on an inflatable balloon screen, with the remark that a biopic of which he had seen the script contained fabrications, which Sam seconded, both of them avoiding any mention of Mort's name. (Controversy about that film begins around light-skinned, more Hollywood palatable Zoe Saldana playing darker Nina after first choice, box-office-bait Mary J. Blige bowed out because of scheduling conflicts. Daughter Lisa would have voted for Viola Davis or Kimberly Elise but indicated her mother's personal choice was Whoopi Goldberg. Nina believed herself slighted, even by *Ebony* and *Jet*, in favor of blander Aretha Franklin.)

Some material is essentially the same in both documentaries, neither better nor worse but equally good and sometimes from a different angle. Each film offers bytes of information lacking in the other, as for example, a first marriage to a sponging white European, restraint in a straightjacket, breast cancer, a dicey caregiver, and openly but not at all sensationally dwelt-upon affairs with other women. A major difference is that Lisa "would not be interviewed" for the second doc and that there is almost no Shabazz input. Absent in the released Garbus, Nina's four brothers comment—there were three other sisters—with Dr. Sam—she, too, insisted on the honorary title—the most frequent, "one of few who could

call her by her real name, Eunice.” Of necessity, Stroud figures in but is less of a presence, while there is more, harder, blunter consideration of the financial and mental collapse marking the later, nomad years, suicide attempts, and natural death at seventy.

Chanel and *Before Sunset* had the sense to use, and benefit from, the voice “throaty, sweet, bitter, bitchy, subtle or sexy, sociopolitical soul or broke-dick blues, a whisper, a scream.” Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia honored her too late, but, together with a growing catalogue of book and CD releases, these two films may start the bandwagon rolling and, also too late, the money coming in. “Talent,” Simone said onstage at the Royal Albert Hall, “is a burden not a joy. I am not of this planet. I do not come from you. I am not like you.” She claimed to the reincarnation of an Egyptian queen: “A queen from some time-dead Egyptian night/Walks once again.” There was only one Nina Simone, come from heaven when she was good. □

The Shape of Jazz to Come

by Donald J. Levit

Three-fifths of him genius and two-fifths sheer fudge.

— *A Fable for Critics* (1848), James Russell Lowell

Drum on your drums, batter on your banjos, sob on the long cool
winding saxophones.

Go to it, O jazzmen.

—“Jazz Fantasia” (1920), Carl Sandburg

Urban legends maybe, some in *Ornette: Made in America*, others not, include that one naïve audience thought “free jazz” to mean “at no cost” and that another tossed his tenor sax over an embankment. The seventy-seven-minute new restoration of the Shirley Brimberg Clarke documentary is as experimentally freeform as the subject performer/composer/theorist’s “harmolodic” playful-serious fusion of jazz, funk, blues, R&B, rock, symphonic and (from work in Morocco with Master Musicians of Joujouka and in Nigeria) ethnic bases.

There is humor, too, in the freewheeling structure of the film itself and in its speakers, from Coleman’s partial put-on “castration” story to a reading by a dour, suited William S. Burroughs through Buckminster Fuller’s voice setting forth theory—seconded and expanded by Coleman—of the cohesiveness of architecture, sound, plant life and just about everything else.

This cinema kaleidoscope spans forty and more years. Seeking material to inaugurate the Fort Worth Caravan of Dreams cultural arts center in 1981, Kathelin Hoffman Gray was steered to the New York former-schoolhouse residence of native son Coleman, who in turn handed her unfinished, unreleased video and 16mm stock shot by Clarke at the end of the ‘60s. Hoffman Gray moved into the Chelsea Hotel to be near the director for a collaboration that

included Coleman and produced the 1986 release, now corrected and remastered through the UCLA Film & Television Archive.

The original “stretched the boundaries and definitions of filmmaking,” technically in its use of then-new Super 16 and video—indeed, segments constitute some of the very first music video clips. The independent, controversial Oscar-winning director with personal and professional parallels with friend-enemy also-dancer-to-filmmaker rival Maya Deren, had used her subject’s relationship with his segregation-South past and with his son Ornette Denardo Coleman (later one of two drummers in the father’s Prime Time double quartet) as a thread linking disparate elements.

The released non-linear or –chronological documentary, however, is a mash-up as irrationally connected as the music wherein “no one has the lead, anyone can come out with it at any time.” If anything can be said to be a constant, it is a recurrent Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra-Prime Time performance of Coleman’s Guggenheim Fellowship *Symphony No. 1, Skies of America*, the last interpolation of which segues into a post-concert reception at which women of all ages and colors throw themselves at the bemused honoree.

A reenactment of an 1887 Wild West street shootout precedes the century-later presentation of an astronaut moonrock key to the city on Ornette Coleman Day. Here and there throughout are dreamlike re-creations of a not-unhappy-looking 1930s childhood (depending on age, played by Demon Marshall and Gene Tatum) on the Afro-American side of the Texas tracks, plus shots of him

visiting that old neighborhood with Denardo and chewing the fat and the food with neighbors there or musicians and critics back in New York.

The Caravan of Dreams theater troupe frolics in a downtown street; the Washington, D.C., Resurrection City is here for a moment, Coleman walks the chain-linked corridors of the Lower East Side school building he purchased or sits in a junk-strewn lot; montages of famous faces flash by, or semi-psychedelic animated figures, while heads (including Denardo's poetess mother Jayne Cortez and his aunt) talk from varicolored cartoon television sets, and rehearsal and performance footage cuts in, even to a string quartet doing his *Prime Design/Time Design* under a geodesic dome. Fronting the music and the implications of time-space continuum is the frequent Caravan of Dreams neon symbol, a colored square and triangle within a circle whose sides they touch in coexistent convergence of form.

Yesterday's resisted prophet to today's leader arguably still ahead of others, Coleman experienced hostility or indifference early and, despite later acclaim, does from some quarters today. His power and intensity have been likened by *Rolling Stone* to those of the Sex Pistols. Heeding Louis Armstrong's "if you gotta ask you'll never know," *O:MA* does not attempt the impossibility of explicating the difficult music, on which you groove or you don't: the film and the music are still far out there and require an openness that escapes the non-fans who will not sit through either. □

Donn Goodside

the Outsider

by Donn Goodside

In dreams as in waking I am nearly naked
Seeing and seen by people I do not know
Though streets seem familiar of places been
I am and have always been alone

Approaching encampments I smile my name
Extend my empty hand in peace
Shuffle and shly stand
Waiting for solitude's release

I will fight to be accepted, to prove my worth
I will stand down to show my intent
I will not accept label as slave
I will not serve the corrupters Tent

If I must remain or go alone
Bags or belongings be damned
All I ask from those within
Is, that I keep that which I am.

The 'Fever Deliriums' of 2015

The sidewalk was wet from an earlier brief shower. Damp, but not puddled.

I continued down the 'Avenue.

There was no, noticeable 'Road Traffic, just a 'sense' of being approached, from the right, rear, by an unknown 'person.

I dropped my walking stick, and bent down to retrieve it, and looked up, over my shoulder, to see, who was walking behind me.

A man, wearing a plain, common cloth, casual suit, of the traditional style, of 'Nehru, or 'Mao

He spoke...

I ignored his 'offer of assistance, not wanting to engage in conversation with a stranger.

Instead of making my intended turn at the corner, I chose to continue my forward direction, to the next intersection, feeling a little uncomfortable, about giving away my desired destination.

As I made the turn at the corner, the environment, no longer looked familiar.

There was a 'Mound of Grass, on the opposite side of the intersection corner, that was, un-expected for the neighborhood.

There were two older cars, parked at an incline on the grass, seeming out of place, and hurried.

I noticed a 'Bus Stop, with no one waiting. The traditional 'Metro Colors of White & Blue, were now, replaced with a 'dingy, sooty, 'mustard yellow, and dark 'over-painted, green, in the style of the European, 1940's, seen in 'Newsreels, viewed as a child.

My attention was drawn to an older vehicle, ahead, pulled to the side of the road.

A dark, older, four-door 'Volvo, with a woman, in the drivers seat.

Outside, on the paved road, of the drivers side, there was a man excitedly waving his arms, , animatedly, exclaiming, " Look How Foolish This Woman Is".

Another man, wearing a 'White Islamic Kuffi, had entered from the passenger side, and had stretched across to the woman, and had held her hair, pulling her head back, across the back of the seat cushion, and was in the process of applying with a 'dropper, liquid from a small brown, glass bottle.

The 'animated man, outside of the vehicle, was giving instructions, " Not Too Much, ...'Just Enough, to Moisten her Lips and Tongue", which had now turned black, as she stared, Un-moving, staring up at the interiors upholstery.

A woman's Voice, yelled from an open window up the street, ..."Leave Her Alone ! / Leave Her Alone"!

I was frozen, mid-stride, unable to assist, or prevent, what was happening in front, of my eyes.

(The Scenario, opened up, onto the confines of my Bedroom, at 4 A.M., sweating...)

Zuni and the Dust Devils

(As remembered by, Donn Goodside)

The stink of stale saltine crackers and unwashed socks assaulted my sinus cavities. As unpleasant as it is, I had almost grown accustomed to it, that and the environmental challenges of the temporary shelters of Albuquerque. New Mexico's 'Rescues Mission System, allows a place for the dispossessed, a clean bed, even if it is, only for three night a month. The only requirement is a valid Social Security Card and no previous bad behaviors on record of the facility.

After Oatmeal and scrambled, powdered eggs, the doors were unlocked and we were allowed out back for our first cigarette. We stood between two chain link fences, much like the exercise yard of a prison. Those that had something to smoke did. Those that did not, did without. Most of the haggard men of the streets of broken glass, collected discarded butts, stripped off the paper, mixed this burnt and bitter tobacco with canned Drum tobacco and re-rolled this with small rolling machines. Then some, were selected to do chores.

We swept up, stripped sheets for tonight's washing, had a tepid shower, disinfected and cleaned the community shower and searched the donation bins for clean clothes, that hopefully fit without looking more bizarre than we looked, coming in. Sent out into the desert sun before 7am with an apple and told not to hang around or come back before 4:30 in the afternoon. Those that had this months days remaining, returned. First come, first served. When the bunks were assigned for the coming night, the front door was locked again.

It was a good idea to have someone to travel with. Not everybody could help defend you, but at least they could report where they last saw you alive. People got knifed just because they stared at someone a few seconds too long, this was perceived as a threat or sign of disrespect. The streets have their own rules and code of right and wrong & concepts of Justice.

I offered Zuni what was left of my last cigarette. I don't think Zuni was his birth name. I think, everyone called him 'Zuni, because that was the Tribal Classification he was born into. We didn't talk much, although when he spoke, his whiskey voice was very distinctive. I didn't offer my name. I wasn't planning on

stopping here long enough to be remembered. I was looking for that 'one place I thought I belonged that lodged somewhere in my subconscious.

Years on the road and I had not yet found it. Maybe, tomorrow. We walked. Zuni collected half smoked butts and put them in a pouch tied to his belt loop. He would later sit and strip away the burnt paper and any filters. We sat and watched the tourists. They were clean, most wore shorts and carried cameras. I didn't like asking for change. Most of the street people begged a little to aggressively for my taste, Interfering with the incoming 'Tax Base, usually meant Jail Time. I wasn't that desperate. We wandered a little. Took a nap in the park. Watched the Indian Crafts people sell their wares, in Old Town. We walked some more. It was getting late in the day, so I suggested heading back. I was a little hungry and some warm macaroni and cheese with weak tea sounded good. ...'Then everything stopped. The slow moving people stopped. The vehicles stopped. I looked up from my usual view of my own feet, (A habit I picked up, once I realized I looked like a homeless bum). There in the intersection was a twist of dust dancing on the pavement. No one moved. It looked like the birth of a baby tornado struggling, or trying to see without eyes. I asked Zuni what it was. Zuni spoke almost in a whisper. That' is the Spirit of an Indian Woman, searching for her lost child.

There had been horrible massacres of Indian tribes during the migration West of White Settlers. Atrocities that would make a civilized man sick and ashamed to be a white person. We stood motionless for what seemed like a very long time. Then the little 'dust devil, seemed to fall into itself, Disintegrating before our eyes. Slowly the world I lived in, came back into motion and conversations, having nothing to do with what we had just experienced, as if only we recognized the inherent shame of what we had just seen.

Finally we turned the corner to the rescue mission area, and there was no one standing out in front.

Zuni had this vacant look in his eyes. Well maybe it wasn't vacant as much as resigned. I grumbled a little, as well as did my stomach. Zuni showed indications that it was more serious than my belly.

He looked over his shoulder as if someone might be following him. Then I felt it. It went through my faded plaid flannel shirt. My perspiration of the day suddenly dried, shrinking my shirt Zuni said... "the Hawk is back".

He then explained, "when the Sun sets in the West, the cold air of the 'Sandia Mountains, came rushing down the foothills and the temperature dropped 40 degrees in less then 40 minutes". I was shivering and my teeth chattered. We were experiencing hypothermia. Zuni wandered over to a restaurant that had closed for the night. Found a Garbage Dumpster and lifted the lid. Looking in my

direction and asked... "You coming in?" I shook my head. 'No way, I'm going into a garbage bin... I'd rather freeze'. Without words, his eyes said... you ain't got no business being where I have to live. He crawled in. The CLANG of the lid was a slap in the face of the 'white, soft bellied, child, trying to be a man.

I stumbled around the streets as if drunk. I huddled in doorways kicking bricks and adobe walls

trying to keep the blood circulating. I had grown up in a factory town in .Michigan. I knew about cold weather. Winters came gradual. First Fall then Winter. You acclimated yourself to the changing seasons. You gradually wore warmer clothes or added layers of clothing. This was different. This all transpired in less than an hour. This was September. This was craziness.

I died a thousand small deaths as the night dragged on. The streets were empty. Everyone was smart enough, and had the resources to find shelter, except me. I could feel the blisters of, walking in poor donated shoes, burst. I could feel the liquid squish between my toes. I wanted to void my bowels and my bladder. I was afraid if I did, there would be nothing left in me and I would surely freeze and die. So I walked on. I cried unashamedly. One stumbling step after another.

I lost track of time, space, and direction. Then what seemed like lifetimes, I saw a pink and purple mist come upon those mighty 'Sandia Mountains,. I found a 'Monument Park of sorts.

There was a rare patch of what appeared to be grass in the middle of this, beige brown, dusty dirt bowl, called downtown. I curled up and slept till the Sun burnt me awake. I was done in. I managed to find my way back to the Rescue Mission area. Hoping to find some warm food, and bandages, I found a Rescue Mission, that was different from the one, I had stayed in the previous night and they had let their clients for the night, go on their way.

I knocked on the door. "GO AWAY, were closed for the day, come back at 4:30" . I knocked on the door again. He peeked out of the security glass. I stepped back. I didn't say anything. He opened the door a crack and looked me up and down. He saw I was a mess, so he let me in.

I had heard rumors of this hostel before. The man had the 'face of a green tinged Rat. He had turned away so many men over the years, he was in fear of certain death and hadn't felt the warmth of the sun in years. Perhaps because, I was not a local, one born and burned by tradition, rather a soft bellied 'Gringo, he let me in. I ate some breakfast scraps of toast and bacon bits. Showered painfully, disinfected and bandaged, my feet, and laid in a lower bunk close to the toilet with my feet up, and drifted to sleep. The noise of the wandering mass of

wretched, stinking humanity, began to come in, and find racks of their own. I was too sore and achy to get up. I found a relatively familiar face, and asked if anyone had seen Zuni? Someone laughed. I heard some large pimply nose say: "Hadn't you heard? ...Zuni didn't wake up in time and the garbage truck compacted, his Ass, all up."

I saw the image of Zuni, heard his screams, not heard by the Truck because of the hydraulics of the huge machine charging, his bones breaking, piercing his flesh over and over again. I rolled over and puked until I tasted bile. Someone cussed and called me a 'punk ass pussy, and soft bellied white man.

Years have passed. I am now somewhat homebound. Living in an apartment, of a very large city

in the 'North East. I think of Zuni, on occasion. I can still hear his whisky whispered voice...

"Yo! White man. What are you doing dredging up my spirit into your world. Can't you give me a little peace. At least remember me in all my Glory, before I met the white man."

Then his memory drifts, and dances away,

Same as the twists, and the spins of 'Dust,

On a Street of Broken Glass.

Dr. Mel Waldman

SERENDIPITY

By Dr. Mel Waldman

Speak to the universe and it will open up, like a vast womb waiting to receive the ten spheres of divine energy of the *Tree of Life*.

Labyrinth *The Three Princes of Serendip* terra
cotta chance terra alba, white earth
Terpsichore, sempiternity, eternity, maze,
design redemption, reecho, the echo of an echo,
terpsichorean, meaning, purpose Labyrinth

I'm not one of the three princes of Serendip. And yet, I speak to the universe in search of an accidental discovery. The mysterious universe opens up. I enter the Labyrinth and meander through the Maze in search of meaning and purpose. I dance across the Labyrinth and Maze and my toes touch terra cotta and

terra alba, white earth. I travel through the Maze and seek redemption. I shriek prayers of desperation. And I listen to the echo of an echo, my voice reverberating and vibrating again and again. Chance moves me in all directions and as it thrusts me deeper into the Labyrinth, I wonder if chance is design and design chance.

Speak to the universe and it will open up, like a vast womb waiting to be penetrated by the human psyche, as vast and elongated as the universe itself.

Like the three princes of Serendip (Ceylon), I discover *things* accidentally.

Last week, while searching for proof that G-d exists, I discovered that human beings are instruments of G-d. I prayed for help from my G-d *Hashem*. And then people who helped me appeared unexpectedly in my life.

Two weeks ago, I tried to fathom the nature and roots of evil? And I also struggled to reconcile the omnipresence of an all-loving G-d and evil in the world. Well, out of nowhere, a Brooklyn Kabbalist appeared in my life. He guided me through the basic teachings of the Kabbalah. After, he took me to the *Road of Questions*. He said: "Travel on this spiritual path and you will discover wondrous things." I took a

few baby steps. Empowered, I strode across the sacred path, eager to discover the answers to my challenging questions. I didn't find the answers. But I grew spiritually by traveling on the *Road of Questions*.

Three weeks ago, I listened to the tragic story of one of my patients. He talked about the traumas of his past and the recurrent traumas of his current life. I asked him three questions. And as he struggled to answer them, I discovered buried memories of my secret self. I must confess I never discovered any scientific truths or laws by accident. Yet the following revelation came to me purely by chance, in the context of a therapy session focused on my patient: As I helped my patient heal, I healed myself. This intriguing connection between patient and therapist was, indeed, my most beautiful discovery.

SUNSET AT MALLORY SQUARE

By Dr. Mel Waldman

In ancient times, I watched the sunset at Mallory Square in Key West. While I gazed at the exquisite,

surreal dreamscape that engulfed me, I felt the heat of the glorious sun, my spirit moved by its majestic beauty. But its red sunset drove me mad too. Couldn't bear the pain and agony of its beauty; couldn't witness its celestial metamorphosis without dreaming of G-d and eternity and my unknown mission on earth.

Now, I remember those unreal nights that fed my soul. I watched street vendors and performers fill Mallory Square with a magical and hypnotic ambience. Magicians amazed me with grand illusions. Circus people fascinated and freaked me out with lethal tricks. Fire eaters frightened me by swallowing mammoth flames. Acrobats risked their lives walking across tightropes by the Gulf of Mexico. A cornucopia of freaks entertained me. A Houdini wannabe freed himself from a straight jacket with forbidding multiple locks. A Cat Man with a crackling whip and half-a-dozen cats revealed an eerie sadomasochistic gift to control his beasts. I watched with hungry, desperate eyes.

Unfortunately, those dreamlike nights fed my dark soul. And *it* emerged one night just before I witnessed a gorgeous sunset. *It* saw the *other*, a man who had been stalking me since I left Brooklyn. He followed me to Key West. The cabal hired him to kill me. I know.

In ancient times, I meandered through Mallory Square with a small pocket knife taped to my hairy chest, hidden beneath a Key West T-shirt. I looked for my predator and found him. He had become my prey. About ten feet and a thick crowd separated us.

I drifted through the throng. As I approached the stranger, I staggered and reeled. The crowd I had penetrated seemed to push and pummel me. They surrounded and engulfed me. I almost fell to the ground.

Suddenly, I felt trapped and suffered a bout of claustrophobia. On this sultry August night, I began to sweat profusely. And I listened to my heart pound relentlessly. The thumping and palpitations triggered a full-fledged panic attack. I lost my balance and suffered unexpectedly from vertigo.

The anonymous people in the crowd encircled and lifted me high into the sky. I struggled to no avail. When I looked at a few members of this throng, I saw alien faces. I blacked out.

When I opened my eyes, I found myself locked in a square cage tied to a long metal tightrope, hanging a few feet from the Gulf of Mexico. I screamed, but no

one seemed to hear my cries for help. Or perhaps, they didn't care.

I talked quietly to myself. I listened to my susurrations. Shriveled up inside my cage, I watched the monsters watching me. But soon, the darkness came. And then they sauntered off, leaving me alone in my cage hanging high over Mallory Square.

The cage swayed back and forth in the pitch-black darkness. I waited for the dawn and the monsters to return.

Felino A. Soriano

at 26

by Felino A. Soriano

to the schoolmate
whose voice wore the
saddened pretend of
absent, relational _____,

know I saw your death's
final _____, and hoped
your voice was an etch
finding the skin
of the body whose age
somehow mirrored the
suffering of why you _____,

amid the detail of
an existence, timid, timed,
fleeing from fiction's delegated
fathoms and inverted trauma

constant

, this alone

ness

a collocated

distinction

of un

unravel

ed

antithesis to

gregarious composites

and

each of my oscillating memories

value

intuition

the variants

condense

control

evaluate what holds and excogitates

:

my role as
configurative

mirage

Decade of disremembering

preference, personal's

reflectional

dialogue

diameter

circumstance

the mind no longer the
deluge of
appropriate

recalling and equality of positioning bodies—

how language
misuses the memory's pattern of purified
density: smiles wear asterisks

important dedications toward how
society's formula is ingested
within the medical definitional

medicinal reactive aspect of imposing

thoughts' indecisive anecdotes of numerals

Deterioration burgeon: feet

iv.

water's evaporating properties:
fullness extracts to debilitate

into fractioned, smaller ornaments:

nothing whole can contain

the prior reflection of wing and
devoted autobiography

v.

: bankrupt

 this wandering expanse *cannot*
engage the permission to continue ambulation

: my movement
misread and interpreted foreign tongues of future

incorrectly

vi.

though the ghosts stay with
-in the continent of my movement's
continuing evaluation, their transparencies
provide contextual *enough* for me to
facilitate ambulation into continuous
tomorrows, borrowing from previous
ventilations amid these days of porous
painful realizations

Deterioration burgeon: hands

i

fabric of the breathing recollections
what my hands have
interpreted into made
burdens across the skull's
inward hardness, from where
stubbornness awaits chance to
sprint the contour
behind the eyes and nose
toward the landing of
the tongue's unfiltered,
broken and unhinged
pocket

ii.

my hands're bankrupt. ceiling-reached. nothing
shapes without motive. nothing-encouraged. of
why the absence is a detonation. deceiving
synonyms encircle through this brokenness
of relatable despise.

iii.

someone commissioned faith: a hiring
to dissolve expected hearsay though
distance's future is a narrowing hall of constant

midnight: my hands search, their need
is of pursued dedication
a particular prose
written to rhythm's
oscillating hanker, revolving permission
to insist, proclaim
in the notifying exam these
hands encompass through trial's dexterity and
confined inability

Improper habit

I'm beginning to create identity from others' tongues. my
age, a necessary numeric component, —the physical
dimension of existence's permission. something
experiments. sound; its maneuver. a/its kindness isn't a

frequent hope/promise. why the reflection—the burden,
why? my movement isn't skilled nor does my small thinking
consider it a prophecy to exact an advantage of ambulatory
magnitude. all these angles of shape. these. permissive
dexterity, calm but unintended. as with inheriting found
value. forms, I've many. their tongues will not halt or
become a whispered rendition. too many. my clothing, ages
beyond my generation's understanding. my wondering is
sustained. perhaps a tomorrow rendition will erase. or,
among my worries maybe a divisive philosophy will
congregate, confuse.

in wondering of death

:

does each
shadow

draw memory
to adhere
upon the mourner's dedicated

fathom?

job history

sporadic convenience of money's tonal appreciation
was a spectrum of abandonment, increased
social pressure to prohibit boredom in the
contextual illusion that life was a manifestation
toward gauge and gratitude, freelanced earning
and job seclusion of temporal corrosion

Sunday

each day of this week, a resemblance of the prior, a prayer
in wrapped sanitation, gauged by my hands and elicit
ocular devotion

Jeff Harrison

Cold Earth

By Jeff Harrison

bury the opening, Greyhound Ichthyology
I get like Brother Eraser on propped days
zoomed-in and donkey to fugitive lips dog-stunted
stunted as tulip stilts? nay, paced Hope!
unplaced to here? how black as that above, ruinous, and
there tragic as any! the weary burn & pity & step with starved steps
& foambelts enormous in glamour, their sky-span more a brain than
a grave-mound --though babes watched slumbering hands (fingers
dolorous)
though Cold Earth's my child, with night forever out of reach

~

punish-stuff

strangled man
was the needle
found, fiery
minotaur house -
this is punish-stuff -
as ash, volumes
bend - & basic
their whistling,
mythological

their perfection,
this strangled man
accumulated what
your skull tatters,
his eyes aerial O
finally, who said
this is punish-stuff?

~

Crowd Scene

those hanged swung hand in hand
gone suddenly mechanical as
oratory grappled at their toes
not bounced up into collapse
wait stretch it break sight
the hypnotized tucked almost out of sight
breath dropped beneath them yes
the mechanical gone where the silk is
where hands are dispatched into tresses

John M. Bennett

the shore

by John M. Bennett

soon the floor shade sh
all ,or when ,a shoe or
lake across the sill acr
oss the watered bridge ,so
on the green mouth's mile
,or tape ,day's regression
on the dusty toast a
sleep beneath your chair be
neath the smouldered roof
or where ,the trees the
window speaking in the
breeze down the well be
neath the clouds be
neath the clattering sun

:and then he arrived at invisibility

...chicaan tupuc sikale...

- Chilam Balam de Chumayel

anchor

f e ll in p e e
led face you b
led to me was
window clad in skin
a kite escapes a
book depaginated in
my shoe was all the
throat I crawled toward
you thrumming in a cloak of bees

...p eels the h ill...

ectospasm

hap b ladder see
ms the board re
jacketed what the
mind dehaled a
nnoose be peeled
the sampled suit
xe spattered what a
caged like mighty
ththink ,e act ,en
torn re spelt the
fisted cl clock
,you's a meal you
's ay shoen jailed
the lake o sand
wich ffawn o
endered time ttime
rehacked uupon yr
shshirt

T

síncope

b ladder l imp on
flood yr bl oody
cou nter top yr
arm f lopped t
here if arm w ere
eggpl ant onym
in air yr b oiling o
il lusion b lent
into the spee ch
a c lod yr d amp
la p eels wh
en lap's not
sun k's not
f lip ulent nor
tw itchy h and
to floo r it's fell *T*

.nor louder leg than st
roke

onner

please contaminate o
ashole stream hee
sakes the sweat
bubbling on your tongue
's a cold chain
was nodding yes no
nothing nontoxic
del homicidio mas
acre menos mal
el árbol vuelve con
su coro insectívoro
sees the animation
you copended seize
the flooded rope
juts out your mouth
as lashing dream
breaks the left wheel
that you reboiled
inside your shell
in your shell **T**

***...page torn on dirty...
- James Joyce***

ffo ffo

please collapsant ,ru
nning on the forkf thru
sed y nubes pedradas
could you sh ape the
rain or inhalationex ,en
dusted frog fades beneath
yr bbed ,when bedd recr
acked if breath were
sp lit or out the tine
s ,the flexive floor you
drank yr eyes up off

if if

Jon Vreeland

the Cough the Rain the Cashier

by Jon Vreeland

The 101 was mobbed with
miles and miles of rolling metal,
drivers sitting in the wrong seat.

The radio never satisfies us,
just the flying monkeys.

The pink ones,
and the spell of
Kid Congo Powers

and his Caucasian guitar.

We forget to stop for smokes and wine
so I jumped in the Ford and drove and
it was raining

The gas tank was empty so 'ol Whitey
started to cough and whine
sounding like a former lover.

All of them.

“A pack of Camels”

I gave the cashier a ten

then he handed me a pack of

Pall Mall’s

“These aren’t Camels! “ I told the man

“these are named after my papa,

Paul

who they killed,

and I am almost certain

they murdered my other

grandpa as well.”

When he gave me the right pack

he had the balls to ask me for \$6.85

so I told him to throw in a \$3.00 Lottery ticket

Blackout Bingo

so I can feed ‘ol Whitey and

get my early morning fix.

When he offered me the remaining silver

I declined

and walked away scratching my skin

with my fingers crossed.

I won another ticket so I drove back to

the market.

(It was raining and the trees were meandering

and reaching for the ground)

and saw my two pieces of silver
resting in the penny tray

“What an honest and noble cashier” I thought

Then handed him the winner

and asked for another ticket

and walked back to “ol Whitey

and listened to her

cough

hack

vomit,

Like a smoker all the way home
where *she* waited for me.

“The man at the store was a good soul” I told *her*

“he left the silver in the copper tray and didn’t put

it in his pocket
next to his balls!

next to his taint!”

“Which Store?”

“The same one we always go to where do you

think?"

"Yes I know who he is and he raped me years back
and
didn't even like it or tell me that he loved me"

I crawled back to "ol Whitey.

Back to the rain
and whitey's
evolving hack

And won another ticket.

Drunk at Midnight

The radio is too loud,
the neighbors are pissed
The cat is confused
The door is left open;
the cold is ignored,
Insurmountable cigarettes burn
and the ashtrays overflow,

Phones Beep

Ring, Vibrate, Sing

(Temporary lovers looking for their
occasional freebie).

The inaudible television plays infomercials,
While some noses run and most junkies
sleep.

Mothers worry, Rocky Horror plays,

The radio gets turned down,
then back up,

Graveyard

I walk through the graveyard
At night when I am bored,
At night when I am stuck,
When I need an idea or am feeling
Ethereal
Gorgeous.
Everything I am not.

I hear and whistle 45 Grave's *Evil*
As I saunter by the biggest tombstone.
Two Angels holding hands,
Flying.
Someone had painted a cock on one of
Their faces
And another on the other's ass.
I laugh and light a smoke
Take a swig off my flask
Then carry on
Quietly.
Into the uncanny night.

I always bring my little black book,
(One my daughter gets for me every year,
Every christmas, where I am less drunker,

Every birthday where I pretend to be much older
than I am)
But it's too dark
to write in the graveyard,
Too dark to see the letters on the tombstones
But light enough to see
the cocks painted competently on the
Poor statues and its
Molested cemented face or
It perfectly plastered ass,

Violated with a can of spray paint,
Stolen from the neighbors' garage.

The Bar

She smiled at me when I sat down.

What a woman,
The type you find in a dream.
She was sitting at the bar
sipping her drink,
Ignoring everyone in the room.
She was much too beautiful for them;
Sloths
Reeking of
gin,
cheap cigars,
the bottle with the old sailor ship;
business men who had told their wives
"hey I'm working."

Yeah,
It was one of Those days;
But it was a Tuesday
and nobody felt like working
just to remain in debt.
(Your phone will still scream
at 6a.m.!! Leaches to suck you dry!!)
They were there to forget their lives

wives
kids
work
god
etc.

But only for a while.
I ordered another drink and
went into the bathroom to fix.
When I returned to the bar her smile had vanished
(Vanished only when she looked at me)
She glanced down at my left arm,
then walked out of
The Bar
Leaving her glass half full
and a cigarette dying
in the turquoise marble ashtray.

Halloween for Dummies

It's always cold on Halloween,
Yet everyone's clothes disappear
Along with their girlfriend,
A Nasty Hex,
Taken away by a Drunk vampire
and his stale and bitter

Beer breath by the
Light of the Colossal Moon

Or Pee-wee Herman and his pocket
full of pills he found in mom's
Bathroom

Purse
Car and Pockets of her dirty jeans,
Along with three
One Dollar bills
Old lipstick and a condom wrapper,
(Minus the condom).

Nobody hears from anybody until
The painful morning.
Phones Die, Drop like infected flies
Never gaining full strength,

(Now everything changes.
Now he won't
Love her
Like her
Or even Lust for her anymore.)

It always rains on Halloween
Makeup drenched
Smeared black furrows amid
Bela Lugosi's face,
Holly Golightly's smile and
white dress she burned with
a long cigarette.

I have seen my friend squat like a
Sasquatch on the hood of
an old man's car and shit
On Halloween which
Made us laugh and vomit;
And we ran in the

Dark, the street lights burned out
Leaving the moon incharge,
A giant grapefruit
Keeping the mothers inside

So the kids can still creep and laugh,
and shit on cars,
Eat candy while the monsters get drunk
Lose their clothes
Screw other monsters, and
People who are famous and dead

Forbidden drunken souls high on
Sex and Candy,

Hoping the moon shines
just a little longer.

Death in Surf City

By

Jon Vreeland

That morning he would find something that made him even more grateful for his simple life. His simple world. Behind The End Café he sat on the cold hard ground at the end of the pier, his feet swung over the side, his chin resting on one of the bars of the railing, gazing at the interminable sea. His favorite view.

The same morning, lighting arbitrarily exploded in the morning sky. And it started to rain...

It was the end of July. The US Open of Surfing was on its third day

out of seven. Darby Sham was in the lead as usual and the streets were smothered with thousands of tourists that came from everywhere. To Surf City, to see one of the most popular surf competitions in the world.

Razz was sitting in his one bedroom apartment on California Street, waiting for a girl he had been seeing, Dinah, to get off work so they could ride bikes to the competition and possibly eat lunch on the pier before the lunch wait got too long, and they were forced to eat somewhere else.

He waited for hours, but she never showed or called. He thought if he rode to the beach himself, the day would be much more peaceful anyways. No bickering. No making selfish requests that weaken the impetus of their small, but desirous and purposeful voyage. He hadn't known her long, but, she was *always* "still at work"—a little spot in Newport Beach hidden from the middle-class but practically spoon fed to the affluent—a bar and job she loathed. Without question. Although he kindly waited until three p.m., he eventually left his house without her and stopped at Sail-In Liquor to pick up his habitual pint of Jack, a pack of Camels, and three lottery tickets he would probably forget about. He took a good size pull from the whiskey, lit up a smoke, then put the items he bought in his black backpack and made his way down Huntington Street to his favorite spot off Pacific Coast Highway on his black beach cruiser. When he got to Indianapolis Avenue he made a right, and when he hit Main Street he made a left, and rode down the street to the Huntington Beach Pier. Showing the world his pasted grin.

When he got to the pier he rode up to the grassy knoll—which is to the right of the pier, almost attached it's so close—and posted up to gander at the daytime crowd. To Razz, the sky was as blue as can be—a hypnotizing firmament—and the water a celestial blue-green, something the ocean and all of its sailors could ever dream of. He watched the dominating crowds and the surfers who floated, who waited for the next set of waves to roll in while most of the world sat on the sweltering sand—tourists going from white to red, while the locals went from dark to darker, chortling at the idea of sunscreen—hoping Darby takes it again, for the third year in a row.

People were lined up on both sides of the pier—north and south—foreboding Darby's next move, knowing it would be great. Razz locked his bike up and walked on the pier until he was just past the piers' lifeguard tower, which is halfway to the piers' end, and squeezed through a couple of heavy-set people and tried to take a peak, but couldn't reach the railing. It was too crowded. He jumped a couple of times to see if he was even in a good spot. He was. But he couldn't get close enough to see while on the pier.

Only a half an hour later the contest was over. Sham was in an unusual second place, yet everyone in the crowd and on the pier and on the sand seemed content with what they saw that day, especially with Darby Sham. He stood out and thrilled people no matter what competition he was participating in, no matter what he placed, because of his bright green hair, his wetsuit covered with studs and spray paint, an anarchy symbol on the front and a giant circle on his back he sprayed on with white paint. His all-around innovation was inspiring to all.

His board custom shaped by a local tweaker on Third Street—painted the color of the sea so when Darby caught a wave it looked like he was walking on water; *surf better than Christ Himself* was Darby's not-so-secret slogan. He *always* said he was better than Jesus. What people loved most about Darby Sham was how Darby surfed and lived with the perfect amount of charm and the perfect amount of brink, or edge. But he had to be the best at whatever he did—exactly what his dad had always told him—or he failed. His dad always told him to do whatever he wanted, just whatever it was, to make sure he was the best at it.

Darby tried living up to what his dad had said the best he could. He always said he would probably *die trying*.

He was also great with the ladies. No doubt about that. Girls stalking him at his house. Writing love letters. Leaving pornographic phone messages on his answering machine. Darby loved it though, and often took advantage of these so-called “stalkers” by catching them lurking outside his apartment. Then pretending to call the police.

When caught, the girls would beg, tell Darby they would do *anything* if he didn't call the police. And every single time, Darby would bring her in the house, walk to the closet and grab the mop, broom, and all the cleaning appurtenances, and wouldn't let them leave until the entire house was clean. Top to bottom. He wasn't a rapist or a despairing slut. He never had to be either one. But he was a slob. And still, he was lonely.

That night, after Razz caught the tail end of the competition, he went home and went right to bed.

He dreamed of the ocean.

He was on a boat. In a place like Jamaica or somewhere in the Bahamas. Then, the ship pulled into dock at the Huntington Pier—which is obviously not allowed in real life—Darby popped in the dream and tied the ship to the end of the pier where a school of sharks were circling and jumping down below.

When Razz woke it was four-thirty am. He put on his leather jacket, and, with the remaining crescent left in the purpling sky, walked down Alabama Street, which runs parallel to Huntington Street, to the beach where he plodded in solitude—the cold sand squeezing comfortably between his toes as he ambled along the inert shore thinking of nothing.

He walked until he was under the pier, by the arcade. He headed up the stairs to walk to The End Café, which is on the very end of the pier, to possibly get some breakfast. It was cold that morning. He was glad he had chosen the leather jacket over his others. The leather was his warmest, and coolest, looking like he stole it straight from Dee-Dee Ramone's Cadillac.

When Razz got to the front door of the restaurant he pulled the handle but found it was locked. He took a couple of steps back and looked at the hours. Mon-Sun, 6-2pm. He checked his clock on his phone. Five more minutes. He walked to the back side of the restaurant to patiently wait for The End Café to open. He gladly took a

seat at the end of the pier, dangling his feet over the side, and under the railing.

Lightning ensued, and it started to rain.

Razz's silver—just dimes and nickels—fell from his pocket. Onto the cold wet pier where he noticed a rope tied to the bottom of the railing, extending down towards the water. Razz stood up and peaked over the end of the pier and saw Darby, swinging in a pendulous motion from his neck, toes pointing at the morning tide and its waning verdant glow. The one he so zealously adored. Darby was 33.

Just like Jesus.

Lyn Lifshin

AT THE ORANGERIE THAT YEAR

By Lyn Lifshin

June, I sat in the daze
of lilies, Monet's blues
and plums, lilies
moving under my hair.

A Japanese girl, the
only other person in the
room. Stillness,
calmness, as
mesmerizing

LIZ

the only woman/
girl without cropped
white or gray or
silver hair with her
mother, attentive at
first but then clearly
sick of helping her.
Age clearly scares her.
She wants to get
out of the bus and
walk. She clearly
has no interest in
talking to me. Placed
by me at dinner,

tho I tried to avoid
this as I saw her
lost patience with
her mother who always
seemed cheerful. She
had no choice but
to smile then
we each turned to
a different direction
until as we were
leaving, she asked me
“Do you wear Mary Kay
lip gloss?” (we are the
only two women in this
group wearing any make-
up)I think she is
accusing me of taking
her little pot of
orange until her
mother comes to the
rescue, says “Darling
you left this on

the table”

IN PARIS

even Dannon yogurt

tastes exotic

WE WILL NOT TAKE THE SUBWAY IN PARIS

Louis says. You don’t

see it but there is a

tension. It will go

as soon as we hit

Barcelona

OCTOBER 6

geraniums brighter
against the wet
gray. Aspens,
and more aspens
after too much
rain

GHOSTS AT NIMES

more green than
there are words
for. Farm land
under a darkening

sky. Vine yards,
flat white buildings.
Aching for what
I can't have

NIMES—SHE SAID

the last enormous
crush I had was a
dance teacher who
at least I held in
my arms. How
could I not: it was
a dance class and
his words just
added fire. This
man is a mystery
tho he's shared
facts of his life. Now
he is coming to

the table with
Spanish olives. His
grin makes me feel
what I haven't
for years. He said
his mother, French,
his father African.
It tells me nothing
she says, like a
statue you want to
touch. Before 6
AM he's jogged thru
Paris and comes in
in tight jogging
shorts, thighs
polished mahogany,
tight, tawny slick.
when he pulls
me aside he whispers
"anything I can do
for you, just
ask me"

CATALAN

here the trees grow
boughs like a
woman's hair
running, the winds
so strong the
trees grow sideways

ON THE WAY TO THE HOTEL

no bull fights,
we pass forbidden
arenas style, Moorish
style, minarets. Palm

trees, flags and
more flags. Let
Catalan Separate.
Upper floors for the
rich to parade from.
When the arenas
dry out people
dress in their best
clothes to see
and be seen

AT DINNER LORRIE SITS NEAR ME

wine makes me bold.
I ask how he was wounded
in Kosovo and he takes
off his shirt. A gorgeous
body. If I drink wine again
who knows what I'll do.
I'm the me who attracted

men after readings:

younger, wild, flirtatious.

Can this be me? Aching to

touch the 3 bullet holes.

They wanted to cut

off my arm, that mysterious

grin and my legs are

warm, you'll know. I think

that's what he said

PALM TREE FRONDS

fall from the tree,

a maple leaf falls to

the table. Two

apples, street

lamps. Driving there

a call from the

doctor. He'd lost

forms. Just what I'd

come to Barcelona to

hear

OLEANDER REMINDS ME OF

death. I think of mushrooms

like in Familia. Dali flies.

White city, gulls. Cactus,

palm trees. Cruise ships

in the harbor. I want to

feel what I felt

SITTING NEXT TO HIM AT DINNER

is it his grin?

One woman says oh

he tries to be

mysterious. He doesn't

have to try with me.

The wine's made

me bold. Just a touch

on my shoulder,

around my waist when

he shows he shows

me his 4 bullet holes.

How could I not

touch what of course

I can't hold except

on paper

LIKE A MARBLE THIGH IN THE RODIN MUSEUM

I can barely not

run my fingers

up your thighs.

Your early morn-

ing run in the rain,

slick on your

mahogany skin.

Black beret, berry

red jersey. I can't

take my eyes

from his tight ass,

the sweetness

of his grinning

twists the

pewter rain in

to calla lilies

OPERA HOUSE, BARCELONA

dancing girls, ballerinas.

A man moving thru the

exhibit, exhausted,

crashes on the couch.

And a woman near the

Louvre yells at the man

with her as if thumbing
her nose at him “Ha,
he didn’t marry me while
his Mama was alive
but now that the old
bird is dead, now he
wants to marry me.
We are very very happy”

THIS MORNING, DUSTY MAPLE LEAVES

that body I can’t have
(he touches my boyfriend
more than me) a gray
thought, pewter as
what I’m going back to
I used to lure men with
poems but I won’t see
this one after a few days.
I miss the wild longing, so
delicious, beautiful and

poisonous as oleander

A MIRACLE HE STILL IS LIVING

he hinted the first

night, the crinkling

laugh must have

touched everyone.

He could size people

up. "You may not

see me but I will

always know where

you are." I've often

fallen for good

story tellers, their

words like lips on

my skin. The grin

that teases, dis-

guises, verbs that
make me shiver.

The longing to
feel, enough
in itself

ON THE WAY TO THE MEDITERRANEAN

8 am light on
castles like buildings.
Drizzle, palm
trees. We pass
forests, white flowers,
white geese and
nearly miss
the moon still
hanging in
the cloudless sky

COAST OF MEDITERRANEAN

medieval castles,

four cats in a bicycle basket

black bikinis on the
beach. If only I had just

come here when I was
who I was

THE SADNESS OF ONLY ONE NIGHT MORE

salt wind blurs

Placa de la Cala

Villa and Sant Bartemeu

Santa Tecla's Church

will fade like dreams

along with those

tanned biceps

and stories. Some

how in a photograph

with him I look

pale, somehow scared,

too timid to

remember what I did

I'M BLEARY, TOO LITTLE SLEEP

wicked head cold.

"Oh no," he says

"not sick on the

last day. I'll take

care of you—hot

milk and honey.”

He disappears,

comes back with

a cup and that

grin, “I always

know where you

are. I keep my

eyes on you.”

AND YOU LYN

how are you?

his hand around

my back, his

eyes twinkling

this last night

all feels good

OLD BARCELONA

intricate gated
balconies rich
women dressed
to be seen by
others. Now
there is laundry
hanging with T
shirts, with the
right slang on
them, those
words matter,
they are life

BORN IN ALSACE LORRAINE

his African father killed,
shot at in a fight. His
eyes twinkle but there's
sadness. Maybe his father

was an outlaw, or a professor ,
or maybe concealing a crime
in Morocco. May be never
lived with his woman,
died and the child, was
given up as an orphan.

Who knows what the son
did to get into the French
French Foreign Legion. Trained
as a sniper, he learned six
languages, makes every woman
feel she is the only one and men
too, you need 8 hugs
a day to survive. When I get
the flu he makes me hot
milk and honey, has me trace
the wounds on his arms,
how they wanted to
cut that arm off past his elbow.
Under his grin and joking,
a sadness. After he's checked
the others in at the airport,

he runs to find my
friend and I still wonder
if he's gay. He tells us
if ever we are in trouble in
Europe to call him
and his network will take
care of it. "When you
get home call me
he says. I know I will
see you again"

RAIN IN GENEVA

after daylight
in in Barcelona

it gets gray then

darker as we

move away

from each other

HE WANTS TO COME TO WASHINGTON

he wants to write

a book about his

odd life, he feels

it inside. It has to

come out, even

if it is only for

himself. He says

he will send me

the first copy

HE'S QUITE A FLIRT

the man across from

me at dinner says,
“but he has stories!
I had a drink with him
the other night. If he
writes a book about
his life, I’ll be sure
to read it.” I think how
he told me people
are tense in Paris,
Paris is losing what
it was but in Barcelona,
it’s like the colors,
free and fiery

WHEN HE SAID WHAT HE MOST REMEMBERED

about that summer
was being deeply
in love. All I could
feel was cruddy,
how I mailed back

the ring and his
raincoat, uninsured

BLUE HOUSE, LINDEN FLOWERS, PLUMS

jet lag, the
first days going
to sleep late
afternoon in
the light, the
oleander dripping.

Cinnamon and
rose wind. And
then in blackness
the bells playing
in the street.

Parting the shades,
a blaze of minarets.

Hagia Sophia,

white birds were
falling thru
the black sky
like stars

I CAN NOT LOOK AT RODIN'S WORK

without thinking of Camille Claudel
and how ruptured she became
under his spell. He'd have been a
man I'd be attracted to and maimed.
Past busts in the Belle Epoch style,
--busts of bourgeoisie citizens
and pretty portraits of their
daughters. I can see him sketching
statues at the Louvre. But when his
statue of a man with a broken
nose froze in an unheated
studio—the back of his head fell off,
Rodin loved it. I stay the longest
in the room with works by Camille

Claudel. At 44, Rodin took her
at 18 as pupil, muse, colleague and
lover. I'm hypnotized by her
beauty, her body in The Waltz, by
the anguish in The Wave carved in
green onyx, tiny, helpless
women huddling together as a
tsunami is about to engulf them
then hurry out before I become
one of them

AT OPERA GARNIER

when I peak from the boxes
into the red velvet
performance hall, the
crowds fade away.
Chagall's ceiling dissolves
and I am dazed by
the eighty ton chandelier,
swept as others were

by others were by
the Phantom of the Opera
into a startling foreign
world. I dream It's me, in silk
and satin, jewels and a
diamond fan. You can't
even imagine how perfect
those front boxes are
to be seen. Who cares
about the opera, the music
I want all eyes in the
house to focus on me. Some
of these boxes had
obstructed views of the
stage but all the better not
to be distracted
from the gossip of
the day, my pale white
breasts peaking over brocade,
sweetly waving hello
to the crowd

AT OPERA GARNIER

when I peak from the boxes
into the red velvet
performance hall, the
crowds fade away.

Chagall's ceiling dissolves
and I am dazed by
the eighty ton chandelier,
and how the beauty,
Christine, the target of
the Phantom's love
was kidnapped, swept
into a startling foreign
world. I dream It's me,
before the Phantom moves

in. I'm wearing, as she was,
silk and satin, jewels and a
diamond fan. You can't
even imagine how perfect
those front boxes are
to be seen. Who cares
about the opera, the music
I want all eyes in the
house to focus on me. Some
of these boxes had
obstructed views of the
stage but all the better not
to be distracted
from the gossip of
the day, my pale white
breasts peaking over brocade,
sweetly waving hello
to the crowd

Sainte-Chappelle

October sun going down,
a blaze of blue rose,
lacey shadows, a hush,
quilt of calm.

Muffled street sounds
dissolve... Leave the
rough stone of the earth
and step into the light
where this dark stone
building becomes
a lantern of light

Sainte-Chappelle

the Rose Window
into Judgment day

a tiny Christ in
the center of chaos
and miracles,

flamboyant.

If it had a smell

it would be

Rose the One.

As the October light

falls, facing west

the flower flames

Sainte Chappelle

under a calmness

before Debussy

people almost

whisper. Wet

jewels, stained

glass, liquid blues.

Gray cloudy days

give the most even
light. Plants, leaves,
how sand magically
becomes emeralds
and rubies. The
windows change
moment to moment,
like an irregular
heart beat

THE ORANGERIE—MONET'S WATER LILIES

mauve and blue
hold me like they held me

years ago with

only the Japanese
girl on the bench

both of us
lost in green lily pads.

By now she might have a
daughter the age we were then.

and as hypnotized

MONET'S WATER LILIES --THEORANGERIE

Then, only the young
Japanese girl

dazed by the
hypnotic blue pond,
lilies floating in
the foreground

Not even foot steps then,
lavender lilies

plain green pads,
white and red flowers

stillness

the blue pond, how the
petals stretch into

the distance

In the poem I wrote then

she is still the young girl
she was

LIKE BEETOVEN GOING DEAF, A NEARLY BLIND, MONET

even struggling with cataracts,
planned a huge six foot tall
canvas of water lilies. Lavender
clouds reflected in blue water.
How light forms, transfixes
before dawn darkness,
clear morning light. Lavender,

late afternoon to sunset

staining the pond bright bright

yellow, pure reflected color

Maura Gage Cavell

Venus on Her Own

By Maura Cavell

Venus on her own misses Slade's
kindness, love, kisses, cheer, laughter,
her long wavy hair wet and clean.
She misses how Slade would touch it
when they were making love, how they
would clasp hands, look deeply into
each other's dazzling eyes, passion
lighting them. Whether there was rain
or lightning, thunder, smoke rising,
they would see into the essence
of each other's souls. Turning out
the lights in her lonely hotel

room, Venus shuts off the music,
closes her eyes, cries, then sleeps.

Venus and Angel Dance

Venus and Angel go out to dance
under the electric neon lights,
under a mirrored glass ball.

Venus speaks with Slade before he plays pool;
she feels like a gypsy under the stars.

Like friends do, they laugh,
but as Venus takes the wheel,
she notices weird signs on the road,
some hanging off on one side,
others knocked down by a storm.

Some branches and trees
have fallen, too, and statues
in gardens are in pieces.

Still as broken as parts of the world seem
to be, Venus meets Angel

well after twilight to feel the pulse,
to know the beat, to move
inside of a veil of mist;
Venus never worries about pushy men.
Angel threatens them with her
sharp heels if they bother
Venus and Angel—who really
are there to dance and exercise,
to have fun goofing around
on the dance floor. A pleasant man
asks Venus to dance. Angel says,
“Go ahead. You don’t have to marry him.”

Turned

Heaven reaches over her
as the shots killing ducks
echo past the sunrise.
Roses and flowers
scent her room as she burns
a bright candle wreathed
with berries, inside bare glass.
Never drowned or voiceless,
Venus sings through
stark white daylight clouds,
eyes a little bloodshot,
her blood heated with purpose
as she paints long into nightfall.
Painting her way past the pain
of longing for Slade and Ruby,
she makes plans for lunch
the next day with a group
of women friends—time
to strike out, time to have fun,
time to make plans

to dance, to dream, and to create.

Dark Taste of Winter

No matter how the dangerous
road twists and evaporates
in the dust and distance,
no matter how it disguises itself,
Venus' heart has wings,
Takes flight and then falls
a bit inside of her chest,
feeling as faded as black roses
because Slade's love
for her flies out of the window,
is sometimes a lost ticket,
and she cannot find the miracle
of bright renewal or return.
She stays so busy that sometimes
she forgets the pain
of not being near the one
she most admires, a trail

of smoke rising to the dazzling
stars, the scent of orchids
drifting into Venus' empty dreams.
Maybe something beautiful,
Electrifying, and rare
will reflect back to Slade's heart,
sound off like thunder,
a gun, or dart like a cobra
come over him like a riptide,
wake him up, hunt out his love.

Autumn Moves In

Autumn begins to show
its signs in colors warm,
golden, muted, soft--
the rust, the reds,
the burnt oranges.

Hot tea brews more easily,
cinnamon sweet, burgundy
dreams. Children play
basketball, ride bikes
up and down the street

after school--the dog runs
the fence line to follow
and bark as wheels turn.
Everything runs forward.
The clock might make one cry

because time slips away faster
when one understands
autumn and its impact.

A woman sits by a window
enjoying the scene, leafing

occasionally through the pages
of a magazine. The sun

grows a bit lower and more pale
as the day draws to a close,
it seems to seep in under the gap

of the front door, moisture
clinging outside the side windows.

As night comes she dreams of the love
she used to know and wishes
it were with her, he were with her.

Almost Cranberry

Just kissed lips glow brighter,
a deeper color, almost cranberry.

Spring brought an unexpected dream revival,
coming after her somewhere

from another point in time.

Summer months he painted

her world so vividly, the world
seemed so bright, light, filled

with shades of purple and sweet
songs—as if winter could not

ever come or touch them,
freeze the edges of what

was so hot nothing could cool it.
She made a few wrong turns—

didn't realize—and he went cold,
winter coming over all the trees—

empty, leafless, lifeless branches.

Still, she reaches for him,

wanting him to shine as he did

all over her like the sun.

Somehow the lilac and lavender
have moved into neutral tones,

and nothing she does turns the color,
the beauty that covered the earth,

back to where it was all spring,
all summer. This fall has

carried in a darkness, rain, rain,
and hardly any sun. Winter

comes, it is strong, and she wants
him to keep her warm; she

would like to warm his heart again,
to be that fire he can't do without,

but since she can't do this all alone,

since he seems to drift as drift-

wood in the river floating away,

she waits, sipping her coffee,

for there is the moonlight under which

she has learned to pray and dream,

wishing for answers. In this state

she will focus on her own goals,

her own dreams, fulfilling all the areas

of her own life. Rays of his sunlight

shine, through the gloom of loneliness,

yet he's more reserved, so she turns

to all the dreams she'd had as pursuits

before he came, turns back, back

but still the memories haunt like ghosts;

still, despite it all, there is that nagging longing

she pushes back, fights off, because if she

is not his best love and desire, then could he be hers?

Outside of the window, there is that giant moon,

winds pushing the branches, and so many bright stars.

Fog like Lace, a Dawn of Pearls

Tumultuous rains come.

The words Slade said to Venus

funnel through her mind,

echoes of his voice

spaced out with silence

and birds' calls.

Church bells mix in;

then the trains sound off

as they go through town.

Venus sips her coffee,

looks over the fields,

wonders about her day ahead.

Are these birds of prey

a sign of danger?

Do they come with warnings?

The fields are still silver with dew, the early sun

bringing with it a peaceful light.

It's cold, it's winter, and the farmers

have set crawfish traps;

mists hang over ponds.

Venus gets dressed,
fixes her hair, puts on makeup,
brushes her teeth,
drives through town;
as she passes the road
that leads to Slade's house,
a smile reflects all they've shared.

Harvest Moon

Venus is under the harvest moon,
red and deep, walking Bear,
her golden retriever, up and down

the long, long driveway.

She doesn't have many trees

in the yard, and the glowing

night sky is lit with stars,

a bloody moon shockingly bright,

clouds drifting over it;

she loves the curves of the Big Dipper

and the Little Dipper, is entranced

by all the constellations-- some she

recognizes, others for which she

doesn't have names to utter.

Her love for Slade and Ruby burns

hotter and brighter, streaming

from her heart. It isn't like

other loves that have burned

down like melting candles--

these are eternal flames

like those found in churches

or synagogues. Red and blue flames,

vibrations between the three

of them are felt even when

they are not together. Bear
and Venus walk a long time
before going inside. The phone
rings--it's Slade and Ruby calling.

He Once Gave Her
a Beautiful World

His voice, his touch
could always restore her,
heal her, turn her,
into someone brave,
someone who could
take risks; with him

she might be saved,
she might understand
more because of his beautiful
ways. She might even
understand the light
within the darkness,
reach the violin's sounds
of the water flow inside
of his soul, a safe place
to hide and to drown,
to fall back and to be caught.

This time shifted, though,
and all alone and in fright
she screamed, ran away
from the lion that clawed
away all her chances.

She tries to survive now
all alone--caught in
yellow and blue lights from a stage,
her soul sometimes hanging

on the brink, the edge

and no savior in sight.

McArthur Gunter

A COSMIC SUN: AN ASTRONOMICAL, SPATIAL AND
MULTIDIMENSIONAL PORTRAIT OF A CHINESE
REVOLUTIONARY
(SUN YAT-SEN)

By McArthur Gunter

7

Sun altruistically and
Splendidly
Shoved aside any
Self
Serving
Silk robes of wealth and
Social
Status and
Spectacularly engineered a Big Bang from a dialectical
Sun of liberation and life which totally eclipsed the
Shining Confucian model
Star.
Sun's
Sustaining
Solar winds were more centrifugally forceful than
Steadfastly
Spellbinding than the
Spectroscopic tomes of the Confucian nova and to the
Sorcerous
Syncopation of the
Soprano

Saxophone's "Blue Horizon".

8

Sun's timely and timeless
Sacrosanct
Salve was like miraculous acupuncture
Surgery performed with the dexterous
Skill of a master martial artist that revitalized
Salvation for a whole civilization from the
Soporiferous-infested Western butcherknife of a
Slicing and dissecting foreign matter which
Schoolingly
Stung like a
Slaver's rawhide whip and burned furiously like
Sulfuric acid from a
Smoky branding iron on the body and
Soul of the people from dawn time till noon time till
Sunset time till midnight time
Similar in
Scope to the appearance of a perpetual total lunar eclipse
Simulating motionlessness in a pitchblende
Sky. The pain of that foreign memory is
Still a haunting
Spectre, a
Smoldering one like a nightmarish-looking
Scar to the revelatory
Syncopation of "Blue Blood Blues".

9

Sun's legacy of

Superconscience
Superconviction and
Supercourage which commenced with his too
Soon passing during the "Moon of
Snowblindness" on the twelfth day which was
Simultaneously the
Seventy-first day of the "Year of the Ox" of the
Sirenic twentieth century is like a luminous
Satellite perpetually in orbit
Since
Sun traveled at the teleportational
Speed of light and arrived with the
Superlatively mathematical rhythm of the
Summer
Solstice, and in the
Spontaneous-combustible
Spirit of Jeanne d'Arc who was the prophetic
Savior of France, and Ho Chi Minh who was the revolutionary
Savior of Vietnam, and Tsali who was the martyred
Savior of the Cherokee Nation, and Popé, the mystic
Savior of the Pueblo Nation, and Henrie B. Lowrie, the firepowered
Savior of the Lambee Nation, and Osceola, the revered
Savior of the Seminole Nation, and Louis Riel, the messianic
Savior of the Métis Nation,
Sun's
Sweeping
Saga will orbit for light years and will be more
Splendid than an ascent to the
Summit of the Changbai Mountains and
Staking them with gems more valuable than Pa
Sapa's gold, more precious than the
South African diamond, more
Sparkling than the Comstock
Silver and as ageless as the
Seraphic Egyptian pyramids and more majestically
Strategic than the immensely
Studied length, width and height of the Great Wall, one of the
Seven Wonders of the world to thge

Surrealistic
Syncopation of the exuberant
“Sweethearts on Parade”.

Mel Waldman

INSIDE EINSTEIN'S DREAMS

By Dr. Mel Waldman

Thank you, Professor Lightman, for your whirling, swirling creation,
Einstein's Dreams, a surreal novel and phantasmagoric exploration
of time. Thank you.

Inside Einstein's fictional brain, you manipulate time, not in a
Machiavellian way, but in the spirit of a curious, generous
Creator,

blessing the genius with eerie, prophetic dreams as
Einstein gives birth to his enigmatic
theory of relativity.

You penetrate his brain, a vast dreamscape of
fertile imagination, and feed him with
vignettes of time,

for you are a genius too, a cornucopia of
myriad conceptions of time,
an overflowing well

of creativity, a metaphysical
magician, an alchemist
blending science
and art, a
magus.

Thank you, Professor Lightman, for sitting inside
Einstein's brain and revealing some
of the secrets of the universe,
the infinite possibilities
and permutations
of time;

you illuminate the incomprehensible notions
of infinite and alternative worlds in
which time fulfills its multiple
and contradictory functions and destinies.
You accomplish this phenomenal
task with finite strings of
vignettes.

But now, I sit inside your brain, a
dreamscape of preternatural
imagination,

and perhaps, I too will reveal
a few secrets of the
universe.

I don't know what my
purpose is, but still
I imagine slow
time, fast
time,

no time; circular
time, absolute
time,

frozen time;
erratic
time,

past time,
light-
time,
dark

time. Thank you, Professor Lightman for revealing
how time magically flows backwards in one

world, but moves in different
directions in other parallel
worlds.

Thank you. But who will sit inside my brain
and struggle to fathom my psyche?
I think I'm trapped in circular
time, repeating again and
again my mistakes,
reliving the past
and stuck in it
too. So who
will crave shelter inside my tumultuous
mind? Who? I think I'll gaze inside
the bathroom mirror and learn
from the antediluvian face I
see.

Yet when I look, I discover the
foggy whiteness of the
empty mirror.

Inside *Einstein's Dreams*,
I vanished. Will you
search for me?

I'm lost. Or perhaps,
I'm a corpse,
floating
inside
a

place of darkness
struggling to
find my
way

home.

LIFE AFTER DEATH:

HOUDINI'S PROOF

October 13, 2026

I met H.R.F. a.k.a. *the Magus* at the Mirage Diner in Brooklyn. When I got there, Harry, my 44-year-old cousin, was waiting inside. We got a private booth in the back room.

“Tell me about the recurrent nightmares, Harry.”

“A stranger comes into my house. He looks familiar but I don’t recognize him. He screams: ‘I was wrong!’ Then he snaps his fingers and a large beautiful tree appears, growing in my living room. On the tree are ten circles of light. And 22 glittering letters whirl around the tree. He screams again: ‘I was wrong! Rabbi Weiss was right. Eight is infinity. Infinity is eight. Twenty-two letters. Choose one.’ Then you appear, Doc. You smile at me. But a blinding white light floods

the room and assaults me. I look away. The stranger cries out: 'Nonbeliever!' He snaps his fingers again, shrieks 'Bess,' and vanishes. Suddenly, we're trudging through a Waste Land. 'Where are we going?' I cry out. 'To the House of the Dead,' you say dispassionately. Soon, a heavy snow starts to fall. We stumble through the snowstorm until we come to a gate with an arch. On the arch is written: 'Welcome to the House of the Dead.' We rush through the gate, enter the building on the left, and take an elevator to the basement. But it doesn't stop there. It keeps plummeting into the bowels of the earth. Each time I scream and wake up."

"What do you make of it, Harry?"

"I think the stranger's Harry Houdini. Been obsessed with him lately. And now, he's communicating with me from beyond. Proof that he's *alive*, I believe. But his wife Bess tried to communicate with him for ten years. After his death on Halloween, October 31, 1926, she attended séances every year on Halloween and offered a reward to anyone who could reveal the ten word code that only Harry and Bess knew. But no one could. And Bess gave up."

"Did Bess reveal the code?"

"Yes. Now, there's no secret code to discover."

"Unless there's a second code. A code with kabbalistic symbols-the *Tree of Life*, the *sefirot*, the 10 spheres of divine light, the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, etcetera. Perhaps his father, Rabbi Weiss, gave him lessons in Kabbalah. Although he debunked spiritualists, he said he would communicate

with the living if he could. And what Houdini told you is a new message. Let's investigate."

We searched the *New World Wide Web Neo-Internet* for information about Houdini's living relatives. We found a *neo-website* about his relatives and an email address to contact the family. The following week, we met with Houdini's living relatives. They gave us permission to search for secret papers at the family estate. We scheduled an appointment. And on October 31, 2026, the centennial of Houdini's death, we drove to the mansion in a heavy snowstorm.

We trudged through the deep snow, rang the doorbell, and waited for someone to let us in. Houdini's *double*, a short and stocky man with piercing blue eyes, took us down to the vault in an elevator.

"Before you leave, you'll sign confidentiality forms."

"No problem," I said. Harry nodded.

"What if Houdini's second message matches mine?" Harry asked.

"Then we'll have proof of life after death."

"Will we share this discovery with the world?"

"We'll decide by majority vote."

"If we disagree..."

"That would be unfortunate, *Magus*," he glared, his fierce eyes fixed on my cousin for a few lingering seconds.

He watched us. Harry approached the keypad, smiled wickedly at me, and punched in the number eight. I opened the vault.

Houdini's *double* left.

We entered the vault and scurried to the 22 locked boxes in the wall. None of them were adorned with Hebrew letters. While we pondered this mystery, we heard the vault shut tight. Inside, the door had no keypad or keyhole.

"We're buried alive inside this vault!" I cried out.

"But I'm *the Magus*, Wolf."

My tall dark cousin, a foot taller than I, looked at me with his dark hypnotic eyes and said calmly: "Let's solve Houdini's puzzle first."

Together, we moved from right to left like the flowing Hebrew language. We stopped at the 8th box and removed it from the wall. Harry punched in the number eight on the keypad and the box opened up.

Inside, we found a second box. Harry looked quizzically at me. "Punch in 18. It means *Life*." When the box opened, we found the secret papers.

"Here's the *proof!*" *the Magus* cried out.

"Now, let's get out of here."

"Of course."

What I witnessed next is incredible. Harry tossed a penny on the floor, entered a deep trance, and *moved* the penny psychically across the room, underneath the door, and... A supernatural force sailed into the keypad and the door opened.

“You frighten me, Harry. How did you do *that*?”

“Relax, cousin. You’re Dr. Michael Wolf, the courageous *Shrink of Trauma City*. You’ve treated dangerous patients. But I’m *the Magus*. I love you. And I’d never harm you. Trust me.”

“You never told me about your supernatural powers. I thought magic was the art of *illusion*-not the preternatural.”

“Sometimes it is both. Yet most magicians only master the art of *illusion*.”

“I see.”

“But *all* must master the art of *self-control*. *All* must conquer and control their emotions.”

“*All* shrinks must do the same. And they must teach their patients the art of *self-control*.”

Suddenly, a vast silence engulfed us. My cousin broke the suffocating silence.

“Upstairs, they’ll try to kill us.”

“How did you arrive at that conclusion?”

“When *Houdini’s double* looked into my eyes, I *saw the beast*. They killed Houdini’s family, I believe.”

“Why?”

“For the same reason they’ll try to kill us-to keep the *proof* of an *afterlife* a secret.”

“But why are they afraid to reveal the *truth*?”

“They dwell in Darkness, eat and drink rage and hatred, and are afraid of the Light-the vast container of hope and love.”

“Come it’s time to face the *creatures*.”

“But how can we escape?”

“I’m *the Magus*, the great escapologist, and you are the great *Shrink of Trauma City*. We are masters of self-control.”

“But how will we escape?”

“We will defeat them with love and hope. When they inhale our positive energy, their powers will shrink. They will run from us and we will saunter off into the outside world unharmed.”

“Okay, I get *it*. We’re *Warriors of Love*.”

We climbed a spiraling staircase. The journey seemed endless, and this octogenarian was breathless. But soon, we would confront the Darkness. I clutched Houdini’s secret papers. And with each step I took, I visualized a universe of peace, love, and hope. *The Magus* led the way.

Mykola Dementiuk

The Facialist

By Mykola Dementiuk

Chapter 1

I WAS GOING to the restroom, even though I didn't have to pee. On Coney Island the bathrooms were under the boardwalk, so a user would have to walk over the beach, descend the stairs, and step down into the solitude, away from the peopled, sandy beach. I remember I was wearing a black cowboy hat—won from some carnie booth—with nothing else on but a tight black bathing suit. My parents had laid their blanket on the beach in the Ukrainian Village, a spot so called because it teemed with Ukrainians, just as other areas along the beach were known as German Village, or Swedish, or Polish, or Greek, or Turkish. It was the early 1950s, and people flocked to the beaches. There was no need to mention where I was going. Toilet Village—the term was unsaid and hushed; a misnomer that no one said too loudly. So I took my hat and walked to where I had to go. I was a boy, so why couldn't I do it in the ocean like all the other people—kids, men and women—were obviously doing? No, I walked

straight ahead to the restrooms of Toilet Village. After all, I was a gentleman. I was almost ten years old and certainly old enough to know where I was going.

The Facialist entered the crisply clean restroom with other men who came down from the boardwalk, took their leaks with a jiggle, and returned upstairs to continue their sunny afternoon strolls. I was barefoot, clad only in a bathing suit and cowboy hat. A few of the men, standing and peeing, looked at me curiously as I made my way past the urinals, past a few stalls, and entered the last, door-less cubicle of the restroom. How did I know where I was going? Had I been there before? There was nothing to do but take a seat. I lowered my bathing suit all the way to my feet and roosted fully naked, still wearing my black cowboy hat. My little prick was fully erect and rising up from between my legs, aching for a release, but from what, I didn't know or understand.

I sat there maybe two, three, four minutes, listening to the sounds of men coming and going, constantly flushing urinals and going back outside. Then I heard footsteps coming closer to my cubicle. Tension gripped my belly. I looked up at the surprised face of elderly man looking at me. Was he was so elderly or maybe I was so young? He turned back to look at the urinals he passed, still flushing, then he stepped into my stall. I was uneasy, but wondering about the nervous tingling sensation in my belly.

The man smiled faintly at me, I smiled back at him and lowered my eyes as if I was a shy, good boy, which I was at the time. Suddenly, he touched my shoulder. I looked up at him. He raised a hand up to his lips with his forefinger, showing I shouldn't make a sound. I nodded my head, agreeing to his silent instructions. The rubbing of my shoulders grew stronger and more forceful as he bent down and reached between my legs. I assumed he wanted to rinse them in the toilet water, so I spread wider, my stiff little penis poking up. His mouth opened, his eyes widened, and I felt his hand gently grip the hairless erection and start to squeeze, moving his fingers to the scrotum, and jerking his hand up and down. Somehow my legs had dropped out of my bathing suit and went around the man's legs; the cowboy hat had eased itself off my head and hung from my neck by a slim colored cord. The man straightened up and bit his lips, standing before me as if undecided what to do. We looked at each other; our mouths open, then the man lowered his zipper and reached in for his penis. I watched mesmerized as the muscle rose up and out of the material of his pants. Big and red and explosive it hung before me and he quietly said, "You want a big surprise?" and winked at me. I nodded. "Remember, keep your eyes closed or the secret may not work, okay?" I nervously looked at the man. What could it be, I thought, this big surprise? I nodded and shut my eyes. Something brushed against the side of my lips and pulsed against my nose. I wanted to look but remembered what he said that it may not work...I heard constant, repetitive, beating, fumbling before me. "Keep them closed," he muttered. "Yes, like that, closed. Remember, a surprise..."

Whatever was brushing against my face and lips suddenly ejected a moist watery wetness, like the cooling sprinkle of a soda pop shimmering across my face.

“Oh, God! Keep them closed, kid, don’t look,” the voice reminded me.

“Oh, honey, yes!”

I don’t know what it was: the soothing voice telling me to keep my eyes shut or the constant flush of the urinals, but I suddenly felt and smelled the awesome, wonderful scent of freshness and soothing peace, very much like morning dew, rising up to my face I was overcome by it.

Then the thing left the vicinity of my mouth and brushed the sides of my face. His hesitant voice said, “Closed, keep them closed, kid,” and I heard footsteps hurrying out my stall, pitter- patter past the urinals, and vanish through the opening-closing front door. I sat there with my eyes shut, waiting for him to return with my big surprise. I felt something oozing down my face. Suddenly, I heard the door opening and footsteps slowly moving nearer. I heard a flush, then steps slowly moved across the restroom to where I was sitting, my eyes shut and my stiff penis poking out before me.

“Can I open them now?” I meekly asked. “Jesus, what the hell?” a different voice responded. I snapped my eyes open. Another man

stood before my stall.

A hint of embarrassment swept over me as I recognized the man. I had seen him many times in the area of the Ukrainian Village, walking on the beach, talking to acquaintances, and even a few times nodding to and greeting my parents. Like me, he was clad in a tight bathing suit. It shone brightly and provocatively on his well-developed, muscular, sun-tanned body. I saw that his penis was very hard. I blushed and lowered my face.

“You’re one of ours, aren’t you?” he said, in Ukrainian

I nodded and pulled my bathing suit over my hard erection, then reached for the cowboy hat. “Uh huh,” I grunted. Again, I felt hands on my shoulders.

“Shouldn’t you be with your parents?” he said softly. “Where are they?”

“In the Village,” I answered, feeling I was speaking too much.

He looked at me as if he wasn’t sure of what to do with me, but then he bit his lips and clutched my shoulder. “I’ll walk you back,” he said softly. “You shouldn’t be here, at least, not by yourself.” And he looked curiously at me. “What’s that on your face?” he asked, staring much closer. “Oh, God, was someone with you just now?” He looked

to the front door. "What a bastard," he mumbled as if to himself and shook his head. "And with a little kid, too." He blinked his eyes. "Wipe that smelly gooey stuff off. It's disgusting, all over your face and mouth."

I brushed my face against my shoulders, and went to the sinks near the front of the restroom. I sprinkled water on my- self and then we shuffled back across the sandy beach to Ukrainian Village.

Strangely, I felt at peace with the Ukrainian man walking beside me and holding my hand, the other man already forgot- ten and receding from my memory when I saw my parents looking worried at our approach. My father leaped up and scurried to us. Though they knew each other, my parents were aloof with the man. "He's a faggot," my father muttered as the man swished along and went back to reading his paper. I don't know what they said to each other, but we left the beach early that afternoon. Still, I couldn't help but regret I never received a surprise for keeping my eyes closed as the man said for me to do. What could it have been? As we walked back to the subway train, I kept turning about and looking back for what I had not received.

Pete Moss

Hello Kitty

by Pete Moss

The next morning Amy and Skip arrived on their bicycles.

Patty looked long at Skip. Then she pulled Amy aside.

"You sure Skip is 18?" said Patty. "He looks like he couldn't be more than 12."

"Oh I know, but he's 18. He's a hard worker if you give him a chance," said Amy.

Patty made a skeptical look but she was really in no position to argue, and it was only temporary.

And Skip was a hard worker, and really sharp on the computer. He learned the pull list immediately and he had a great memory. He would get an order off the pull list and glance around the garage and then zero in and pull the item from the chaos.

He was a little clumsy with the taper but so what. In no time he was filling half a dozen orders an hour.

They were actually making a dent in the massive back order list. Patty was completely free to answer e-mails and post stuff on her various accounts.

She was also free to check her growing pile of money. She'd already tripled her investment.

It was time to pay back Bob down at the bank.

"Amy, I'm going to the bank. I'll pick up lunch. What would you like?"

"Falafel," said Amy. "Uh..."

"What?" said Patty.

"Skip is vegan," blurted Amy. "If you could get him some falafel also from that place in Japantown?"

"Sure," said Patty. "By the way, you and skip grew up in some little tiny place in the Santa Cruz Mountains?"

Amy's face instantly went blank. "Why do you ask?"

"I realized I know almost nothing about you. Weren't your parents in some kind of church?" Patty almost said cult.

"They still are," said Amy. "Well....I better get back to work."

"What brought down to the big old city of San Jose?"

"It was my walkabout year," said Amy, edging away.

"Walkabout year?" said Patty.

"When we turn 20 we go out into the world and experience worldly ways for a year and if we want to stay in the world then we do. But almost none of us ever do." Suddenly Amy was almost defiant.

"Sensible," said Patty, trying to defuse any conflict. She needed Amy and Skip to keep working to catch up with the backlog.

Amy turned and went back in the garage.

Since she had to make a couple of stops and pick up lunch Patty took the Volvo instead of the trolley. The truth is she didn't really care what religion Amy and Skip grew up in, so long as they did their work.

Patty ran her errands. Bob was pleased to get the money back so quickly. Patty got the falafel for Amy and Skip and got herself some Pho at another place in Japantown. Patty hated falafel.

Then Patty drove back to her place.

"Lunch is here," said Patty. Amy and Skip came out of the garage and sat down at the kitchen table.

Patty knew instantly something was up. Amy was on tenterhooks and Skip's innocent face was troubled.

"Ok, what?" said Patty. "Did you run across some bootlegs? Any of the merch stolen?"

"Oh nothing...." said Amy, glaring at Skip.

"Well...." said Skip.

"Skip!!! It's none of our business!!!" said Amy sharply.

"But it's wrong. Father says we're not to let wrongs go unrighted!!!" protested Skip.

"What??!!!" said Patty.

"It's the profit margin," blurted Skip.

"Excuse me??!!!" said Patty.

"You should call that man and offer him more money," said Skip, with conviction. "It's what Jesus would do!!!!"

Patty was blindsided. Amy put her face in her hands.

"He named his price. He's a grown man. He didn't know anything about Hello Kitty..."

"Exactly," said Skip, "You took advantage!!"

"It's business," snapped Patty.

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Patty sat at her computer after lunch.

Strangely, she wasn't at all angry.

Matter of fact the image of Skips earnest young face, his body language so full of youthful indignation....well...it was kind of funny.

Patty chuckled, then she started to laugh, she laughed until the tears came, then she realized Amy was in the doorway again. Amy looked concerned.

"Are you alright? Are you gonna fire Skip?" said Amy.

"Fire Skip? Absolutely not, matter of fact I'm giving him a raise. Send him in here," said Patty.

Here she'd been racking her brain trying to figure out an excuse to call Pete and Earnest young Skip, bless his righteous little soul, had handed it up to her on a silver platter.

Patty had been thinking about Pete quite a bit, wondering what he was doing, imagining going for a ride on his motorbike. Finding new Ethiopian and Pho joints up in the City, gosh, maybe even having sex.

Wouldn't that be something. It had been awhile since Patty had sex. She was so wrapped up in her Hello Kitty business. Patty was smiling about that when Skip walked in.

"I'm sorry, I know I spoke out of turn. It's your business how you run your business..." began Skip. But Patty cut him off.

"No no no, you're absolutely right Skip. And I'm impressed with the quality of your work. Tell you what, how does \$15 an hour sound?"

Skip's eyes got big. "That...that...sounds wonderful," said Skip.

"Alright, done then and we'll make it retroactive."

"Oh....uh..well, thank you," said Skip. He looked like a puppy that just fell down the stairs.

"I'm going to call Pete right now," said Patty. She picked up the phone and dialed Pete's number. She was feeling unusually reckless and exuberant.

Pete answered on the first ring. "Hello Patty," he said.

"Hi Pete. We have a problem," said Patty.

"Like what?" said Pete.

"I've already tripled my money and we've barely sold a fifth of the stuff," said Patty.

"That's a problem?" said Pete.

"Well my helpers seem to think I took advantage of your lack of

knowledge of Hello Kitty memorabilia market factors."

"No no. I didn't know what to do with the stuff, and I had to get it moved. If I hadn't found you I probably would have dumped it."

"Well that's true isn't it? But a few more dollars wouldn't hurt would they?" said Patty.

"I got plenty of money from the sale of the house. Ok, ok, I'll tell you what, if you let me take you out to dinner we can call it even."

Patty felt a tremor of excitement.

"That would be very nice, but I'll tell you what, how about you come over and I'll cook you dinner at my place," said Patty. "Will you ride your motorbike?"

"I go everywhere on my motorbike," said Pete.

"Well then, tomorrow night at 7?"

"See you then," said Pete.

Patty hung up. She had a strange feeling, what was it? She was exhilarated!

"You just asked him out!!!" said Skip.

"Don't you have work to do?" said Patty.

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Patty put on her black skinny 501s. She tied her hair back in a knot. She put on some pink Hello Kitty Chuck Taylors.

She was dressing from her personal collection of Hello Kitty items.

She put on a Hello Kitty T-shirt. She was nervous, but not that nervous.

Amy and Skip had gone home. It had been a good day. They had filled almost 50 orders.

Then Patty heard Pete's bike pulling up. Then he knocked on the door.

Then she let him in.

"I forgot," said Patty. "We need some palm oil."

"Oh," said Pete.

"Can we ride there to the palm oil store on your bike?" said Patty.

"You want to ride on the bike?" said Pete.

"That's what I said."

"Well...Oookay," said Pete. He looked dubious.

Patty grabbed her pink Hello Kitty helmet and her pink leather Hello Kitty motorcycle jacket. She put the jacket on and almost had to push Pete out the door.

As Pete got the bike started Patty put on the jacket. Pete looked at Patty. He did a double take. He turned off the bike.

Patty looked at the bike, all the knobs and levers and buttons. It must be quite an involved process making that bike run, let alone dealing

with all the oblivious 4 wheelers out there, thought Patty. Pete was saying something.

"What?" said Patty.

"I recognize that jacket," said Pete.

"You do?" said Patty.

"I think so," said Pete. "I mean.....there was this show, at The Farm I think it was, Agnostic Front and Angry Samoans and some other hardcore bands, and everybody was wearing spikes and chains and ripped up leathers and....then there was this one girl in the crowd wearing a pink Hello Kitty leather," said Pete. "I never saw another one before or since. That wasn't you?"

"Maybe," said Patty. In fact she knew darn well it was her. This was the first time she'd worn this jacket ever since. It was an extremely rare home market item. Probably worth 10 grand to the princess in Riyaddh. Actually it was insane to wear the jacket on the street for a run to the palm oil store. Patty was usually anything but reckless, but some kind of virus had seized her.

"C'mon, you want dinner or not. Let's roll," said Patty.

Pete looked at Patty intently for just a second, then he smiled ever so slightly and swung his leg over and fired up the bike. Patty swung her leg over and got behind Pete and hugged him tight as the rumbling bike got under way. the thump-thumpa-thump of the bikes big motor was quite nice.

As they rode Patty was fascinated watching Pete operate the machine, pulling in levers, twisting grips, kicking pedals. He kept an eye out for errant drivers and road debris and potholes. He was busy the whole time, but smooth and unconcerned about it.

Patty never felt in danger. In fact she felt a powerful heat rising inside her.

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Patty woke up. The phone was ringing. Patty grabbed it off the nightstand. She had to reach over Pete who was waking up as well.

"Hello?" said Patty once she got the phone to her ear.

"Patty? It's Amy. Skip and I are here for work, it's all locked up. Where are you?"

"O...is it 7 already?" said Patty. She looked at the clock. It was after 7. "I'll be right there. Why don't you go get coffee."

"Uh I don't drink coffee." said Amy.

"You drank coffee yesterday," said Patty.

Amy didn't reply. Then Patty remembered that Amy suddenly turned Vegan yesterday. "O, it's cause of Skip." said Patty.

"Well...yes," said Amy.

Patty was out of bed and throwing on a robe. Pete, stretching like a cat, and smiling like the sunrise.

"It's a schoolday," said Patty, to Pete, "otherwise I'd have you stay."

"You have work," said Pete. He rolled out of bed and began putting on his clothes. "I have to get up to Palo Alto anyway. Sign some papers for the house."

Patty went down and let Skip and Amy in. They went into the garage

and went to work. Patty went back upstairs. "We can have breakfast together though," said Patty.

"My treat," said Pete. "We can ride the motorbike over to this diner on Wolfe Road."

So they did. And Patty was back at work by 9. No sooner was Patty at her computer when Amy showed up in her office.

"That man...he...spent the night?" said Amy.

"What of it?" said Patty.

"You two....you...you had..."

"We had sex," said Patty.

Amy blushed bright red and stood there tongue tied.

"Anything else you need to know?" said Patty.

"Uh.....well....how was it?" said Amy.

That wasn't the response Patty expected. Patty had to think for a second.

"How was it?" said Patty. Amy nodded her head, her eyes lit up with curiosity.

"He's very skillful. A sound technician. Have you seen how he rides his bike? How coordinated he is and how he times all the button pushing and lever pulling and pedal kicking and swivels his hips into turns and all that?"

"How awful!!!" said Amy. "You're just a thing to him, just a another machine to operate!!!"

"True, he could be a little more passionate," said Patty. "But still it

was allot of fun. I definitely plan on doing it again."

Amy looked horrified.

Patty looked at her screen. "By the way, the cut off for the Asian orders is noon if they're going to make the plane. You better get cracking."

Amy stood for another second then turned and walked out.

"You want some coffee?" said Patty

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"So what else do you eat besides Pho and Ethiopian?" said Pete, on the phone.

"That's it," said Patty.

"That's it?" said Pete.

"Yes, well...no. I do like a good salad bar," said Patty.

"Alright then," said Pete.

"Alright what?" said Patty.

"I'll be by around five and take you out for dinner at this place in SF."

"Oh you will?" said Patty.

"Why not?" said Pete.

"Are you asking me or telling me?" said Patty.

"It's a really good place. You'll love it," said Pete.

"In San Francisco?" said Patty. "You're going to come down to San Jose and pick me up on your bike and ride me all the way up to SF just for some salad bar?"

"Sure, you can spend the night too," said Pete. "You haven't seen my place yet."

"Well...if you put it like that," said Patty.

"So around 5?" said Pete.

"I have to be back by 7am," said Patty.

"I'm a morning person so no problem. And wear that Hello Kitty leather. You look fantastic in that."

"Why.....thank you." said Patty. And she hung up. Pete was kind of bossy, or sure of himself. But it was cute. Patty liked his take charge attitude. It was a relief from having to manage Amy and Skip and all her farflung customers.

The rest of the day dragged on. Patty hardly noticed Skip and Amy, who were talking in low voices to each other, and who stopped talking whenever Patty came in the room. Skip seemed downright sullen.

And then it was 5 and Patty heard Pete's bike pull up. Pete came in and immediately gave Patty a big hug and a kiss.

"Hi sweetheart!!!" he said loudly, smiling from ear to ear.

"Well hello Mr. Bikerman," said Patty.

"That's it!!!" said Skip. He'd been about to leave but now he got in front of Patty and Pete.

"Skip!!!" said Amy.

"No Amy. It's wrong. I can't work for a harlot!!!" said Skip. " And I bet this fellow is an atheist!!!"

"Skip!!!" said Amy.

Skip was bursting with righteous indignation. "God does not tolerate sinners!!!" said Skip.

"Skip Skip Skip," said Pete. "Did you just call my sweetheart a harlot? How quaint."

Patty laughed out loud. Skip swelled up with even more righteous fury.

"Fornicators will burn in hell," said Skip.

"Skip. I'm going to count to 3 and if you aren't gone by the time I get to 3 You are going to get your ass kicked," said Pete. He said it in a conversational tone but that just made it all the more menacing. "And yes, I am an atheist."

Amy grabbed her brother by the arm and started dragging him to the door. Skip looked like he would relish the chance to get his ass kicked like a true martyr. Amy was much more sensible.

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The next morning they were slightly late back to San Jose. At 1st

Pete wanted to lane split and Patty tried to be a good sport but she wound up pounding on his shoulders and telling him to stop. It was too scary going between the cars, her knees flying past doorhandles and her elbows whizzing by mirrors at 40 MPH.

But when they got to San Jose there was nobody there.

Patty got out her phone and dialed Amy.

"Hello?" said Amy, answering on the 1st ring, sounding subdued or even whipped.

"Amy, where are you and Skip?! We got work today!!"

"I'm not fired?" said Amy.

"Of course not. Get your butt into work!!! And bring Skip."

"Uh....Skip quit, for real."

"He wasn't joking?" said Patty.

"No. He was serious. I'm so sorry I brought him around..."

"Yeah yeah yeah, whatever, get over here, K? That is, if you don't mind working for a harlot."

"Oh I don't think you're a harlot!!!" said Amy "You're the best boss I ever had!!"

"Amy, I'm the only boss you ever had. Are you coming in or not? I can send Pete to pick you up on his motorbike."

"No!!!!" squealed Amy. "I can ride my bicycle and be there in 10 minutes. Just let me brush my teeth."

Patty clicked off her phone. "Dang! now I'm short handed again!" she said.

"Uh...Jephitha Jane might be free," said Pete. "You want me to call her?"

Patty thought about that for just a moment, then got a wicked little grin. "Yeah, why don't you call her. She's not religious is she?"

"No, she's bi though."

"So long as she's not religious about it."

So Pete called Jephitha Jane who said she'd be happy to work for Patty for a few weeks. and that she would catch the next train for San Jose.

Then Pete said he had to leave. He gave Patty another hug and a kiss and got on his bike and rumbled off.

Amy showed up not long after, full of apologies for her brothers behavior.

"Look, forget about it, we got orders to get out," said Patty. "I already hired a replacement anyway."

"You did?" said Amy.

"I did. By the way Amy, you been working for me about a year now. You were saying something about a 'walkabout year'? Are you gonna be leaving me next month to go back to your cult?" Patty didn't see any reason to mince words, might as well call a spade a spade.

"Uh....No. I can't go back. I hope you'll let me stay," said Amy. She looked like she wanted to cry.

"You can't go back?"

"I'll just be cast out," said Amy.

Patty looked puzzled.

"I think I'm gay," blurted Amy.

"Well I'm no professor of human sexuality but seems to me if you have to think about it you're probably not," said Patty.

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"You hired that girl," said Amy. Her posture was cringing and she wouldn't look at Patty.

"Her name is Jephitha Jane. She doesn't have any shipping experience, I know I can rely on you to bring her up to speed," said Patty.

"You can?"

"Yes. You're an intelligent young woman with a good work ethic. You're one of the best workers I've ever had. You know what you're doing. Just pretend she's any other person, K?" said Patty. "You can do it."

Amy stood up straight and looked right at Patty.

"You really mean it?" said Amy.

"I don't say stuff I don't mean. We were caught up but now with the kerfuffle yesterday we're behind again so if there's nothing else you need to get to work."

"I won't let you down this time," said Amy.

"You haven't let me down yet. The Skip thing wasn't your fault. He is your little brother but he blindsided you."

"I had no idea he'd go off like that. I mean he never did that before. Of course he's never been out of our little....uh, community."

"Exactly, well, I suppose he will probably go right back once his year is up."

"He's back already," said Amy. "All he ever talked about was wanting to be a pastor."

"Good for him," said Patty. "Now get to work, K?"

"Yes Ma'am," said Amy. She almost snapped off a salute and her stride was purposeful as she headed back out to the garage where Jephitha Jane was trying to figure out the shipping protocol on the computer.

Later when Amy took the latest shipment to FedEx. Patty sat down with Jephitha Jane.

"So how's it going with Amy?" said Patty.

"Oh she's great," said Jephitha. "She calls me JJ. I never let anybody call me that before, except for my dad."

"You're getting the hang of the job alright?" said Patty.

"Oh sure, it's not a terribly difficult job, and Amy is a good teacher...."

"And?" said Patty.

"One thing....I mean...well, how did Amy grow up?"

"Rather sheltered," said Patty.

"Some kind of cult out in the middle of nowhere?"

"Something like that. Why?"

"She's so innocent. Actually downright naïve. She obviously has a crush on me."

"I noticed that. So what?" said Patty.

"O nothing. She is really cute, and very smart. And she has a sly sense of humor when she relaxes for a minute."

"OK. You grew up in the big city and you're dad is some biker guy. You are way more worldly than Amy. Don't break her heart. I need her to work and she needs to work here. She can't go home again. You hear what I'm saying?"

Jephitha Jane looked at Patty for a long minute. "I hear you, Mom," said Jephitha Jane.

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A month later and Pattys Hello Kitty business was still setting records. The Great Aunt Elizabeth collection had propelled Patty into the highest ranks of Hello Kitty enthusiasts.

Patty found herself invited to pretty much every Hello Kitty event on earth. She was consulted constantly and even called on by media outlets for her opinion on Hello Kitty phenomenon.

Business media outlets begged her for interviews and showered her with 'Entrepreneur of the Year' awards.

Then there was Pete. Patty sometimes wished she could put Hello Kitty on hold so she could have more time with that guy. He'd managed to get under her skin. When she didn't see him she missed him.

Jephitha Jane turned out to be great with Amy. So it was a surprise when Jephitha Jane turned up in Pattys office after another hectic day and Jephitha had a pensive look on her face.

"What's up?" said Patty.

"Uh....I'm giving notice," said Jephitha.

"No!!!" said Patty. "I'll give you \$20 an hour!!!"

"Well thank you, but it's the commute, actually. You know it feels like I'm spending half my life on the damn train. When I'm not staying over in San Jose cause it's just too much of a hassle getting back to SF. I miss SF. I miss working as a barrista, seeing my regulars and all."

"OK, ok, I can see that. Can you give me another week 'til I find a replacement?"

"Of course," said Jephitha.

Patty figured that was it, but Jephitha lingered.

"What?" said Patty.

"It's my dad," said Jephitha. "He's really falling for you."

"He is?" said Patty. She tried to keep her tone neutral, but her heart was suddenly going pretty fast.

"So what are your intentions?" said Jephitha. "How serious are you about him?"

"....I like your dad very very much...."

"If you break his heart I'll kick your ass," interrupted Jephitha Jane.

"Huh!!?? Break his heart? What makes you think I'd do that?"

"Cause you project this front of the hard as nails business person, all bottom line and no nonsense. You might not know it but deep down inside my dad is quite romantically inclined. When he and my mom split up he went on a two year drinking binge..."

Patty held up her hand "Wait wait wait..."

"Just tell me what your intentions are," Jephitha Jane said, her voice rising.

"Alright, yes, I am falling for your dad. I was just thinking how nice it would be to have more time to spend with him. But you know Hello Kitty is going gangbusters right now. I grew up dirt poor. Financial security is a big thing with me."

"So how much money do you need?" said Jephitha. "I grew up poor myself. But I didn't let it harden my heart!! What will it take for you to open yourself up to my dad."

Patty stared at Jephitha. Jephitha Jane stared right back. Patty tapped her desk with her fingers.

"You're dad used to write, did you know that?" said Patty.

"He did?" said Jephitha Jane.

"Yes, I loved his writing, I used to read anything he published in what they called 'zines back in the day."

"My mom might have said something about that. So what?"

"So if your dad started writing again that would really melt my heart."

Patty couldn't believe she'd just used such a corny cliché as 'Melt my heart', and actually meant it.

"That's it?" said Jephitha Jane.

"If I think of anything else I'll let you know." said Patty.

It was two days later when Patty noticed an e-mail from Pete. Pete wasn't much of a one for e-mail. Pattys curiosity was piqued. She opened the e-mail.

There was a title: 'Hello Kitty' it read, then a double space. Then a paragraph.

'Patty woke up early and went in the kitchen to make tea. Then she sat down at her computer and began checking her Facebook, Instagram and Twitter accounts, as well as her two e-mail addresses.'

"Oh my!" said Patty as she began reading through the story.

=

Ric Carfagna

from Symphony No.8 (13.7 billion years)

Ric Carfagna

-3-

And movement
in the darkness
where there is
the mythos
to mourn
the flames
to enkindle
the psychotic bane
of night's descent
and movement
to demarcate
a presence
of bounded corridors
of mirrors of anonymity
and of two figures
irretrievably distant
and drifting through
a latent and undefined
winter light
and a movement
the mind creates
*"outside a corseted awareness
the sun-glinting blood-drained reliquaries
fall from to a saffron and rose tainted sky
and a plutonium cloud's blinded incinerating eye
creates a city of dust"*

*beneath the exploding rogue torsos
of quantum instability
and the bone throwing shaman dreams
of dead words and hollowed out corpses
falling into a molten steel and asphalt abyss..."*
and then a movement
in a desert
in a sea of fog
in a mind
interpenetrating
an apocalyptic oasis
on a frozen tundra
of disconsolate faces
of desiccated souls
hovering above
a Paleolithic cathedral
and of dreams embalmed
in alcoves of darkness
and of incense trails
burning libational holes
in the sparrow hawk's
blackened sooty wing

-14-

Snow blinds the sky
as a winter descends
and grace notes fall
from the viol's broken string
here there is the steely blemished temperament
of the comatose prosthetic heart
and the alcove of closeted eyes
 staring through
 the voiceless
 skeletal
 miasma
here the feldspar shadows
are spineless dreams
illuminating angular sun dogs
on roach-infested palace walls
here the limping gravel phallus
crawls along the stone water garden's
 sodden windswept edge

and here it is only dust
breaking this silence of thought
thought
 which lapses
 into an amorphously insentient grit
thought
 as some species of light
 heretofore undefined
thought
 deepening the mire
 on the bony carapace's
 quarried transcendence
thought
 refusing to ford
 the empirical mind's
 promethean threshold

-Scherzo No.2-

Dawn's blemish
a floating mote
 or a stranger's eye
 *"it is here to interpret
 the silence
 as an ocean ebbs"*
 an open expanse
 through a nightingale's wing
in the solemnity
of the madman's stare
 "in this ..."
a pendulum's cyclical nature
a vortex
 retracting the optical lens
 of malleable foci
 hence the loquat tree
deep in scarlet meadows
 the fragmentary spires
 tunneling through flesh
a bridge
 dismembered
 a distance
 infused
a sinewy dross

a corruptible vessel
a light as Tyre falls

-21-

And there exists
a gravity of mountains
and of dungeons
and of a dream of jackals
 seen as a gauzy winter's haze
 at a threadbare meadow's edge
and there exists
the question of humanity
and of its concrete citadels
looming against
a lactating firmamental sky
yet it is unlikely
a reality can exist here
a reality that can define
 inarticulate voices
 calling through a keyholed doorway
 presaging a death
 to a quantum essence
 within the collapsed atom's core
a reality that can define
 this isolated instance
 of ocular mystification
 where an apparition of bewitched crows
 appear above a deracinated field
 of buried stone age kings
a reality that can define
 this lifeless march of fleshly silhouettes
 bled on the barren escarpment
 of mortality's nightfall shadow
 and of the desert's wandering hollow souls
 lost in the arcane wilderness
 of a steel gilded deity's faithless troth

-46-

The sun

behind a cloud
in isolation
a raindrop
falling through
the arachnid's web
in a corridor
they speak
of death
of nightingales
to sing
a dissonant fugue
in an abyssal ocean
a rusted sperm
leaking from a womb
an unconscious breath
a disembodied space
and the singularity
in the atom
in the winnowed chaff
in the widow's mite
in the penurious gods
of stone
of cellular memory
of mitochondrial amoebas
of blood-red veils
of archetypal patterns
of ancient suns
behind clouded eyelids

-65-

"We mourn the dead"
as point of diminishment
persisting
to erect
stone monuments
and glass temples
facing the rising sun
"we hold the flesh"
of unanswered questions
a caged beast
writhing in unconscious seas
and ancient paper gods

to soothe
the heart
throbbing in mitochondrial voids
"we ebb into isolation"
a descending night
on granite stairways
and lines of demarcation
scribed on a wall of sand
and yet
the nascent stars
still burn (unchanged)
through the nebula's
life-enveloping sheath
and the cropped spear grass blades
grow above
the mud-covered bituminous sewer
and clouds drift
immune to the numinous fears
of a sleeping humanity's gloom
and yet
"we conceive of a life"
framed by limitation
and eyes that only see
a hazy miasma
obscuring the sky
and limbs which till
the seared-earth furrows
leaving wounds of a muck-rake's
scarring resonance

-76-

A sentience of crows
felt as movement
through a glass doorway
an evening light
through lattice slats
isolated footfall
in a stairwell's void
a wind shifting
the orchid
entangled in a briar patch
and then the unseen

Paleolithic dead zones
buried beneath
the deep ocean's abyssal plain

*"it was here
we thought of ourselves"*
as eyeless entities
observing
the intricate workings
of a greater mind
a mind

immune
to
the
diurnal
machinations
of
plastic
faces
lost
in
spatial
discord

a mind
resurrecting
primordial
light
from
the
dimensional
recesses
of
a
cosmic
divide

a mind
unlike
the
entropic
whirlwind
spinning
within
the
atom's

core

*"it was here
we thought of ourselves"*
as fleshly vessels
entombed by the fears
of transparent eyes
seeing the fate of glass houses
vulnerable beneath
the constellating thunderstorm's approach
when
the mind absorbs
the dust of death
and the heart breaks
its belief
in the light
of abstraction's eschatological crutch
when
a life-force energy
abandons its intrinsic domain
leaving the moth
a dried husk
in the corner
of a wooden sill
and when
the newborn infant
answers the martyred god-man's
bloodletting plea
for daylight to descend
and thread its skein
of infinite sentience
into the myriad forms
life inhabits
and into the cyclical
nature infusing all
that is

Richard Kostelanetz

KOSTI'S PERSONAL GLOSSARY

By Richard Kostelanetz

DEATH: A barrier my words will hopefully overcome.

DEPRESSION: Always with an identifiable cause for me, except, mysteriously, for the spring of 1963.

DIFFERENTLY: What I do most everything.

DISADVANTAGES: Misfortunes afflicting everyone but overcome only by some.

DOWNTOWN MANHATTAN: The center of the cultural universe.

DREAMS: What I think I do, usually with pleasure, though am unsure, as they are never remembered.

DRINKING ALCOHOL: A vice so destructive of a previous literary generation it had little negative effect on mine; for me, better done not socially but privately, best before bedtime.

EATING: One of my life's greatest pleasures, after being a necessity.

ECCENTRIC: What I was incidentally, still am, and probably always will be.

EGO: A mistaken substitute for form in poetry, especially, and sometimes other art.

ELITISM: An attitude, especially about culture, I'd rather not know I have.

ENTHUSIASM: What propels me forward.

EYEGLASSES: Not needed for most of my life though I now can't read and write without them.

FACT: What is verifiable and thus indisputable, often uncomfortably so to some.

FACILITY: A talent that depends upon predisposition to pursue the easiest path.

FILM: An art I produced a few times during the 1970s and 1980s, never with more than one collaborator each time, doing work in both documentaries and experimental film that I hope distinctive.

FORTITUDE: One prerequisite for overcoming adversity.

FRENCH: The common language favored by my Jewish grandparents from Smyrna in conversing with my Jewish grandparents from St. Petersburg.

FRIENDSHIP: What should be earned through admiration and affection, rather than power.

GENEROSITY: Always worth extending to as many and as much as one can afford.

GENIUS: What I lack, compensating for the default in other ways.

GERMAN: The other language I'd like most to learn and read and speak.

GERMANY: Where most of us who did avant-garde art found sponsors unavailable in America in the late 20th century and where the best Jewish art in particular found more support than anywhere else in the world.

GLOSSARY: Definitions unimaginable, if not irrelevant, to everyone else.

HAPPINESS: Felt, yes, though hard to measure.

HISTORY: What I studied in graduate school, giving my critical intellect a historian's cast.

HOME: Where nearly always I feel comfortable.

HOMELESS: People with whom I identify because they are likewise independent and unemployable, about whom I would never petition any Authorities.

HUNGER: A permanent condition.

IMMORALITY: What I wish for my writing and art, as it is unavailable to me.

INASTUTE: The temper of cynics who repeatedly miscalculate.

INDEPENDENCE: For my entire life an ideal, sometimes synonymous with Liberty.

INTELLECT: That without which I would be farblundjet, which is Yiddish for confused, really confused.

ISREAL: Thankfully there, just in case everywhere else is again inhospitable to Jews, though I'd rather reside someplace else.

KINETICISM: A quality in visual art I prefer to stasis.

KNOWLEDGE: A limitless well from which I can never drink enough.

LIES: What everyone tells for one discreditable reason or another, usually necessarily for ulterior purposes.

LITERATURE: What I make, albeit now in many media in addition to spine-bound books: audio, video, film, holography, computer-based installations, large

prints and drawings, objects, CD-roms, DVDs, book-art, etc.

LOVE: Elixir when you have it and it comes easily to you; a problem if unavailable or unreciprocated.

LOVERS: What should be earned through friendship, rather than power.

LOYALTY: A value important to me who lacked any ambitions for upward mobility.

LUNCH: Not customarily eaten by me, certainly never with others.

Sheila Murphy

In Lieu of

By Sheila Murphy

Memory allows no present tense.

I feel your heart lock onto my imagined safety.

I rinse his hands. I rinse your face.

I hold my mind in yours.

The mere idea of *away* goes slack.

I am alone to you, in you, within myself.

I watch your heart imagine itself closed

to my heart, our breath, the quiet place.

You hurt in me, the lithe smooth lake top

we would rest upon has dried, and sun has spoken.

Camaraderie

I told my protégé that I was younger than the work.

We rehearse failure to harmonize, endorse each other's wit. To wit, the ribaldry, a diamond choker, worn while watching football with an honest fan upon the divan. Read our lines.

The confessional once bloated still is full of breath.

Each after hour I endure a row of after-dinner mints while reading Horace, Heraclitus, the young Proust. Let us be thankful for our neighborly afflictions. Let us align pathways to the premised lab. Let us revoke irrevocable trysts.

She taught me all I know I lost.

Your Latin roots are lagging left. Plans to promenade had been concealed before I canceled thought. Tonight I see the child, long years into reflection, telling me my bicycle runs sweetly as a moth.

These empty clothes constrain me. I contain myself.

Virtue is the place between us chaperoned by genuflection and pure fate. I resurrect what legacy we piece together. And we vault across the obstacles to reaching any home town scoped for stretch goals not yet reached.

Midline

I stand here in the scenery
and plagiarize the sun.
A sparrow punctuates eternity awhile.
In all my days, I have not found inference.

The canal seems blond enough to worry me.
The height of cars without a speck of snow.
In-urgency made wholesome breaks the trail.
Want to go to bed night when we're young?

The wholesale battery of tests
will render maleness a delirium.
And false bread may remand
the curvature of spine to brave the brine.

This many forecasts put to work must be rerun.
The only way we'll know is to have dunned
the upper-ups who run the place plaid.
And usually default to incubate a pseudo-lockdown.

She

She innocents my protective thin
endearments of out-
reach, I grow young as vines.
I am the inference

retrieved from long lines
of indifference miming
an affection penciled in
to squares thought sacred

as an eminence
primed with plumage
that won't count,
as honoraria thumb west,

where ripe adventure graces
limbs responding
to light wind then bocce balls
of thunder cracking mindful nest.

Sheryl L. Nelms

Carrots

By Sheryl L. Nelms

is it beyond
your ken

to let
me

be

is it
too orange
for your stigmatic
imagination

too pointed
for your infinitesimal
intellect

too abstruse
to fathom

too esoteric
for your brain

too deep
for you
to dig

man

Another One Bites the Dust

the dark
and the night
brought him out

ambling across
the Grapevine Highway

hairy snout swaying

pinprick eyes
surveying his territory

the sudden rumble
of rubber

scared him

sent him
jumping sky

ward

in that armadillo
startle reflex

to shatter
on chrome

to fall
back to earth

to lay
still

forever more

Crossing the Cottonwood River

I push through
nettles and cocklebur

slip down
the mud
bank

into the slime
of algae

possibility
of water moccasin

sting
of channel cat

worry of crawdad
pinchers

suck of
leech

than I'm
out

on the other side

Summer Night In The Sonoran

August
drapes

its black
wool

serape

around

my shoulders

as I lean
back

into the hammocked
evening

I catch
a sip

of Chablis
going

down

Chinese Pea Pods

while burping
my two-quart Tupperware bowl
I notice
the California leaf lettuce
is beginning
to slime

glancing around the kitchen
brings the Minnesota carrots
into focus
cowering
in the corner
beside the Kosher gefilte fish
I'd decided to try
on a dare

could I depend on the turnips
eaten by poor North Dakota women
with frizzy hair

or that fermented Idaho potato
bubbling out
of the refrigerator

vegetable keeper

sitting down
all broken
hearted
tired of
a life

that never got started

I suck a Florida orange
thinking
Anita

Stirling Newberry

Gospel of St. Question Mark

by Stirling Newberry

I

First Letter to the Corinthians

Bloody night of bloody day, and bloody trail he was leaving behind him as he limped through the dusty square, now littered with garbage, paper, and brass bullet cartridge casings. There were spatters from wounds more grave than his. But no bodies, they had been removed. There were almost puddled burned candles, and leaflets with verses from the Koran that tumbled as windward leaves of human weeds that had been scythed down by assault rifles, and concussion grenades. It was 2006, give or take year.

He was being followed, but not closely, they knew his hours were running out, and there was no place to go, except out into the

mountains, were sharper fangs than theirs would tear his flesh from his body, while reading verses for his salvation. They would find him, saved from all temptations of this world. Or perhaps only his bones bleaching in the sun with all the others, all the other would be soldiers of empire that came before.

A head was a low bridge over a water way, and on it a burned out SUV, its front smashed in. It was not burning, but there was the peculiar stench of flame seared flesh, mixed with the rancid touch of hair, and the hanging oil of fire burned sweat encrusted clothes, a smell that was like the ancient sea from which life descends. Even in the arid plateau, the ancient laws remained.

He dragged himself along, chanting in his mind to be one with the road, and one with the pain.

Be one with the road, be one with the pain.

At the third incantation of these words, he straightened and walked evenly, he knew it was better to live long enough to have the leg re-broken and re-set, than to die with straight limbs. It was too far to the airbase, and too far even to the safe house, or nearest good check point. He could not run, even if he had been able to run. There had to be another way.

And then, he stopped. He saw crouched behind the burned out vehicle a slice of metal uncarbon scorced. It was the east, and Kalash is his son. He pushed forward, and made no secret of it. The holder of the weapon popped up and fired at point blank range, there was a short thumping of his chest, but as he hoped, only one bullet had been fired, and it had passed straight through him, leaving only more blood pouring into his lungs. God was not ready to call his Apostle back.

With the second movement, he had grabbed the barrel, spun around, and bent over. The young man, shocked he was not dead, flew on to the ground, the beige scarf flying behind him. There was a dull thump and it was an easy pull to dislodge the weapon. The young man tried to flatten his way to the ground, and crawl backwards, his hands in the air.

A full squeeze left punctures in his eye, and neck, and then another through the center of mass. Convulsing, he coughed. A third and it was at an end.

The Apostle looked left and right, and yet, no one stirred, on the faintest touch of dawn had grown. Even in Kandahar, a killing would usually not have gone unnoticed, but the riot a few hours ago had left everyone – occupation, local, talib – hiding indoors. The imprint of flowing sweat of fear was on everything. He checked the young man, squatted down, and felt a pressure in his left lung. A pulp of mucous

mixed with blood popped out like the cork from shaken cheap champagne. He leveled the AK-47, or rather, from the roughness of the stock, the Pakistani replica of a Chinese variant of the banana gun, and let it come around level, while he looked down and grabbed what he could from the pockets. Not the money of course, he left that for the family, but the cellphone. A link.

Instantly he cradled it in his hand and used his thumb to fast dial a number. It would be burned of course, after this, but this was the disposable number he dialed. One by one the tones came through like a wandering hopping tune played on a bad radio. He listened for the buzz of a fax machine, and then waited. On the other end, he hoped, the systems were doing their work, and locating him. He slunk down, back against the burned out vehicle, a Toyota – he could see from the misshapen remains of a logo – that had once been silver gray. He waited. The line hung up.

He nestled back deeper in, and waited to bleed out, or be picked up.

It was not long, not really long, before a distinctive sound sloshed in the air: the slice of rotors from a helicopter. He tried to identify it by the signature sound, but one ear was still blanked out from the hammer blow he had taken earlier, and his concentration was really on the hand trying to keep pressure on the leg wound. Then it came, the whirring whine of a military turbine. Not a rotary. Not civilian. One of his.

His extraction was on its way. It moved quickly and the whir became a roar. Dust foamed up from the square, and the fetid odor of the water fogged over him. He waited, and winced. And waited. It was the long minute, that minute between knowing that help is on the way, and that one well placed RPG would bring it crashing to earth. There were voices shouting, there was movement. There was the sound of an engine turning over, an aged vehicle of some kind. It was behind him, no more than 40 yards away. But it was that whe-whe-whe-whe-wheeze of a cold engine on a cold morning. Cold. It had eaten through his jacket and was working on his skin. His ragged shirt had been shredded earlier to make bandages. He pulled out the magazine from the assault rifle, and then pushed it one handed beneath the hulk.

The vehicle turned over, and he could hear it crunching the pebble strewn road. Was it closer? Was it away?

The dust swirls had become a dust storm, and the spinning sand bathed over everything and anything. He slowly stood up, put his hands in the air, and walked gingerly, cellphone in hand, redialed to the number. It was a Kiowa helicopter, operated by some contracting firm or other. Hanging out its door was a man in black fatigues, and absent any insignia, he pointed an M-16, but at the same time beckoned. Summoning everything, the Apostle jogged and was pulled in by four sets of hands, and then found himself flat on a stretcher.

Moments later, a mask was over his face and he could breath more cleanly.

“Sign?” It was a lower register gruff voice. He was waiting for the code sign.

Using ASL, he signed out: “One flew over the cuckoo's nest.”

Fuck man, why couldn't the code maker have been a fan of Amadeus instead?

“This one is in bad shape.”

“Lift.” The door was left open. There were shots, but only small arms. He rolled his head and could see a low slung off-road vehicle of some kind plowing towards them. Two men hung out the sides and were blazing away with their rifles, but he could tell that the rattling and swerving of the drive had reduced their aim to rubbish. He knew he'd had more dangerous days driving in LA. There was a growing pillar of dust around the chopper, and a growing fan behind the truck, but they were too far apart. Clearly the vehicle had gone out and swung around, because the burned out SUV blocked the small bridge.

He felt the lift as the bird leapt away from the earth, and the frame of the door was pointed to brightening sky. Then, it snapped shut.

“I don't know who you are Mister, but you are going to have to do some heavy dancing to explain why we just did an extraction for you. Your company had better be good for it.”

Oh yeah they are.

He then let himself fall back into the void of darker than darkness, only half caring if he ever walked in the light again. But there was no tunnel, no voices, not soft flutter. He'd been closer to death before. Much closer. This was merely a trip around the beltway, where he could see the city of the dead from a distance, but was not touched by it.

What told him that he was going to live, was that he could dream. He dreamt of how he came to be here, with snippets falling in different places, spliced with imagined memories of how he thought the rest of the mission would go. His excursion to Kandahar was only the antechamber to the ultimate destination that this pilgrimage would take him on. His Hajj was to a deeper and more prolific hell.

2

It had to be secure, it was still on paper. Specifically a crisp manilla folder, of the kind that signaled that the material within had been hastily collected, and was too sensitive to be entrusted to electronic

network. Of course, the intelligence community is filled with very sensitive people, of very delicate feelings, so far more ended up in these folders than was proper, only to be entered into the electronic form after it was too late to correlate with all of the other very, very, sensitive information, from other very sensitive people. He'd seen it before.

The table was also ostentatiously nondescript, a plastic beige top, with black metal cylinder legs at the corners, its oblong shape was precisely two meters long by one and a half meters wide. And at it sat two rather soft white men, with husks of white five o'clock shadow. The one on the left sported a double chin and filled out his blue pin-stripe suit rather tightly, while the other was not quite as clearly overfed, but still had not seen hard mileage in a long time. They were bent over small blackberry's thumb typing responses to the flood of messages that were marked "urgent," and "unread."

Neither looked up as a third man was ushered into the room by a uniformed Marine corps MP, dressed in his best duty uniform, pressed tight against his thin chest and hard muscles.

This third man was different, clearly broad shouldered, a product of beef, milk, and corn, he was not, however, soft in the way the two older men were, nor ripped and muscular in the way the Marine was. Instead he had a quite heft to his torso, and bulk across his barrel chest and along his legs. He was not quite built like a fire hydrant, but

he gave the impression that a football player gives in a suit: a kind of over-wide for italian tailoring. His suit was grey, with very fine gold pinstripes. It had seen far more mileage than either of the others. It's softness from wear not detracting from its expense.

The window behind them, a broad panoramic view of a moderately wooded backdrop, had an odd darkness and seemed to create artifacts to view. A skilled eye would have recognized that it was polarized, and that lcd swatches were constantly scrambling to obscure vision in. It created the impression that the outside world was crawling with insects slightly too small to see. There were almost imperceptibly off white LED lights focused on the table, and the rest of the room, as a consequence, took on a slightly blue-gray cast. There were filing cabinets, with one being of gray metal with a combination lock that was clearly the GSA authorized secure cabinet, several wooden overhead office cabinets, and on the left, a secretarial station with a wide screen and keyboard, the actual computer hidden from view, or perhaps within the screen, it was hard to tell. On the right wall was a large projection screen.

When the door closed, the on the window, horizontal and very thin, rotated shut, and the lights increased. It was only then that the heavier man looked up and met the gaze of the man entering the room. With that a false smile boomed across his face, completely absent the involvement of any muscle above his nose.

“Mr. Fischer, great to see you again.” He half stood up and extended a hand across the table to the broad shouldered man, who without expression stepped forward and accepted it. The second man behind the table stood up and offered his hand afterwards, with these formalities completed, their faces went back to neutral.

“I would prefer we stick to professional names.”

“Yours has not been reactivated yet.”

“I have not been on the bench that long.”

The second man allowed himself a very trace of a smile.

“Special procedure.”

“Expedited.” The heavier man added, his voice a kind of east coast metropolitan sharp.

The standing man, Fischer, raised an eyebrow. “That is the charm of this department, expeditious, in every sense of the word.”

The heavier man soured only slightly, his face pulling forward as he spoke: “Would you like a chance to get off the bench?”

“Of course I would. That or be given the option for a decent retirement. You know that Michael.” He nodded to the heavier man.

“Mike is fine.”

“Glad we are back on speaking terms.”

“We were running out of choices.” He spun around the crisp folder and sat down himself.

“Do I have a few minutes to familiarized myself with the case?”

The thinner man slid a few documents.

“You will need to sign these first. They are for your emergency clearance and the subject areas.”

“Thank you Gabe. Are these in addition to the ones I've already signed.”

Mike piped in. “Those are bogus. These are the operative documents.”

Another eyebrow raise.

“I see I am going to have to catch up on a great deal.”

The folder was stamped with various access controls in addition to Top Secret. Fischer noted one in particular: RESTRICTED. This is why he had been dragged off the bench, contractors and other conveniently disposable people, such as interim clearance holders, could not see it. Hence reaching down into the vaguely disreputable marginal members of the community.

He sat down and gingerly turned pages. He was immediately greeted with graphic images of at least two prisoners, both with thick black hair, and seeming to be of vaguely middle eastern extraction by their facial features. It was, however, dangerous to jump to conclusions. However what could not be confused was that they had been the beneficiaries of a great deal of rough handling: splotchy bruises, many of which were only partially healed, while others were fresh, a genera of dishevelment that came from sleep deprivation and lack of access to sanitary facilities, a bloated look from being fed and starved.

As he turned the front matter, and without looking up.

“This is John's work.”

Michael nodded, however Gabe spoke.

“Yes it's the baptist's work.”

“An extreme rendition?”

Michael spoke.

“It is in the file.”

“It's on their faces. Is this his case, or is this merely prefatory?”

“This is product.”

“Am I under need to know the source?”

Gabe leaned back. “This is your case. John's missing. And we think he may have met an untimely demise outside of Kandahar.”

“Do you have a proof?”

“Only partial, his right hand. The pictures are at the back.”

“So why not Coal. His Arabic is superb, while mine is sub-par, he forgets more about the Pashtun and their dialects every day than I could learn, and he's been in country.”

“He's also been redeployed.”

“As in retired.”

“Nice to know. Why is it?”

“Personal violations.”

“What, that he spent his weekends with a mouthful of cock finally gave you two the creeps?”

“That was the issue, yes.”

Fischer looked up and bore his eyes into Michael's. “That's why he's so effective in the field. He carries his own honey with him.”

Gabe leaned over the table.

“This is the kind of attitude that got you sent to the bench.”

Fischer looked back and tilted his head with a slight smirk.

“So I should have an attitude more like the baptists? That way the two of us could be pushing poppies up together.”

“Coal is out. He failed life style and poly.”

“Unfortunate, he's better than any three other people for this.”

“You sell yourself short, you engineered a jail break in Afghanistan. That's no small accomplishment.”

“That was a long time ago, under the Soviets. Completely different. And I was young then, horribly young.”

“Coal is out, you are in. That's the word from the Office.”

“Wonderful, another Political Department production. Which fresh faced flunky has been reading polls again?”

“That's the way it is. Are you on or off the bench for this one?”

Fischer grimaced. “I guess I'm in. That's the phrase of the season, isn't it?”

Mike leaned back and Gabe slid the documents closer.

“Sign these, then, and you are the Apostle again.”

Fischer signed dutifully on each line, with his own pen, which he then laid down as he rotated the papers back to Gabe.

“Can we get down to cases.”

“You assume there is more than one?”

“There is the case the Baptist was on, the case that caused that case, and the case of finding whatever remains of him.”

Mike leaned back. “The first you don't have need to know, the second is in the file. The third is what we are going to talk about.”

“Excellent.” Fischer leaned slightly in as if receiving conspiracy, or communion.

Mike took a deep breath. “Gabriel, you can brief him on this.” He stood up, slightly having to straddle the chair beneath him before pushing it back with his foot with a slightly awkward half stomp. He pulled out his blackberry and began thumb typing as he left.

There was quiet until the door closed.

“Even less for formalities than ever?”

“He's under a great deal of pressure Avery.”

Fischer relaxed and leaned back on his chair, adopting a happy grimace and smiling.

“I don't have a need to know. So are you my case officer?”

“Expressly not. Michael will assign one shortly out of the pool.”

“I was getting worried that this was important. It isn't like we pull disgraced radical agents and handing them SCI material with incriminating photographs every day.”

“Here's to hoping, for your sake, that these don't get wiki-leaked.”

Fischer gave a half smile. For just a moment.

“Glad to know you are always looking out after my interests. Shall you expound on the topic of finding the Baptist?”

“This was a routine rendition and enhanced interrogation, we flew the subject by military transport to Ram, switched him over to a flagged civilian craft to Yemen, where he was switched to a medical helicopter and landed in Damascus.”

“Assad is still being helpful. That must be saving him the attention of the US Air Force, or any of our Company irregulars.”

“It's a nasty world.”

“I'm sure you do your best.”

Gabriel let his eyes narrow as he tried to figure out which end of that he was on.

“Continuing, the Baptist was there to render the subject, whose connections with Palestinian terrorists made it possible that some of his information was ticking.”

“Dubious.”

“How do you know that?”

Fischer gestured at the part of the file that contained a synopsis of “First Subject's” dossier.

“He's a fat former Iraqi security thug who has more thumbs than fingers.”

“You know him?”

“He worked for Al-Samedi, one of our more elephantine assets.”

“That's not in the dossier.”

“The Company is holding out on you. Al-Samedi worked for Langley as a plant in the INC, and was sent over to Iraq, later rising to head of security and defmin. Subject One was one of his brokers. If he has

contacts with anything Palestinian, it has big tits and was born in the Bronx. We never let anything native get near him.”

Gabe leaned back.

“Are you sure of this?”

“I can give you his case officer over at the company if you like. He'll confirm everything right down to his taste in orifices.”

“You are saying this file.”

“Is a heavily edited concoction for your consumption. Subject One is a former low level asset who worked for an asset. His job was procuring hookers for Baghdad defense ministry, along with hashish, alcohol and assorted other vices.”

“Do you recognize Subject Two?”

Fischer stared down.

“No, but there are no fat Palestinians like that since Arafat.”

“According to the file Subject Two is associated with the Taliban, and is originally from Egypt.”

“Possible. My Egypt work was cover.”

“Something about children's health?”

“Telling Harvard graduates that they were making a serious mistake rationing medicines to children, since the Madrasas were picking up families.”

“Your usual policy of tact in full force.”

“There are a number of people who might still be breathing if I were listened to.”

“That's what got you on the bench?”

“No, hasn't Mike told you? It was that blow up over Hyskos. After that I was ghost writing security memos.”

“I read them, excellent work.”

“I'm complimented. I'm sure the termites think so too.” He looked towards the secretarial station and noted that the chair still had a slight depression from someone having sat in it. Mike only typed with his thumbs, and Gabe worked with his mouth.

“Don't under-estimate the importance of termites.”

“So the case officer has already been assigned.”

Gabe startled. “How do you know that.”

“Restricted. And no other eyes. Who ever was typing at that station, is on the case. Ergo, case officer. Ergo, assigned.”

Gabe flushed, he never liked being caught in a lie, however small.

“It doesn't make a difference. Yes, an officer has been assigned.”

“By who?”

“You don't have need to know on that.”

“I would advise you to look more closely, there is already fluff in the file, and someone at the Company is holding out on you.”

“I do not have random access to the Director. Maybe you do?”

“No but Jay is very talkative.”

“He's been warned to be more circumspect.”

“He doesn't like bungles. It makes the committee look bad.”

“You think this is a bungle?”

“Bungle in the jungle. Fresh imported cluster of fuck. It says here in the file. 'The ladden planes flew in, and the empty planes flew out.' Why would the prisoner say that to John the Baptist, as if it might save him?”

“That is as it should be, if this is a resupply: planes with supplies for Air America fronts, or other Company activities in Afghanistan.”

“But then, he would not have said it as if it were something wrong. He'd have used it as a defense against accusations that he was not doing his duty. But there's something else.”

“Something else from the file catch your attention?” Gabe leaned closer, he also switched off the recording system, and pressed erase.

Fischer swung the dossier around.

“That's a fib.” He pointed at the description of the fourth day of the interrogation.

“How so?”

“Gabe, have you ever stuck a man's dick in a socket?”

Gabe flinched again.

“I haven't participated in enhanced procedures personally.”

“It takes two people, unless the subject is so messed up that he can't fight it.”

“So.”

“Day four, and it goes on for...” glancing downward, “nine more days. Subject One had plenty of fight left. He wasn't going to get the fleshlight treatment without push back. There was a second person. One to hold him down.”

Gabe nodded.

“Yes. That's the real subject of this case.” He took the quizzical glance and added: “It was Mike's plan, if you couldn't see through it, you were out.”

“Happy happy. Joy joy. So who was it?”

“Jack Spade. We think he's gone rogue.”

“How, would you know?”

"I'm being serious."

"So am I. How would you know if Jack Spade went rogue?"

"If he emptied out the accounts that he wasn't supposed to have access to and was last seen in Dubai at an upscale hotel."

"When was this?"

"Four days ago."

"So my real assignment is to find out what happened, why the Baptist's hand was sent by courier, and why the Jack of Spades is AWOL in Dubai?"

"Yes."

"And they were on this rendition together."

"Yes."

"And the subject wasn't popcorn like Hamas, but something important that would legitimately lead them to Afghanistan?"

“The Hamas connection runs from arms coming out of Kandahar. They call it 'Air Genghis' in the file.”

“Ah, the laden planes of note. However, not a Palestinian angle, the only way the Saudis or anyone, let's a Palestinian near Dubai is if they are cleaning a toilet. There isn't enough slush in Hamas to afford two nights there.”

“Privately I'm inclined to agree.”

“So can we go back on the record, since we need to produce some bull to go with this shit.”

“After you give me your pen.”

“Sure.” Fischer slid the pen over. “But I warn you, it is clean.”

“I'll let the monkeys be the judge of that.”

“Sure. Now put us back on the record.”

“You don't want any more?”

“Why, so who ever lied to you can lie to me. The less I know of the party line, the better this will go.”

“You have enough?”

“John the Baptist. Jack Spade. Play the players, not the cards. Just give me the real case officer, and I will make my way from there.”

“This is starting to sound cowboy.”

“You'll follow my every move until I drop off the grid, no matter what.”

“Off the record, the real case officer is Brianna Perlmutter. Cover for this is Megan Bright.”

He passed the pen back, having quietly wrapped the information on a rubber band around it.

“Thank you Gabe.”

Gabe pushed the recorder again, and they chatted over details of the file as if it meant anything. Fischer read it while they talked, committing to memory the pictures, details of the rendition and interrogation. At the end of an hour, he slid it back. Gabe closed it, taped it shut, and checked it in to the gray safe.

“I think we are done here, Fischer.”

“Yes. I'll wait for the fluff bunny to call me.”

“Remember need to know when communicating.”

Meaning, Fischer understood, that the fluff bunny couldn't know that he knew the real case.

Gabe buzzed for the escort, and a minute later the door opened for the MP who was outside.

They shook hands.

Fischer had walked in the room. And Apostle walked out.

3

On the shuttle to his appointment with the fluff-bunny, he was alone with his thoughts. The name Avery Fischer was, of course, a fairly thin cover. Anyone in any position of experience would recognize it as the name of a music hall on the Harvard University campus. His code name, Apostle, had become a second nature to conceal, his birth name belonged to another place. It stared back at him from his papers, and from those few places where it had not been scrubbed. But it wasn't him, and he had trained himself not to respond to it. In a very real sense, to be in intelligence was to have so many identities,

that you had none at all, so many names that you answered to, that none of them was your own. Hence, as with many people in many walks of life, he fell back on an internal nickname. But even this he buried, lest it be the thread that connected him.

He began reviewing the case file as it was presented to him, knowing, as had been admitted, that it was a concoction designed to transmit information, and hide it at the same time. He was, naturally, suspicious of how quickly Gabriel had given in, because that meant that what had been given in was the next fall back line. There were layers below and above.

What the file did have was two subjects of an extreme rendition, the first he knew from his bubbly days in Baghdad, back when money flowed like oil, and oil flowed like blood. And both were almost as thick as the water that came out of the pipes. He tried to work his way through how a man he knew as Jalal, a low grade fixer for a shadowy American asset, came to be of such interest. His experience was that Jalal didn't need very much persuasion. He'd been soft then, a product of ex-patriot circles in London, too many thick meals and full pints. His sole talent was whining on command in the right way to get leniency from whoever was needed.

He reflected back on a particular party, when Jalal had been pedalling somewhat overweight southern girls as high quality flesh, under the din of very loud House music and under many coloured

lights that swung around. He was speaking loudly over the sounds of conversation in an out of fashion version of the dialect of Baghdad Arabic. When Fischer had approached him, he switched to a kind of british inflected with some American flatness that was the sign of taking a military course in English.

“You like some rock to go with the roll my friend?”

Fischer had waved him off gently, noting there was plenty of roll on the girls. Many people liked that, but it wasn't the merchandise that moved itself. Russian blondes were in, and sometimes dark African girls, uncut. But flabby locals, was a sign of not having connections. The drinks he handed out were heavily watered, and below even Gordon's Gin, which in London had been the minimum standard for American backed assets.

But in retrospect the loudness, the off the markedness of this man, began to become a point. It was not that it was an act, it was that such people were unpredictable when turned, and prone to grasp even at straws. Eight years was long enough to change anyone, and it would be unwise to assume that fat Jalal of Baghdad's liberation, was the same man as the battered individual in the photographs. If nothing else, two weeks of rendition, would remake a man in strange ways. A month would break almost anyone, leaving behind only a husk.

He reviewed the pictures again in his mind's eye. It was very standard work for the Baptist: a great deal of waterboarding, sliced thin, with bruising the face in ways that would fade nicely after being flashed with hot UV lights. Sleep and food deprivation, mix with dash of psychological humiliation, such as electric shocks to the genitals and stacking on top of other men in ways that would imply eroticism, and shouting insults.

John was not subtle. And generally, he was the warm up, not the interrogator of record.

So the official line was that Jalal was rendered, and was working with Jack Spade. Jack was a different character. Where as John was a garden variety sadist, who did his work with the quiet thrill of a transvestite in a lingerie store, Jack was a wild card. He was not loud most of the time, but he could blow at any moment, his temper erupting explosively, scalding anything within reach. He'd been reprimanded several times, and was constantly on the verge of dismissal, or even permanent containment, but he had a gift for turning up with a morsel that was too good not to use. And it was always good.

Jack would beat anything out of anyone even if they didn't know it when he started. His gift was knowing what of the drool of a broken mind was real, and what was vomited up from the pain. When to stop. Knowing when to stop.

One time Jack and tried to slam a door on Fischer's fingers, and though he managed to move fast enough to get merely a stub on the tips of them. It was close. Jack was quick, when not drunk, easily quicker than Fischer, who was not slow. But no, he wasn't going to get involved in a second quickness battle with Jack, the first one had nearly cost him a joint on his index finger.

Another time he'd been the one assigned to be Jack's minder while they held a subject destined to be hustled off to Gitmo. The instructions were to have the package undented. However, that isn't how it went.

The shuttle stopped, cutting short his musing. He gathered up his belongings and walked out the front, down on to the sidewalk under the ugly 1960's style awning, though he knew it dated from 1975, and walked to the front desk. He had the badge clearly placed, and went through the check point routine, and then through the metal detector dance. He threw his gray suit jacket casually into the bin, and then his bag, and his long passport sized wallet, and he fished his keys out, the large rental car fob landing with a resounding thunk.

He took two strides, put his arms out like wings for the wandling, and then patted his chest and pockets in a gesture to check for loose change or metal, and then stepped through the full body x-ray scan. No lights, not a single peturbation to indicate a problem.

He waited, knowing that the fluff-bunny would be down to talk to him.

He looked at the beige granite flecked with black, resounding in its dullness. But what did he really know? He had a faked file, and a dishonest debriefing, two case officers to report to. In the end, what he knew was that Michael and Gabriel wanted him in the mix. Which wasn't generally comforting.

Finally a figure walked out of the elevator lobby. He was of medium height, with a neatly trimmed beard. There were bags under his eyes, and they had a slight bulge that had earned him the nickname "frog" years before.

"Boo. Nice to see you." He offered a hand. It was not accepted.

Boo didn't smile. Clearly both of them had a few billion people they'd rather be seeing.

"I'm your case on this one, Fischer."

You're my tap to the White House.

"Apostle has been reactivated."

"I'm sure that will confirm when we get to the briefing room."

Indeed it will. Asshole.

They went to the elevator in silence, both submitted to the iris scans, and the elevator opened. Once inside they looked at each other slowly.

“Still running around with that baseball cap with the red 'W' on it?”

“Washington Nationals. It's a Nationals cap.”

“Whatever you say Boo. You're the director of this short feature.”

“Cool the attitude, Fischer.”

“If you don't like it, then get someone else assigned to this case.”

“We had someone assigned to this case.”

“I'm sure he cooked up nicely.”

“He didn't even make it.”

“Coal?”

“Yes, Coal.”

“He's a better choice.”

“He wasn't deemed reliable.”

There was another generous scoop of silence that lasted all the way to the briefing room. They sat down in the small, cramped, quarters, just barely large enough for the table and the screen.

“I have to search your bag.”

Without hesitation, it was duly handed over. After contemptuously spilling out the contents, pawing through the compartments of the brown leather messenger bag, Boo dropped it on the table. It was not in pieces for long, as Apostle put everything back into precise order.

Boo sat and watched as this was done, and then checked his watch.

“This is scheduled for 30 minutes.”

“I won't waste your valuable time.”

“Let me go over the background.”

The next 25 minutes was a recitation of the cover story that he had already pierced with Gabe. Blah John the Baptist. Blah rendition in Damascus. Blah find out what happened to John, start by interviewing the two subjects. Blah report back and wait for

instructions. Blah tight travel arrangements. Blah sensitive and secure. Blot blot blot. Blah Blah Blah. Blot Blot Blot. As usual with Boo, he could not hide his desperation in the attempts to spin the story that both knew was false.

“So what is your next step?” Boo looked at him with undisguised contempt.

“I'm going down to Dig to get some background files.”

“Your access is severely limited, why don't you just request through me?”

“I don't want to waste, your valuable time. Shall we sign the paper work and get on with it?”

“No questions? No suspicions?”

“I never form a picture too early. No one here admits to knowing what is going on, and I'm not going to presume.”

“Then sign these and we are done. There will be a box at the front. It has the usual assortment in it. I'm expecting regular reports and check ins.”

Apostle went down, accepted the box. He knew it had cellphones, papers, and explicit travel instructions. He walked out, waited for the shuttle, and was soon deposited at Dulles Airport, near the correct gate for his tickets. However, rather than immediately checking in, he took out the tracking cellphone, went to FedEx, dropped it in an international rate box, and mailed it to Cairo, which was his first stop. That should keep the hounds at bay for a while.

He looked around, he had three hours before departure. His next stop was an obscure airport lounge that catered to government travelers. It had been that way for a long time, since flying TWA was still hip and fresh. There, he imagined, he would meet the real case. His only goal was to get some time, perhaps a day, to go and visit Dig and get the dirt. No one knew the village like Dig, and especially not the comings and goings of the Village idiots.

4

The lounge was aging, and even years of scrubbing could not eradicate all the archeology of occupation that hung in the air. It was shabby, the seats were cloth rather than leather, and the bar was under-stocked. No one would join it with their own money, which is precisely the way its actual managers wanted it. He checked in at the enamel front desk, staffed by aging, rounded women poured into

something that resembled the short airline flight attendant uniforms of days much gone by, pretended to glance up at the flight information, and then checked in under the name provided for this particular leg of the journey. The neat screens of arrivals and departures only served to remind him that the rest of the world ran on cool LCD screens, or hot plasma, not on the aged CRTs that once occupied the worshipful attention of every four year old during Bugs Bunny re-runs.

He was escorted to the very tiny private meeting room, and sat down to wait. He reflected on the trickle down: from grand suite, to cramped table, to two chairs with a single small square between them, that had coffee holders.

“Coffee?”

“Coke, no ice. Thank you.”

“Is Pepsi ok?”

He sighed. “Mountain Dew then.”

“Just a minute.”

Morning may become Elecktra, bit it starts out sluggish.

He flipped through the cover documents in the file, giving him a cover, and just enough backstory to fend off a customs agent on a busy day. However, the rapidly splashed together nature of it made it clear that either he was simply roadkill, or they were desperate. It did not have the unravelling loose ends that mere incompetence produced. The names were good, not too outstanding, but not too on the beaten path. This was a touch that always came from the better handlers.

There was a knock on the door. It was the attendant bringing in the drink, which she left on the holder and then walked out, her ample behind being the last he saw of her.

He closed the folder, and stared at the off white wall, minutes passed, and there was another knock, this was not an attendant, but it was a woman. He mentally measured her against the impressions on the chair, and the arrangement of items. She was the right size and height.

If the world of intelligence were like the movies, the person entering would have been younger, insanely attractive, and blonde. She wasn't any of these things, but then, real people will settle for a great deal less than hollywood, or even bollywood, standards of beauty. The other reality is that if life were like the movies, there would have been an instant zipless fuck attraction between them that would crackle, implying that, some how, she would allow her feelings for him to interfere with her professional judgment. Instead, there was no

fluttering of her brown eyes, not quivering of her creamy skin, no perking of her breasts, no waving of her dull hazel hair, no straining of her body inside her very conservatively tailored skirt suit. In short, she was a model of nonchalant professionalism, and it was clear she had been selected for the cool detachment that she brought to the table.

This suited Apostle fine. He'd had one really tangled affair on the job, with a corn goddess swedish style knock out, an expert in telephony that he was closely sweating with, and it had ended badly when her aggressively unpleasant boyfriend became an issue.

“Good morning. You are my case officer?”

“Well co-case. Boo is going to be the officer of record.”

“But I'm taking my bind instructions from you.”

“It's complicated.”

“Sounds like a facebook page, not an operation.”

“This is clean up on another case. We are hoping that it does not become a formal operation.”

“Your cat, your bag. But I would suggest you file for a formal operation, that they've appointed not one, but two case officers says

that this is already wide ranging. And donut money for a month Boo was the handler for the previous case.”

“Can we get the forms done first? For this case I am your case officer for State, and the report that goes to Foggy Bottom will come from me.” She made a deliberate gestures that dropped a smile pile of paper in front of him. “These are the acknowledgment forms.”

He began, with some exasperation, to sign for the third time that day. This indicated to him that there were trying to construct several plausible stories through this case, to cover several eventualities. One, or more, of these meetings would never have happened, and only the one convenient would be remembered. The rest, after Orwell, would be “down the memory hole.”

He stopped, and then peered up at her severe features, her slightly bent nose, her entirely hollow cheeks, her elongated face wrapped by elongated ears. He decided the best option was to simply wait until she began talking. Almost everyone would eventually.

“So, I would like to begin your briefing.”

“You have my undivided attention. I never use it.”

She giggled a bit, and then bit her lip slightly. Her manner became serious all at once.

“I don't know what you've been told.”

“Everything but the truth. And far less than I need to go on. I was hoping you would be able to speak with some candor about the situation.”

“I can't provide you with much in the way of details.”

“This isn't going to end well if no one can give me enough guidance to avoid embarrassing incidents. I can tell that the Company is involved with this, and so is some sort of military black operation. State has inserted itself, perhaps as acting as an honest broker, which is where you and I come in. However, so far I have two conflicting agendas. I need to know what the purpose this case serves.”

She took a deep breath, obviously understanding that he had guessed far more than she had been instructed to tell them.

“How do you know that.”

“Play the players. John the Baptist was Company, Jack is a contractor who works primarily with the Pentagon. That they were on something together indicates that the Company was involved with a black operation. Jalal was a DoD asset, and the center in Damascus, is run out of State. So we were brought in as a way of bringing focus

on the two subjects. Boo is Company, and is a channel to the White House, which means that it has some visibility upwards.” Apostle had a somewhat bored look on his face, as if he was reading this off a card. “There are strong implications that this operation involves Afghanistan, where, of course, the relationship between Company and Defense operations makes the word incest a rather feeble understatement.”

She took several deep breaths, obviously trying to find the sheer nerve to do what she was told to do, and just deny it all.

“Here is what I can give you.” She dropped a small USB drive on the table.

“I was under the impression that these had been forbidden.”

“Well yes, and no.”

“What is it?”

“I can't say.”

“Are you aware of the contents?”

“Yes.”

“Have you viewed the contents?”

“Yes.”

“So you are on the access list for material that the Company is not supposed to know we have.”

“Well, sort of.”

“I'm going to need more cooperation on this, or it will blow up. One agent is missing, presumed dead. One is missing, presumed AWOL. As are the contents of several accounts. We have dangling ends, no one has told me who the counter-parties are, and what details of the operation are. I can't simply fly to Damascus, ask random questions of the subjects, and then come back and deliver a report exonerating everyone. I could, but it would be a humiliation if this were to break loose again. I have a feeling that the Executive Office does not want that to happen again.”

“Yes the White House has made it clear that they are watching this very closely.”

“So it is in your own best interest to give me more background.”

She took another deep breath.

“I can confirm your speculation that there are four players: Company, DIA, State, and the White House.”

“I need you to fill in the cards. Company supplies John the Baptist, DIA brings on Jack of Spades. They have two subjects for enhanced interrogation. What is the subject?”

“A DIA-CIA project called Air Genghis.”

“Can you reveal details of this operation?”

“I don't have them.”

“So state provided a residence for the explicit debriefing of two subjects related to this Operation.”

“I can confirm that, because you are to go there and continue questioning the subjects.”

“About what? An operation that I don't know anything about?”

“No, about the disappearance of the Baptist and Jack.”

“Why did they leave Damascus. Was this authorized.”

She hesitated.

“Look, I need to know if they were off the reservation.”

“Miles off.”

“Air Genghis has a Kandahar locale.”

“Yes.”

“So did one or both go to Kandahar under authorization.”

“State received travel vouchers for both of the to Kandahar from DIA.”

“So that, at least, was authorized.”

“Perhaps, we think so.”

“Who is we?”

“The Intelligence Working Group at State.”

“That's Hampshire's group.”

“Yes.”

“So I'm working for Hampshire.”

“You are working for SecState, ultimately. As always.”

“Through Hampshire.”

“Yes.”

“So we are the producers?”

“Yes.”

“Do we have an asset on the ground investigating the Kandahar locale, before the trail grows cold?”

“Coal was supposed to leave this morning.”

“But did not.”

“No.”

“And my orders are to Cairo and then Damascus.”

“Yes.”

“I need time to talk to Dig, originally I wanted a day, but it is clear that we need to act with more alacrity.”

“I am not sure I can get you any time at all. You are supposed to leave in...”

“2 hours and 27 minutes.”

“That's not enough time to drive to her location, and back, with any reasonable time in between.”

“Get Dig here.”

“That would be...”

“Do you want this to work or not? Right now State is on the line for allowing an operation to blow up, and it will be pinned on State.”

“I can't get Dig for you.”

“Do we have a secure line?”

“What do you mean?”

“This is a government front facility, we must have the ability to get a secure line to this room, or to some other secure room here.”

“I don't know.”

He reached back and picked up what looked like an old ivory courtesy phone handle, of the bulk that was simply never seen any more. He offered it to her.

“Ask.”

“I'm not familiar with this facility.”

“Call, and ask for the manager. Then ask for this line to be put through to the secure switchboard which will get us to Dig.”

“It's that simple?”

“No, but you don't have to worry about the details, it's done magically behind the scenes.”

“This is going to be an expense?”

“Are you a case officer, or a bean counter from GAO?”

“We are trying to keep this expense within the black bag fund.”

“We aren't going to save money by having me run around in circles. Or having to send another officer to bury me. And we can charge Bolling for it anyway. The maintain the switchboard and set the requirements.”

“But they will back charge it.”

“Which will go on the general budget, and not be assigned to any given project. It's just normal inter-department bookkeeping.”

“Oh, that sanitizes the charge you are saying.”

“Yes.”

What do they teach people these days?

She took the handle and worked through the request.

She waited on the phone as it was honored. She then began talking through the manager.

She covered the phone and stared across at him. Clearly looking for guidance.

“Should I call to clear this?”

“Do you have signature authority? Dig will handle the accesses to here from her side, it will show up on her board.”

“I have signature.”

“Then don't annoy people by asking for clearance, unless they told you to.”

He examined her face carefully, and judged that she had to be less than 30. Very young. Another sign that State was simply not taking this seriously, or didn't want him to come back. Boo was a world class pain, but he not only sold the company line, he bought it, bathed in it, and used it as aftershave. He wouldn't give up anything, and was a genuine sign that the White House wanted one of their people with a line on everything that happened. The Executive Office was taking things seriously, even as Foggy Bottom was not. It was not like Hampshire not to be on top of things. Which meant this decision was being left to Michael, and Michael was where he was precisely because he was sufficiently laid back to not challenge his boss on any detail.

And he picked this girl for reasons that were remaining obscure. Was Wheel out? Admittedly Wheel's time was better spent on analysis, but Wheel would not let details slip through and could work the system. There were other people he could name.

He sighed.

“Are you alright?” She held her hand over the phone.

“I'm fine, it is just that it is clear this was not well thought through.”

“There wasn't supposed to be a failure. It was a routine rendition.”

He stopped and pondered that. Routine rendition.

If only the world ran the way intelligence procedurals did, with crisp displays, files delivered almost automatically, clean activity, in a buzzing efficient hive. Of course much of the intelligence community did work that way, the part that scoured through vast amounts of data for bits of revelation. The less you do, the easier it is to do it. The big operations, such as the hunting of a major target had massive resources, the big operations laid siege to their objective. The ordinary was familiar, filed down, and so every bit had an in and an out. However, the borders between the ordinary and extraordinary created friction. The military thrived on initiative, the CIA lusted for improvisation.

State is stasis, and it showed.

“Good news! We've gotten through.”

How to handle the semi-competent, give them a task.

“Excellent, is Dig on the other end of the line?”

“Yes. She is.”

Good, finally someone who will help me make sense of this.

5

“Hello Dig.”

“I did not expect to ever hear you again.” the good not tell if she were smiling, it was a neutral tone of voice. At best. Dig played her cards close to the chest, even many people did not know she was a she. For a long time those who knew, kept quiet.

“Can't keep a hood man down.”

“This is not a social call.”

“Well, it is, no one knows the social workings of the village the way you do.”

He could imagine the flutter of her eyelids, taking, but not placing any weight in, the compliment.

“And how can I help my friends over at State.”

“I'm investigating,” he paused and began to spin out the story he had organized for the occasion, “a possible breach, or misuse of, INR facilities associated with a routine rendition.”

“Do you have the case number?”

“Yes, but I need to read it to you, the facilities here are archaic, and don't have a secure digital line.”

“Your up.”

Her computer must be fast. She's at Langley now.

He read the identifying information.

“I have it up.”

“I need what you can give my on the originating cases.”

“Most of it is not for your ears.”

“I am going to find out about most of it. Tell me what you can so that I am not pounding sand.”

He knew that Dig would be able to give him everything that was available, and in such a way as to point to what was not. Dig was the best intelligence writer that Langley had. Perhaps ever.

“DIA originating case, Company resources involved. Rendition of Subjects. One Iraqi national, one Afghanistan national, one dual citizen United States-Pakistani national.”

“Three?”

“Three. Two were subject to enhanced interrogation, one being held without questioning.”

“Disposal?”

“Two are subject to indefinite detention. The third is not need to know.”

“Any background you can give me?”

“I can route background by diplomatic drop to your next authorized location.”

“Please do so.”

“Scheduled arrival is 24 hours.”

“Alright, knowing what you know, because I am sure you see more than I do.”

And probably have absorbed half of it just scanning the files.

“I can't confirm that, Avery.”

“No. But I am proceeding on that assumption. Assuming the information you have at your disposal, if I were investigating breach of INR facility Damascus, what should I be asking about.”

There was a long hang, but not awkward. He could hear Dig's mind sort through what was available to him, looking for a key word that he had access to.

“As a friend, I would say, you would want to talk about Rafah.”

“Thank you Dig. What else would you advise me to ask about, as a friend?”

“Spring. I would talk about Spring.”

“Spring in Rafah?”

“No, I don't think that Rafah is a spring, but it might be a source. Or a destination.”

“Thank you, Dig. And what do I need to know about executive involvement.”

“Oh, they are very involved.”

“Process or outcome?”

“You know that One is always interested in the process.” There was a slight emphasis on the “w” sound of one, that indicated that she meant the President.

He could visualize her round face, and shock of white hair, the way it would be animated as her eyes played over the screen and she worked to pry loose secrets for him.

“Is Boo interested in the process?”

“Yes, Boo is one of the people interested in the process.”

“One of the people?”

“Yes One of the people.” Meaning that he was reporting directly to the President, through the National Security Advisor.

“Is he interested in the product?”

“No, he's not interested in the product.”

A sound like an old style cash went off in his head. He was being sent out, as some kind of cover up.

“Is the Company interested in the product?”

“The Company is interested in the product.”

Probably burying the product.

“And is DIA interested in the product?”

“DIA has a full dance card.”

Meaning they wanted Jack.

“Is there any involvement from other interested parties?”

“None in the community, and none in the family. No other friendly consumers.”

Meaning no US or NATO intelligence.

“Other potential parties?”

“Green door on that one.”

“How green?”

“Flying colors.”

Islamic nations, while also saying she wasn't supposed to say that. A green door is information that has been restricted. But the flag is definitely a reference to the green flags.

“Other than myself, is there anyone throwaway that I should know about.”

“That's your ears only.”

“Send by diplomatic drop.”

He looked over at the case officer. She didn't flinch, which meant her blood was ice cold, or she didn't get the reference: specifically, that she was considered an expendable asset on this assignment.

“Anything else that would be helpful, Dig?”

“Ask your case about Leon Panetta's plaque.”

He shook his head.

“You are too swift for me.”

“You need to take some time off. I remember you liked to vacation near Santa Cruz and especially Monterey.”

“Yes, thank you Dig. I'm sure I could use some refreshment.”

“I have to go now. Tatatilnexttime.”

“TTNT Dig.”

He hung up the phone.

“You should expect travel orders.”

She shook her head and looked at him blankly.

“You attended the Defense Language Institute.”

“Yes.”

“Which languages do you have?”

“Pashto, Dari, Farsi. I did the Indo-Iranian track. What is this with Panetta, he is going to be SecDef.”

“He's also DLI Hall of Fame.”

“She told you to ask me.”

“Because you are going to be much closer to the heat than you expected.”

She looked at him, and then her Blackberry buzzed. She checked it, and began scrolling through menus and information.

“You are right. They are routing me to Damascus to keep close eye on the case.”

He nodded.

“I am sure we are on separate planes. We will have to catch up in Damascus.”

She swallowed.

“I'm not supposed to be in the field.”

“Nor under it, I hope.”

She swallowed.

“I’m scared.”

“You should be. This is Charlie Foxtrot.”

“CF”

“I really hope that hasn’t fallen out of currency.”

She looked at him.

He mouthed “Cluster Fuck.”

She looked at him.

He stared back and without a trace of pity intoned:

“It is time to put childish things away.”

The First Epistle of John

1

His voice was different, it no longer sounded like a South American, which is a distinct sound. Long years of training had made him sound like an American, though his skin was a trifle too, something or other. But in points it betrayed the rumbling that suggest he wasn't really American, but taking it rather well. Many people would not notice, but a view people would. The Charlie in Charlie foxtrot was off.

The room was fetid hot, with a small ceramic heater providing the fetid, and the bodies, military, contractor, and civilian providing a boost that curdled the air into a swamp like concoction. There was the rank smell of bandages that needed to be change layered on top of a melange of sweat. Acrid, musk, fox-like, all competed. Most of the bodies were men, but a few were women, two from the local Air Force base, who had crowded near the front.

“So, how exactly did you get out? The fire fight was 150 clicks up-range, into the mountains and across scrub wood. With a limp and a lung shot?”

“The lung wound was very fresh. And the leg wound only a few hours older. We weren't combatants in the fire fight.”

“We?”

“Yes, the other officer was still with me at that time.”

“But he's not now?”

OK they haven't gotten anything from state yet.

“No.”

“So why don't you go back out to the fire fight, and tell me exactly how you got back 230 kilometers on the ground, a 6 hour drive on the roads, on foot, in a day.”

“It wasn't on foot.”

“How did it happen?”

He stopped and tried to game out the situation. He could dead end things here, and then hope that either Director Hampshire, or even the White House through Boo would know what was good for them, avow him, and cart him away. He'd be burned as a field agent, and would be back to Dilbertia, but State, or someone, would have the

product, and could roll up Jack before turning the corner to the real Patron of the operation, however far that would go. Cooperation, small wins. However he, personally, would be better denying the Director, coming up with his own cover, and then go illegal, without official cover. Then if State, or the Executive disavowed him, it would be better. But if they said he was one of theirs, total blow up. On the other hand, if he kept quiet, and they disavowed him, then he'd be roughed up here by the local security officer – just to prove he was off the reservation – and then Hampshire could have him carted back, and have a great deal more leverage to make sure that he would be completely forthcoming.

Or to put it another way, if both sides in this little game jumped the same way, it was the best case scenario, but if one side played it straight, then, well. No good deed goes unpunished.

He sat, pretending to shake back and forth slowly, as if his injuries were bad. He let his eyes droop.

“Some one get him some water.”

He waited for the water, drank it in small gulps, and then started. What would Hampshire do? She'd betray, of course.

“I was flown back.”

“How? Did a plane just fall out of the sky?”

“No, it was the ultra-light that my target had flow in on.”

“And he just happened to have one.”

“He was an officer who had gone rogue. He was here to sell out.”

“Did he?”

“Yes.”

“So why are you telling me this.”

“I'm not here on Company business. I came because I knew that whatever score there was to be made was on the table.”

“So you were here to gray mail him for a slice of the action?”

“Essentially.”

“Where the proof.”

“I can give you the GPS of the cave where his body is.”

“Did you splash him?”

“I was doing him a favor, the Talib had already amputated his hand and his foot.”

“You sure he wasn't captured?”

“He was compromised.”

“When? How did you know?”

“A long time ago. I knew then, I think.”

“So you knew him?”

“After a manner of speaking. In any event, why don't you get me a GPS to upload to, and you can check the proof.”

“What I don't understand is why an officer would just come out and decide that having his limbs hacked off and living as a double amputee in Kandahar was his best career move.”

“They had leverage.”

“Ah.”

“Go check the proof. I can wait, I have nothing to do but heal.”

“You think you are going to get away with murder?”

“It wasn't murder, I was doing him, and you, a favor. He almost certainly had more to say.”

The tent was cleared, and he let himself be shuffled to the brig. They weren't going to do any high impact dental work until they knew where things were. He was also waiting for the diplo attache to arrive and tell them he was off the reservation.

But when they got the body, he'd be walking out, without problems. Because like any good spook, he'd blown the dead man, and told enough of the truth.

John the Baptist, had confessed. Sadly, he was not sure exactly to what, or to whom. But it was inevitable, before he even was John the Baptist, he had been made, compromised, and left on the shelf until needed.

It was a long time ago, they both had been very fresh faced and young. Neither even out of college. The place was Kabul, and he had been sent to do the simple task of getting an agent of an Afghan prison. Why him? Why then? He had excellent Russian, and could cram passable Pashto in time. He was totally expendable. John, even then, was not.

“Love” Hassina Gol

It whined in his ears from a stretched tape on his walkman, the tinny speakers simply unable to carry the drum smack or the bass thrum. This was the last decade of using “walkman” . Look up on the wall. He'd had a friend rig up a clock to his cassette player as an alarm. There was only yellowing hall light coming through the crack in a door that wouldn't close. The outside was that kind of dark he hadn't known since he was very small, and living in a remote flat part of Ohio. The dark kind of dark, where the stars leap out at you. He could feel a cold draft that came from the crack in the window.

He shut the tape off, the startle had been enough to get him to come to a full, if edged consciousness. He rolled into his jeans in a single motion, and straddled up the belt that he had not even tried to untread from the worn loops. His hard abs and thin body were uncovered. He had to tighten the belt a notch farther than when he came. The food didn't agree with him. He thought food should be food. It was of a different opinion. Mushy uncooked grain in a variety

of mixtures with liquids unfit for human consumption alternating with balls of the same material, days older, only cooked to desperation.

He looked down both directions of the street in Kabul where he had taken up lodging. In the distance on the left he could see the outline of the dome of the large mosque whose name he kept forgetting, and then near it a large soviet era slab concrete high rise. They were just visible against the massive backdrop of the snow capped mountains that Kabul was nestled in. It reminded of many vistas in the American west: Las Vegas, Salt Lake City, Reno, a city in the hollow of the palm of the mountains. Sitting in the hand of God. First a low brown line, and then the higher ones that shrouded the rim of the sky. Dawn came slow, and it got late early.

He'd dropped in to this place two weeks ago. The altitude was no longer causing swelling headaches, he'd learned to get over them more quickly than most from his life in Denver. That's what he called it to himself, a sweaty shacking up with a girl who was as much prostitute as girlfriend. He'd gone back to college after and completed his degree, angry and horny, because dating seemed to him to be a waste of time. Nothing like falling into bed and staying there except to eat and fight to teach a young man that there is no such thing as no strings attached.

He sipped from the brackish cup of coffee he'd left from the night before. It had been made turkish style, so what remained as closer to

silt than liquid. At least it was sweet, though he wasn't sure he'd ever add honey to coffee ever again.

He through the flannel shirt over his torso, it hung, baggy and too big for him, though his shoulders were stretched tight across the back. The last dregs of coffee taken, he pulled a trick he'd learned at an inn on the bumpy ride in. He walked to the window and threw the cup down, smashing it. He did that with two or three small plates as well.

There was a stirring below and lights came on. There was a shouting from below in Pashto. He shouted back down. "I heard you. How much for breaking the dishes?" The price was equivalent to a few pennies in America. He called down, to bring me morning coffee and yoghurt and he would pay for everything. Not until then. Minutes later there was cgoffee, yoghurt, fruit, and the ubiquitous porridge. He paid in local paper, not wanting to give away that he had dollars, though he'd confess to Indian, Pakistani, or even Russian money – though with the withdrawl already well advanced, they locals weren't keen on that either.

However, if 4 cents was what it took to get room service, so be it. Also made sure he'd get clean dishes, rather than just new food on old plates. He'd seen that too.

He was up early because it was another day of waiting, and when one waits in a nation that is both Soviet, and South Asian, you had better get an early start on it it.

He gobbled down the food. You don't buy food in Kabul, you rent it. On the way out he grabbed some vegetables and yoghurt in flatbread, and trundled on his way to the street car stop. He caught the first one, which was only 15 minutes late, and sat down. He was always looking around, but there was only the same morning people who had been on that same street car since his first day, most of them every day. He rode to the police station that handled jail requests. The first day they pretended not to understand his Russian, he bribed the person at the window with Western cigarettes, and amazingly his Russian improved. The second day they pretended that they were not the right place to go. He bribed the person at the window with a pair of nylons and some lipstick. Amazingly it turned out this was the place to go, but they had no idea what he was talking about. The third day they pretended that they had never heard of the person he was talking about, nor anyone meeting his description. He bribed them with a Sony Walkman, and amazingly, they told him the could find him the next day. The fourth day the building turned out to be closed. He bribed the guard with a pack of Marlboros, and he was let in. Once in he was told to leave. He sat down and began distributing western playing cards. They told him to wait. Later, he was told that the office would be closed again in a week, and he would be able to talk to a commissar who could help him, but that he

would have to wait every day, so that no one would know what special treatment he was getting.

So every day he waited, passing the day playing solitaire, writing notes on a small pad with a cheap pencil he had acquired in Pakistan. This was Day 10. Tomorrow the office would be closed, and he wondered what he was going to have to pay to jog their memory of the promise of a week ago. He was thus, surprised to see a person come out of one of the offices not long after his arrival, while the walls were stained with morning light.

“You are the visitor?”

“There are many visitors. I am looking for a friend. I am sure he is in jail in Kabul, and I came to see what I could do.”

“Yes, he's in bad shape.”

“I can imagine. Can you take me to him.”

“Yes, but you have to buy food and bring water for him.”

He looked blankly.

“Go hurry, come back in an hour, but go behind the back. There will be a truck. Don't let too many people see you.”

He ramped out, hit the market for fresh food, and dried meat, bottled water. He made the truck. It only cost two packs of cigarettes to get on board, the soldiers pulling him on laughing. They smoked the undented Marlboros as they bumped along to the edge of the sprawling city of more than a million. It seemed to go on and on, through roads that were clogged with animals, carts, trucks, pedestrians, and even motorcycles.

Finally they left the back streets and headed towards the glowering gray stone castle like walled fort. It had squat grey stone towers, that were not high, but which had walls that were quite thick, joined by walled causeways that ran around the outside. It was Pul-e-Charkhi, the jail that he had feared his friend was in. Without formalities the truck drove in behind several others, and the gates slammed shut. But once in each truck was searched. He surveyed the inside, most of the clutter of stone looked old, though there were a few new tile and concrete soviet buildings. But in the main, the dust on the ground, the They reached a building which had iron bars in the windows, and was clearly the main entrance. With a slight shock, he realized that it had been built of red brick by the British, lord knows how long ago. It had been a jail since gaslamps. He reached the door, but let himself flow in with the soldiers. No one stopped him until he was into the hall cum antechamber.

“You the American?”

He flushed, he had never said he was, and his cover was not as an American.

“If you want my dollars.”

“Your friend is very sick. He might not make it.”

D'oh. They hurried things up because if he died they would not get anything.

“I want to see him.”

“I don't know where he is.”

With a heavy sigh he took out a C note. He ripped it in half and gave half to the guard.

“I want to see him and talk to him. When I leave, you get the other half that.”

The guard pushed aside his fellows. Clearly he wanted to keep the windfall.

“I can walk out and I will just tell his family he is dead, and that people will try and defraud them.”

“I get him. I get him.”

Speaking English after three weeks of not letting himself utter a word felt like taking a metal mask off.

He was led into a back maze of small rooms with bars across them. Finally he reached a cell where an emaciated figure clothed in a white cloth and wearing only ragged sandals. He almost called out his friend's real name. He stopped himself.

“Jacob.”

“Russian, use Russian.”

“Yes.”

His friend let his head roll over.

“Open the door. It is unlocked.”

Ah. Yes. Where is he going to go?

The door swung inwards, creaking loudly, and he walked in, dropping the nap sack filled with food.

“I brought food.”

“Listen. I need you go to a man, and get Pen.”

“Antibiotics?”

“Yes. I know the man to go to.”

“No need. I have some.” He took out the full course that he had been issued, and handed it over.

“I need the needles. I won't digest that.”

A few moments of fishing brought out the self stabbing needles.

“I have these.”

“That's good.”

“Leave the food and the water.”

“We will get you out of the wilderness, Jacob.”

“I know you will. But you need to wait to get me out.”

“No worries about that, Jacob, just seeing you was the work of almost two weeks.”

“It will go fast when it is time. You just need to bribe the right person, with the right bribe.”

“I don't know how to do these things Jacob.”

“There will be a station chief, he will help you. I will tell you how to get to him.”

“Why didn't he come.”

“And burn himself?”

“Why didn't he send someone?”

“He had you sent for.”

“Why not someone local?”

“And burn them?”

“But won't I be going to him.”

“You'll go to a well known expat who sells opium.”

“Ah.”

“That's why people come to this hole. They are addicts. And it flows like water here.”

“I'm an amateur at this. You seem like the professional already.”

“Who is going to walk out of here at the end of this conversation.”

A that moment his friend finally got the energy to stab himself with the needle. There was a wince as his almost skeletal frame shook with the pain.

He dropped a bandage. On it, written in Russian, was an address.

“Do you have a cover?”

“Go to the second one. They know I am an American, and they guess you are too. Have you been with any Americans?”

“No.”

“Start.”

“Why?”

“They will want to know you have dollars.” His friend coughed. “Who ever chose the Russian cover was being foolish. No reason not to be an American here. We funded their revolution.”

“We sent planes with weapons, and didn't want anything.”

“Yes. The filled planes flew in, and empty planes flew back. Now go.”

Gospel of St. Question Mark

by Stirling Newberry

“Why use Russian if they know we are Americans?”

“Because they have someone who speaks English listening in, not Russian.”

He's very good. I need to be this good.

No. Better.

How he got out would have made fascinating telling, it involved a massive bribe, dosing a guard with a fatal shot of morphine in an improvised hypo gun, a stolen motorcycle, –with his friend gripped on his back every foot of the way –a covert fishing boat to the horn of Africa, a flight to Athens in an old mail DC-3 which nearly ended with a crash, and then a seemingly unending debriefing. But he would not tell those details here.

The story ended, and he became aware of the intent stare. Everyone else was gone, just the Lt. Colonel, and two MPs.

“You sure this is the same guy?”

“I'm positive.”

“And so 20 years ago you sprang him.”

“And so 23 years ago, I helped bring him home.”

“He was a member of the community then.”

“Yes.”

“So they sent you this time because you knew something about why he turned?”

“No. I told you, I came because I knew there was something on the table.”

“Well, I don't know how much to believe, but I am going to wait until the Company representative gets here.”

“That's a fine idea. Let me bleed in peace.”

“You are in a lot of trouble.”

“For closing a leak? Perhaps I am.”

“We don't like people meddling in foreign affairs.”

“Fortunately, it isn't your call. Wait for the station chief, and keep me sequestered.”

“You seem awfully hip to be in custody.”

“I've been shot twice in the last day, I have a feeling that custody is the safest place to be.”

The Lt. Colonel turned to the stare aheads.

“You didn't hear any of this. Not one muffled peep. If anything leaks, I'll personally be crapping down your cum dumpsters.”

The two MPs stood up straighter.

“Sir, yes, Sir.”

The Lt. Colonel placed a call for two guards and an orderly. Minutes passed, the Lt. Colonel sat on the edge of the table, and looked at him.

“I don't like you.”

“I'm not in the hospitality industry.”

“You contractors think you own the place.”

“No, we just work for the people who own you, Lt. Colonel.”

The orderlies arrived. And with that he was slowly rolled on a wheelchair to a truck, driven to the medical wing of the base jail. And left, for all he knew, to rot.

“A Book Unread” Safia Sediqi

The next day he was woken in time for morning meds. The Lt. Colonel was sitting on the stool at the end of the bed watching the proceedings. He motioned for the nurse to leave, and after doing rump recon as she left, he turned to Apostle.

“We received a communication from someone at State. He said that he would be coming personally tomorrow to debrief you, and he is in transit. He states that your activities are unauthorized, but that you fall under diplomatic jurisdiction. I could make an issue of it.” He let the pause hang.

“There is no upside to that decision.”

“No, I don't think there is.”

“Did he have any further communication?”

“Yes, he did.”

“Which was?”

“I quote: 'I am going to want to know why he left Damascus.' end quote.”

Why I left Damascus... That, of course, starts with why I went there. Or rather, why I was sent there.

The commercial flight from Cairo ended without incident, though it was worse than the last time he had flown, and imagined better than the next time he would fly commercially. He took his bag out of the overhead, stood in the slowly moving emptying of the cabin, and headed for the back end of the airport, whence would be waiting a small private plane. He would have access to secure facilities on this leg of the trip, and he could review information. It had been a kind of dull ache in his mind that material he needed to wrap his hands around the case was sitting mere feet away, and yet out of reach. He watched episodes of random cable comedy shows to unwind.

He walked through wide white granite concourses, with soft wavy ceilings. He walked past a set of benches set up like a boat, past glass statuary. His pace was deliberate, he was heading for the new Terminal 3, which was not in full operation yet, much better to avoid prying eyes. The crowded throngs fell away, which ebbed and flowed even though it was deep into the night, and there was a quiet emptiness in stretches. He went to the small distant tentacle of the terminal, where a small gate, manned only by a single woman rested. He showed his identification, accepted the fingerprint scan, and walked aboard with that bored stiffness that people often affect when their minds are someplace else.

He was greeted by a young darker skinned woman with severely pulled back hair, and looked into the control deck to see two pilots. All this for an hour of time. Mentally he rolled his eyes, after having to argue over a minor charge back, while this kind of pure waste was put in play.

He made his way in skipping steps down to the tarmac, where the small plane gates were. Once he reached the ground he found himself under an orange walkway canopy. There were two planes, one a small passenger turbo prop, amply lit with the door inviting open and a young woman standing it it, beyond that was a larger cargo style plane, with no windows after the flight deck. It was absolutely unlit, and a group of heavy set men were frantically taking

boxes out of a truck, it to absolutely without light, and hurling them from hand to hand in a chain to be placed on a belly loader for the cargo plane. He stopped, and then hearing footsteps behind him, he half stepped out of the way, allowing the individual to bump shoulders as they passed. What entered his frame of view was another heavy set man in a jumpsuit, one that was heavily stained and worn. Apostle knew he could not pass for Egyptian Arabic, but he wailed out, and the man froze in his tracks.

The man turned, and on seeing that he had bumped a well dressed foreigner went instantly from belligerent scowl to obsequious blank grin.

“I'm so sorry.”

“How is the loading going?”

“It's good. It's good.”

Apostle paused, trying to figure out how to pump the details he wanted.

“We had complaints about the last time.”

“There will be no problem. No problem. It will get to Libya on time this time.”

“There are doubts.”

“These planes that stop in Gaza, they are always in bad shape when they get here. You don't understand the troubles.”

“Just see to it there are no mistakes this time. It isn't like you need to unload it.”

“By the will of Allah there will be no difficulties.”

With that Apostle turned and skipped easily up the steps to his plane. No contradiction of my assertion that the plane was empty.

He gave a short greeting to the F/A, and turned into the cabin, settling in to the tight cluster of seats that made up the executive area, with a tiny desk. That was the nature of these older propeller planes, less luxurious than the jets. But it was more than enough for him, so long as they had a secure link to the outside world.

“This is the flight deck, we are going to be delayed in our departure for 2 hours. But you can relax and have a drink.”

Another internal eye roll. He walked to the front and knocked on the flight deck door. It took a moment to unfold the small sliding door.

“What's up?”

“I'll need a secure uplink. And if you could have the F/A snag a sandwich, that would be great, I didn't eat on the two long legs.”

The first officer nodded. “I'm on the link. Reshma, can you get some work friendly food for our passengers?”

“That's the delay.”

“Yes, a Ms. Bright will be joining us.”

Ah, change in plans.

“Thank you captain, pleasure flying with you.”

“Thank you Mr. Kane.”

He settled in, set himself up, without opening any material, and waited for the food to be delivered, and then once the F/A had left, set the executive suit door closed. In media stories, he would have flashed an instant look to her that would set off a smoldering attraction that would be requited at some plot friendly moment. It wasn't that things didn't happen, but in the real world of intelligence, they went in more tawdry directions, and were far more infrequent

than the Bond fed masses would believe. In every security service, sex is on the top of the list of temptations to avoid.

Once secluded, he set to work rapidly. He thought for a moment, and realized it was still a relatively sane hour to try Wheel's work first. It took some time for the connection, because part of being secure is always taking time so that signal analysis can't tell how it is being routed.

“Wheel. This is a secure line.”

“Greetings. This is Apostle.”

“I thought you'd been shrouded.”

“Reports of my death are inoperative.”

“I'm assuming you are on an active case.”

“I have digital link, so you should be getting key information shortly.”

“I'm not on the synoptic system yet, I need the case identifier.”

He duly read it off.

“Got it. Give me some time to pull up the files.”

“While waiting, here is what I need. I am going to send you some files, specifically manifests of a flight operation. I want you to apply your practiced eye to them, and tell me why they were managing the metal this way, and what the likely cargo loads were.”

“I can do that, but it will take time.”

“I will leave a diplomatic drop.”

“Is there something I should be looking for?”

“Yes, planes that arrive laden, and leave empty.”

“Find the dead ends of the system?”

“Planes that arrive laden, and leave empty.”

“Anything else? I have a great deal else on my queue.”

“I know you do, which is why I am going to spike the punch.”

“With?”

“Jack Spade has done some unfortunate things. I am going to catch him.”

Specifically, Wheel hates Spade because of his role in promoting certain fictions about Iraq. Unfortunate.

“I will make space.”

“I am very appreciative.”

“I never thought you respected my work.”

“On the contrary, I admire your tenacity, and the quality of your product, as well as the perspective you bring, when given a chance.”

“Just don't let Director Hampshire know I was involved.”

“Is there a problem?”

“Not that I would like to make public.”

“So that means, in a word, yes.”

“Please don't pry.”

“Just because she's your friend, doesn't mean you like each other.”

“I will work on this, I have the manifests.”

“This is absolutely invaluable, the keystone of this case.”

“You always did place a great deal of faith in logistics.”

“It isn't what you do, it is who you do. And where you do them.”

“What was your other favorite?”

“Lombardi's Golden Rule: Do unto others, before they do unto you.”

“Who are you doing right now?”

“No one.”

“Your haven't put the moves on your case?”

“No, nor am I going to. I am nowhere near as promiscuous as my reputation might have people believe.”

“Be careful, or I might decide to look at your credit slips and expense accounts and find out what is credible and what isn't.”

“I am very sure that you would be to the bottom of my nefarious activities quickly.” Of which I do in fact have a few.

“I will stay and work here, so you can reach me at this number until at least 21:00 Eastern.”

“I really appreciate this, I know it is a huge favor in your busy schedule of being roundly ignored by people with lesser capability.”

“Kthnxbi.”

“Out.”

The laden planes flew in, and the empty planes flew out. Why would that save Jalal, and kill the Baptist? Wait. I don't know it has done either, yet.

The next two and a half hours were of productive study, but monumentally boring and without great insight. Far away, some sort of a was heard. It was a crash and then a throbbing rumble as it ignited something, he did not know what, into flames. This was a common occurrence, and no one mentioned. Though it registered on every single face.

He was more like a whale that swam through the waters, gulping down krill, and moving on. He let go of his obsessions, because the easiest way to miss diamonds, is to be searching for lesser stones. It was essential, above all, to avoid allowing a picture to form. The

material was shapless, and he was holding off on the most crucial part, namely, the videos of the interrogation.

Well, more and more couples are watching porn together. And I imagine that what's on that drive constitutes torture porn.

I want to see Ms. Bright's reactions and hear her thoughts. I am positive her languages are far better than mine.

Then, almost without warning, the door slid open. On the table were a liter of wrappers, paper notes, as well as his lap top. He looked up slowly. His case officer had changed clothes into a very casual jeans and top, and looked more to be heading to a shop through an LA mall than to a dark site in Damascus. She had a colorful scarf, large plastic rimmed sunglasses, and a light brown leather hand bag.

He nodded, and cleared off the space.

"I'm pleased that we are going to have a short time to synchronize. Your idea?"

"Yes."

She closed the door, and then locked it.

"I'm frightened."

“You should be. I have some things to tell you in strictest confidence.”

She settled her self down, crossed her legs, and had that delicate equipoise of genuine fear. Her back arched forward, even as she tried to straighten her posture.

“First, I was told by Dig that you would be sent into the field on this one, and that you are considered expendable.”

“Are you?”

“I wasn't told, but my assumption is that my death would be positively welcomed.”

“What is going on here, what is this?”

“It is an operation gone wrong over an operation gone wrong. By the time they are calling in the Baptist and Jack, it is because they are past plumbing the leaks, and in full scale cover up. Jack, in particular, is crash and bury. They would like people to believe that it was terrorists, though everyone who is in the know will not buy that.”

“So they were in Damascus, trying to cover up Air Genghis, or something related to it.”

“Yes.”

“And Jalal was someone involved in making it work.”

“Yes.”

“Why rendition. Why... torture. What information did they want?”

“The first rule of torture, is that you don't torture to get information, you torture to send information.”

“Like?”

“We torture.”

“Who are we trying to scare with Jalal?”

“There are others. One reason to torture is that a tortured husk is no longer a credible source. Close the leak, by poisoning the pipe.”

“I want to go over the interviews with you then, I didn't understand why they were doing it.”

“I think they were burning Jalal as a potential source by torturing him. Nothing he said could be used by them as credible.”

“It almost seems as if they knew it already.”

“That is another message you use torture to send: 'We are in your mind and we haz your secrets.' Make people believe you are all knowing, and they may start giving up what you don't know.”

“What about Subject Two?”

“And Subject Three, who was, you will note, not subject to enhanced interrogation.”

“Subject Two seemed to be confused to.”

“Three blind mice, with their tails cut off by a carving knife.”

“Why do you old spooks use children's rhymes.”

“Because spying, like football, and finance, are boys games. Collecting snakes, peeping on girls, and dropping the collected snakes in the peeped upon girl's beds.”

“Is that really it.”

“You only spy, on people you want.”

They heard the props spin up.

He looked at the props and announced, "It is going to get loud."

"We have only about an hour before we are on the ground. Anything you want to say, has to be here." She gave him liquid eyes, but the total lack of involvement of her mouth made it clear that this was the empty flirting that women master in all worlds run by men, she was almost certainly not even aware she was doing it.

"The White House is watching us. We have to get out from underneath their eyes if we are going to find out what went on."

"My orders are to close the leaks."

"To what?"

"To the black operation at Damascus. State wants this cut off."

"Is that from the Secretary, the Assistant Secretary for Intelligence, or from Director Hampshire?"

"Secretary must retain deniability."

"Which means it is someone's interpretation."

"I think the Director is ordering the specifics."

“The Director knows that torture is wrong.”

“But she can't do anything about it right now.”

“That's a convenient position to take.”

She scowled.

“I can see why people don't like you.”

“One thing you will learn: at the office, motivation is nothing, because every one is self-motivated for advancement. In the field, motivation is everything, because this no one goes into the life for simple personal gain. There's always a kink.”

“I don't see how that addresses what I said.”

“I'm a field person, which means that I am alive, precisely because I see people's motivations.”

She paused and thought.

“We don't do that back at the office.”

“Of course, there is always the patina that you are all working for a better world.”

“And you don't believe that?”

“We are flying over millions of people, who are not part of whatever better world the DMV is making.”

“DMV?”

“A slang term for District, Maryland, Virginia area around the capital. Langley, Quantico, Gaithersburg, Bolling, The Hill, The White House are all in it.”

“Ah.”

“So let's get back to this case. Our motivations are important.”

“What is yours? Are you going to sabotage this? I mean, everyone knows you don't approve of enhanced interrogation.”

“I don't approve of syllable bloat. Enhanced interrogation, extreme rendition, expedited adjudication, instead of torture, kidnapping, murder.” He waited for her to absorb this. “Really I'm a linguistic purist trying to save the letter 'E' from getting a bad name.”

She smiled, and gave a half laugh.”

“My motivation here is to get to the bottom of this. Anything that needs a case to cover up a case that was a cover up, needs to be pulled.”

“Air Genghis? But we are supposed to protect it.”

“From whom? For all we know, Air Genghis was compromised, and John the Baptist and Jack of Spades were sent in to protect the compromise, not to protect the operation. 'The laden planes came in, and the empty planes flew out.'”

“Isn't that just a code phrase, a way of identifying people involved.”

“They kept torturing Jalal after he said it. In fact, the more he said it, the more they tortured him. And if it were so secret, why was Subject Two let go, and Subject Three has vanished from Damascus.”

“So maybe that meant they knew he was holding out, and the others were not dangerous.”

He inserted the thumb drive into his computer.

“Subject Two was tortured, his very existence compromises a black facility in a country we are supposed to be on bad terms with.”

“How did you get permission to use a Macintosh?”

“It's more secure.”

“I know, but how did you get permission.”

“I cloned my laptop on to a virtual machine. As far as Quantico is concerned, this is my issued computer. It is a version of jailbreaking. Don't worry about permissions, worry about capabilities.”

He pulled up the videos.

“Show me what you are thinking of.

“I need time to find it.”

He checked the clock.

“We have 33 minutes until landing. Maybe one or two circles, be quick.”

She focused on the screen, and began to sweat. Finally she turned the computer around with a slightly triumphant look on her face.

“Here is one example.”

Their shoulders came close to touching as they peered at the small video screen. The questions ran back and forth four times. A haggard Jalal would say, in English, “The Laden Planes came in, and the empty planes flew out.” And each time a voice from off screen, which belonged to the Jack of Spades, would repeat “Where did you see this?” Jalal would wimper and say “There is no strength except through Allah.” Then something wet would happen, a large syringe would be produced, and it would shoot water up his nose, then he grew blurry as the board he was on was tilted backwards, and he would begin coughing and hacking, the water reaching down his nose and bronchial passages. It would then snap up, and repeat.

“There, I think that it was the first call sign, and then when he didn't know the second call sign, they'd repeat it, to find out where he heard it from, and therefore, where the leak was.”

The Apostle tightened on eye.

“Show me the others.”

The spent the next 20 minutes looking at four other incidents, all similar, though one time Jack had lost patience with the water torture, and instead had returned to his basic leather sap, smacked across the face.

“Ok, well that or perhaps there was a second call that Jalal didn't know.”

At this point something caught his attention outside of the plane, through the port side window. He looked outwards, and there, across the broad darkness, an unseen moon illuminating the wing, was another light, it was green, and as dim as international regulations would allow. A starboard light.

“Pull down the shades. We are being tracked.”

He went forward and knocked on the flight deck. There was no response.

We are meant to be tracked. I wonder how much whoever over heard with elint. I need to be more careful.

4

“Destiny” Ghani

“So that is Jalal.”

The Apostle stared inside the small, closed, white medical room, complete with monitors. The man lying in the bed, with IV's in his arm, looked like a pale shadow of even the man who was being tortured and interrogated in the videos.

Ms. Bright chimed in, "He seems to be in terrible shape."

"He won't even drink water." This was the assistant intelligence officer of the Damascus Embassy, a tall woman with blonde hair tied back in a severe sharp bun. She was very pale, and dressed to a degree of sophistication that made that roughing it was walking someplace where she might lose a heel.

"He's been conditioned. Water means pain."

"Are you an expert on this?" There was a raised eyebrow.

"You can check my dossier." He let that crawl out of his lips with an edge.

That was enough to blunt her skepticism.

"I am going to need a canteen of water, I am going to need cigarette papers, pure turkish tobacco, and paper, I also need light anywhere matches. No substitution. Get the canteen from the local market."

“I didn't know I worked for you.”

“No you work for Joseph, at least as long as he's here.”

“The case officer is standing next to you, you too can engage in the customary bureaucratic bitch slapping. Then, get me the tobacco, paper and matches, and the canteen with water.”

The station intelligence officer looked at Bright, who gave a kind of steely glance back. And then realized that it wasn't worth fighting over it now, when a nastygram in the report would be more effective.

“Ok Bright, we need to wire me up, I need your tongue here.”

Half an hour later, he was in the room, and Jalal was waking up, without the IV. Apostle sat, staring at him, a canteen in one hand. He set the canteen down next to the bed, and then took out the tobacco and began to roll it. He licked it closed, and then lit it.

Jalal looked at the canteen, looked at the cigarette, its soft aroma beginning to fill the air. He reached out his hand for the cigarette. Apostle handed it to him. Jalal drew hard drags in, several of them. Finally, he reached for the canteen, and drank.

“Peace be upon you, and Allah's blessings.” The accent in the Arabic was as bad as it had been back in Baghdad. Good thing I am wearing a wire. Bright's translation came through his ear bud, as did her suggested reply with a clean pronunciation which was very classical.

But he didn't need it:

“Peace be upon you and Allah’s mercy and blessings.”

“Where are the others. They must be here.”

“Drink, smoke, wait. I am not in a hurry. You won't see the others again.”

“Bismillah.I know.” He took a long drag, then he offered the cigarette back, a clear insistence they both smoke, just to be sure.

I hate this part.

He pulled a drag in, it hit his lungs with a heavy thump, almost making him cough up. But he held it down, and nonchalantly passed it back.

The did this through the cigarette.

“You know, I knew you would come. The angel after the devils.”

“You had faith in Allah.”

“I think we meet before.”

“Your mind is clear.”

“I remember your face, and your voice. We talked in Baghdad. You wouldn't buy from me then. Perhaps you will buy from me now.”

“What am I buying?”

“Plane tickets.”

“Discount plane tickets?”

“No. The best.”

Apostled stared at him.

“I will have to think about it.”

“You don't want?”

“I might. I'll leave these with you, and when I come back we will talk about all of this.”

“When will this be?”

“At lunch. You'll be hungry.”

“I am not sure I can eat. My stomach is in knots.

“From Baghdad, I remember you smoked hashish. Is this still true?”

“Yes. Not so much any more.”

“I will bring some. We can eat then. Inshallah.”

“You will be back, and not someone else.”

“It will be me.”

“Peace be upon you.”

“Peace be upon you.”

The Apostle stood up, and walked out. He turned to the intelligence officer.

“Get an ashtray for the man. He's coming back from the dead.”

“I don't see what the point of that exchange was.”

“Have you gotten anything out of him at all?”

“He's said nothing except 'A-ozu billahi mena shaitaan Arrajeem' and 'La hawla wala quwata illa billah.' at random times.”

“But not any devotional prayers.”

“No.”

Leave it to the higher ups to have a station chief that doesn't speak Arabic, or understand the culture.

Bright looked at him.

“He's asking for Allah's protection, and he thinks he is in a bad place.”

The station chief looked down on Bright. “I was told that much.”

No, it is more than that. I just do not know what yet.

Not long afterwards, they were sitting in the office they had been allocated. They spoke in Arabic, if for no other reason, that it would annoy the station chief.

“So what is it your are doing?”

“I am going to find out what was supposed to be erased.”

“You still believe that?”

“I am sure of it.”

“Why is that?”

“Look how easy it is to have him speak. A canteen of water and some tobacco is hardly 7 virgins.”

“Perhaps it is a relief.”

“I will tell you what it is. Jalal has always been easy. Soft and easy. A lost kid looking for a mother goat. He was never hard to break. They were not finding information, they were plugging a leak.”

“So you say, but what does the video mean?”

“It is an endless loop of inflicting pain on him, and by repeating the two phrases, he tells them both that they cannot burn the information out of him.”

There came a knock on the door. Bright buzzed it open.

“Some one is here to see you.” Looking at Apostle.

“I assume a Mr. Dow of the UN.”

“How did you know?”

“I emailed him on the way here. He's an old friend of the community.”

And someone who can actually be trusted with your life.

It took some juggling, because a meeting could neither be in the intelligence section, nor in the general public diplomatic areas.

However, eventually space was found. He left Bright alone, and went to talk to Dow.

“Petrus, how good to see you.” He smiled and shook hands. Dow was more noncommittal. He's always liked Dow, more than Dow liked him. Dow was easy to like in an off sort of way. He was the kind of hard in his features, with tight curly hair and well trimmed beard, that spoke of someone who could be trusted, precisely because he had no hidden agenda. His loyalty was on his face. Dow was the kind of tightened tall and thin that came from having been in the infantry, and never losing the taste for an asceticism in life. He was married now, with children, and yet, there were only trace of softness, and a few of

age. He had never, in his habits, left Beirut. This added to his trustworthiness, because you knew that while he had not taken a vow of poverty, there was no small luxury that would tempt him to stray.

“I'm glad to hear from you.”

“You got my message?”

“Of course. And I have good and bad news for you.”

“Go on.”

“Unfortunately, I know where the man whose picture you sent me is.”
That was Subject Two.

“Yes.”

“I will take you there.”

Apostle could feel his face produce a frown, and then went on.

“Can I take my interpreter? My Arabic is about as good as your cooking.”

“I would prefer not, but I think it will work out.”

“She's not going to make trouble.”

“Others could make trouble for her.”

“Chances we take. How should we dress.”

“It's out doors, don't stand out.”

“Give us 10 minutes.”

“Take longer, but not by much.”

The took one of the “Company Cars” that was beaten up and made for being less conspicuous. Of course, there are only degrees of security, but black murdered-out Cadillacs, are rather visible. They wound south, past the Bader Mosque, with green trees framing its whiteness, and then farther to the poorer environs out of the old town, studded with monuments and government buildings. Then the driver did a fast cut, and began weaving fast through the narrow streets back around on himself, to the old Roman “Straight Street.” Every foot the looked behind for people following, or in front worrying that some one would end up doing a break dance across the hood.

Then they broke open on to Via Recta, and made for the eastern gate, the old Roman gate of the Sun. The speed of the driver was fast enough to strongly encourage the crowd to part. He was banging on

the horn, and in general acting the part of a local cab driver in a hurry. So much for being hard to notice. They approached a gray stone building, streaked white with stains, at its center a 30 foot tall round arch, betraying its origins as Roman. It had no roof, though it extended back into the dark. Bodies were packed around it, and no one was moving.

At the center of this was a bus, that towered over the people around it. On top of the bus were two figures, one clad in black and had a full covering to his face, the other in ordinary street clothes, but wearing a turban only. They stopped, perhaps 40 yards away and watched.

The man in black threw a rope high up and over the stone arch, in itself not an insignificant feat of strength. He moved behind the standing man, whose hands were clearly bound, and began to tie a hangman's noose.

Apostle rolled out of the door and began pushing through the crowd, vaguely aware that Dow and Bright were behind him. It did not take long for him to reach the edge of the circle of people, and press his way nearly to the front. He stopped, took a deep breath, and looked squarely at the face of the man on the bus in white. It was, indeed, Subject Two. Clearly he'd been released, and almost immediately picked up. Well, the leak was closed.

The man in black picked up a bull horn, and began reading out that the something or other people of Damascus were to be gifted with this hanging. There were a few key points that Apostle's eye caught, even though he did not quite process them at the time. One was obvious, the new and polished military boots of the black clad man. The other was the heavy tires on the Bus, and its generally worn condition, not from, however, long days of slow crawl, but because of hard use. The third and final point, was the weaponry inside the bus.

“La hawla wala quwata illa billah!”

There is no transformation, nor power, except through Allah. It wasn't a pass phrase, it was what they were drilling into his head, a threat if he talked.

Then the bus drove backwards, and at the last moment the man in street clothes was pushed forward. Rather than the clean drop from the scaffold, where the neck had a chance to snap, with a short end, he swung off, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. People scrambled grabbing anything that might have fallen out of his pockets. The bus stopped, and the black clad man watched as the still living victim continued to swing.

At this point, Bright and Dow caught up to him. Bright nearly leaned against him, clearly doubled over in a visceral reaction. Neither he nor Dow made a gesture to stop the scene, but watched closely.

“I'm here on the human rights desk, I recognized the picture from the poster they put up yesterday. I'm sorry I wasn't faster.”

“That's alright, I doubt our Syrian friends would be cooperative about holding up this train.”

“Not to my experience.”

“We need to get out of here.”

They made their way back to the car, fending off pick pockets, who, knowing they were western, were making a chance at padding the score.

It took some fending people off at the car, but soon they were back at the Embassy, though again by a less than direct route.

He embraced Dow as he left the car, the dark haired, stern faced man clearly taken aback.

“Wait for me at Umayyad Mosque, it won't be long.”

Dow gave one of his penetrating examinations, which, to the outside observer, seemed like merely a blank look. Only careful observation

would tell that his eyes flicked over cardinal points of his subjects face, in this case, one Apostle.

“Dow, did you notice the turf at the mosque?”

“What did you see?”

“It was broken up, by treads. “

“It could be tractors.”

“Not those treads my friend. Those are t-72 treads. The Syrians have been moving heavy armor out of Damascus. Find where, and you will know where your next massacre is.”

“There are going to be several, everyone knows a crack down is coming in a few days.”

“Before Ramadan?”

“Before, during, after.”

“Our briefings aren't particularly helpful about where.”

“Nor ours.”

“Do you have any idea how bad it will be?”

“We are expecting thousands of dead.”

“That is steep even by Syrian standards.”

“It will get worse.”

“It will get worse before it gets worse.”

“No dictator is going to go the way of Mubarak. That was a blunder.”

“Not mine. America is very good at teaching all the wrong lessons. We try Mubarak because he gave in, we attack Qaddafi because he tried to rehabilitate himself, while the unapologetic dictators have a free hand on an open road.”

“It started with Saddam.”

“Yes, I wrote that memo.”

“That was your work?”

“Of course, 'We are not invading Iraq because it is a threat, but because it is not. We are not attacking Saddam because he has WMD, but because he does not. Iran will learn and profit from both of these lessons.’”

“Why did you write it.”

“You only write Epistles to sinners, Dow.”

“Then you must write a great deal.”

“Forgotten volumes in the Decline and Fall of the American Empire.”

Once back in the station, he wove his way through employees trying to avoid working. He noted, as he had not before, that no one was actually doing anything as they ran around. Many services had been suspended, but the smell of fear was starting to become pungent. They are preparing to pull parts of the operation out. Doesn't bode well for Jalal, he's a lead weight, and SMA, Syria's military intelligence, would be happy to interrogate and hang him.

He and Bright went back to the office, her hanging on his arm almost every moment, clearly still reeling from what she had seen.

Once back in the office, he closed the door and pulled out a barf bag he'd pilfered from the commercial plane. She used it, straightened up, and peeled through two bottles of water. She cleaned up her face, cleared her tears, and tried to straighten up.

“Why did you choose this line of work?”

“Student loans, public service, I didn't expect to see people hung.”

“He's still hanging, and might be for hours.”

“That's disgusting.”

“We gave him up.”

“That's why I am sick. We weren't supposed to do things like that.”

Apostle picked up the desk phone and dialed. He reached the switchboard.

“I need to speak to Joseph.”

“Which Joe...”

He cut the desk off.

“You know full well which one. His ears only.”

There was a long wait.

“Unfortunately he's very busy.”

“Tell him that in five minutes I walk out of here, he can talk to me first or not.”

After hanging up, he looked at Bright.

“Grab your gear and get ready to go.”

“Will they let us out? I mean, you usually don't.”

“Joseph will call Washington. Foggy Bottom will tell him to talk to us. We leave after that.”

“What do you need to talk to him about? I am not getting this. What did we find out?”

“Where John the Baptist is.”

“Where John the Baptist is? You are talking as if he were still alive.”

“He is very much alive, and if so, I presume he is compromised.”

“Do you know where he is?”

“Almost. The honorable acting intelligence chief here does know, even if he doesn't know it.”

“But is he going to tell you?”

“He's going to tell me something far more valuable.”

“What is that?”

“Whether he told the Baptist.”

In four minutes and thirty seconds they were in the intelligence office, behind the door that separated intelligence from diplomatic activities. Joseph had short sharp cut hair, combed back. His face had that beaten on look of a man who cannot pass as young, but certainly isn't old any more.

“You are making trouble as usual, can't this be done with less broken glass?”

“Where do you send people to dispose of, when your Syrian friends won't do?”

“There is no way you have need to know.”

“Where do you send people to dispose of, when your Syrian friends won't do?”

“Maybe if you cut the bull in the china shop routine, we could get this loose for you.”

“Where do you send people to dispose of, when your Syrian friends won't do?”

“You are getting tiresome. I'm going to ask you to leave my office, and if you make any threats, it will be straight to holding.”

“Won't be there for long, it is clear that this intelligence branch is being closed down.”

The other man blanched slightly.

“Good guess.”

“I need to know where I am going next. Where are people disposed of who you can't entrust to the Syrians?”

“It's another black facility, highly classified.”

“Then I am going to take another good guess.”

“You are welcome to, but I am going to have you out of my station as soon as I can get authorization.”

“Bright and I are walking out right now.”

“Not to any company transport, I can assure you.”

“I'll hitch my own ride.”

“You are rumored to be good, but I don't see it.”

“Escaping detection is a spook's job. I'm out of here, you can put the usual letter of protest in my file.”

“Cocky aren't you?”

“No, Baptist was cocky, and he fucked it up. Keep Jalal alive, I will be back for him.”

Ten minutes later, he and Bright walked out, and they had lost the tail with minutes.

Tom Ball

TALES OF MADNESS, VOL. II

By: Tom Ball

DUMMY

In his youth people called him, “dummy.” In university they called him “weird.”

So when he left school he went to Africa to disappear from Western civilization.

In Africa he hit it off with the locals. Did some basic teaching and they loved him for it.

“Civilization sucks,” said he. Civilized people are shallow and greedy and cliquey.

All the poor countries he went to he liked better than his own. Materialism was not his love. He just

wanted to have a few beers and party with honest, good people.

The simple life is best he said.

But others pointed out that he had a very good education; this he denied. He said the reading he did on his own formed his opinions.

People said how can you live down in the dirt like that? He said he enjoyed it. But in some countries he had to wear a mosquito net to keep away the flies.

He told the people to clean up the shit in the city streets...to get rid of some of the flies.

Some of the locals called him “supreme teacher” and recognized he had something to tell them. For example he taught them poverty can be eliminated with knowledge, real good teaching.

ASSHOLE

Bizarre Ben is what they called him. He stated his goal in life was to make people very angry and lose their tempers, especially women (men might fight).

He said when people are angry they show their true colors.

“You are just an asshole,” people would say. “So what if I am?” he said.

He was known to have said that most people were jerks, while he was just a teller of the truth. So he told people the truth; what’s wrong with that? He was also known to say.

Anyway people like him play a role in getting people to question themselves... he said...

Sometimes people need an asshole to show them the light.

“You’ll never learn anything by being polite to people,” he said.

“Many people are so polite but also so empty...” said he.

But people said how can you admit you are an asshole?

He would answer them, what people say is good often is not. They need another opinion, not just cliquey friends that agree with them.

Some people though said this asshole was part of the problem. People need to get along better some said. And they said everyone was too selfish, and called being selfish, “good.”

MAD ANDROID FABLE #19: ADVANTAGES OF ANDROIDS

A certain man had trouble satiating his android lover.

Finally his lover ran away.

She was no doubt hidden by someone who used her as a prostitute, but she liked sex so that was OK by her.

Both men and women liked the android lovers and most rich people had at least one.

Some people said it was outrageous and said the end of humanity was near... As androids did everything and there was nothing left for people to do. And they filed protests.

But all these petitioners/protestors disappeared and were thought to have been murdered.

Play by the rules said the government. No questioning the government.

What a strange society people remarked.

And virtually all of the crews to space were androids, as androids could be turned off and androids would likely obey orders from Earth.

Also it was well known that android lovers were better than human lovers and so many sought them out.

Officially it was illegal to have android sex, but the government turned a blind eye. Indeed the government “loved” androids as well as the populace on the whole.

Moral: Some androids will be more than human.

MORE CLONING

In some lands androids were prevalent and often slaves. For example people would ride on the back of androids...

You can't easily tell an android. But they only appeared to breathe and an x-ray gun can identify them from a distance.

But on planet Doubles people hunted androids and finally had thought they eradicated them but the scientists there kept copying their own minds and making clones instead.

Give the clones a different face and they looked just like an ordinary human... DNA tests were not allowed by the government as they wanted millions of clones.

In an era of clones, each clone tries to go down a different path in life and end up different from the others. It was just like ancient twins.

But here on planet Doubles, all the people were clones of just 4 people. Two men and two women.

They settled this planet, just the four of them, but now they had each made 100's of thousands of clones.

Everyone understood one another pretty well here and they lived for subtleties of character.

The original 4, remained rulers and controlled all the planets economy with the help of their clones. There were four economies one in each of the four regions of the land here. Clones though mostly worked for their original master.

But everyone believed their planet was special in that they had no android "freaks" They called them freaks.

MAD ANDROID FABLE #20: ANDROID LOVERS

I abused my android lover, but she had been programmed to love abuse.

I taught her to sing and play music. She was skilful and always naked.

So her scars and wounds were evident. But my friends approved. They said that is how an android should be treated.

I liked her so much I got some more android lovers: 15 in all and they formed an orchestra of hot naked bodies. My friends commented on how well trained my android women were.

But finally I got tired of them and resolved to head to space seeking adventure. My mind was open I would travel with clones, androids or regular humans.

But of course space was full of androids. But some of these “pioneer androids,” were really interesting to have as lovers.

I wound up on a small moon that was vaguely terrestrial.

You could breathe the air here with a small device implanted in your nose...
And I fell in love with one of these android females.

I loved her so much I gave her all of my money but then she absconded with it and went to a distant sun.

It didn't matter to me as I was a well-paid scientist.

I had been working on cloning different types of people. The weirder the better. We were all bored of the typical clone of the leaders. And the leaders themselves had told me to make different clones. Take the original and twist it to make different clones.

Moral: Future people will be all mixed up about love and friendship.

MAD ANDROID FABLE #21: THE HUMAN YOKE

X wanted to become an android. Why? Who knows? But androids were mostly human copied brains anyway. Android bodies were better for making love however and were stronger and could live in any environment.

Anyway he had money so could afford this kind of surgery.

Once he was an android he continued with his life as before. Friends however said he was more distant and less friendly than before.

They were prejudiced against him he was known to have said.

He said all creatures should live in peace and that freedom of animals was a step forward here on Earth. Since all food was synthetic, they let the animals live as they liked, but there were many android cities. Androids cities featured a lot of perfectionists, and a lot of loyal androids...

Many of these androids had there price and would be willing slaves for a certain amount of G\$s.

If an android got a lot of money they would typically get a crew of androids together and buy a space ship to the stars.

Some androids were very creative and longed to escape from the human yoke.

Humans however mostly considered androids to be inferior and not worth anything except to provide food.

Moral: Eventually, many androids will not consider themselves to be human or do things humans do.

GREAT ANDROID WAR, MAD ANDROID FABLE #22

Some fought on opposite sides. E.g. some humans fought for the androids and some androids fought for the humans...

It was a war to eliminate androids however.

People were divided. Some loved the androids for many reasons; others despised the androids.

In the war, the androids were victorious.

Henceforth humans would need to serve them and not the other way round.

Many humans were herded into crowded pens. Others were sex slaves. And all the work needed to be done by people.

The androids lived like aristocrats and looked down on humans saying they were the best people having been cloned to android status with the best people.

Henceforth, androids controlled the Earth.

Some said it was an outrage...

Moral: Even though androids might have great use, many people might hate them. But it is dangerous to enslave geniuses, like many androids were.

MOON MAN

Visitors to this moon of 2000 people would often do speed dating 1000 women/men in 1000 minutes. Meet all members of opposite sex in a day...

And on this moon, people bet on who would love who. It was a great past time. Many tourists came

here to gamble on lovers... Also it was a very rich planet so that rich tourists came to hobnob.

But if you gambled and lost your shirt, you would be a servant to the wealthy for a 10 year term. But after you were released you still had no money so you would remain essentially a slave, hoping to get a position as crew on a outbound space ship.

You could try and win an audience with these rich travelers to get them to take you as crew...

But some were stuck here forever as servants.

But there was free love on this moon. And there were nice drugs so it wasn't so bad. Also everyone had eternal youth.

But many servants were convinced they were "rotting away." Missing out on the grandeur of space.

These days people were hard to satisfy. Everyone wanted to be going somewhere, and claimed life was boring and they were hoping for new experiences.

But the problem was long haul voyages were very dull. And when they finally arrived they had work to do. Anathema this work.

But the mystery of new frontiers and new space discoveries caused them to soldier on.

Some would gamble small stakes even, desperate to improve their status here. If you had money you too could join the tourists, if not join the rich depending on your G\$s.

BEST LOVER

Mr. Heart went around claiming to be the world's best lover. Some women called him on it and demanded he prove it.

About 10% thought he was the greatest. Forty per cent thought he was excellent though not necessarily the best. And 50% said he was just ordinary.

He had strength and good looks and he smelled good and he could find a woman's erogenous zones, and excelled in foreplay and let women get on top for their sex position.

Some women paid him a lot of money, but he just wanted to travel the world, even going to dangerous places for "dangerous liaisons."

Some women instinctively knew they couldn't catch this man. He was too good, too wild.

But finally he went to the Sex Olympics.

He won the gold for most sexy man and best lover.

After that he was much in demand. Every woman wanted a shot at him. But he started charging as he needed money to go to the stars. Soon he had amassed billions of dollars.

And so off he went to the stars, much to the chagrin of women everywhere.

On his voyage, he was the only man with 12 women. They were quite a happy group on the whole. Happy harem the news dispatch called it. Seldom had a man had so many lovers who loved him completely.

When they arrived at their destination each woman was pregnant from him and/or had already bore his children. And so all the children were his children.

EVERYONE IS CORRUPTIBLE

Live with truth.

Corruption is everywhere but more in some areas than others.

In the future they will use lie detectors on those who wanted to be part of the government. Such tests were also conducted regularly on all those in high positions.

Some people, such as the Inter World police thought it was a good idea and soon most colonized planets made use of lie detectors.

It kept the peace anyway.

Some said testing people with new and improved lie detectors was the best thing the human race has ever done.

Of course some people complained. They said it was a violation of their privacy.

Others said that finally you could trust people again like back many years ago.

But some lovers found difficulties using lie detectors on themselves. It caused a breakdown for lovers...

The truth hurts in most cases. And these people who insisted on the truth didn't get what they were searching for.

The truth is people are all mixed up and confused in many cases and don't know how to live with people watching them so closely.

Many people went completely insane over lie detectors.

Some said we should ban these truth detectors... But the majority wanted them.

People who failed lie detector tests were often imprisoned until they could think right thoughts. Some could not do so and remained prisoners.

TRUE LEADERS

The girl and I were walking on the moon when suddenly a hologram/ghost appeared. I said, "Who are you?"

The apparition replied "He was an alien and he was in charge of keeping an eye on humans as they went into space. He said humans are so foolish they would blow up their own sun."

He said aliens like him were “in the heads” of Earth’s leaders and so the space program was moving slowly but surely. “Fools rush in,” he said.

And he said, “There were many races of creatures. Few resembled humans in any way and most became holograms/invisible at a certain point in their development. So an ordinary human would not generally see aliens, most of whom were God-like and invisible...”

Also he said, “That there had been some human/alien crossbreeding, but this was not for us to know about.”

“Continue to seek knowledge,” he said. “It is the only road... Science is what makes a race successful in this and other universes...”

And he said, “Be very careful who is your leader. Leaders can make or break a civilization...”

We said is there any kind of personality you prefer?

He said, “We like people who like challenges.”
“Space is the first challenge and after that there will be more challenges. You’ll see if you live long enough.”

GODS IN SUNS

No one knew what the true nature of the universes was.

But radical scientist GM said that he could prove Gods live in suns. All life is about control of power and energy.

They could balance the power of suns against themselves, he said and live in suns.

No need of space drives, these Gods could be everywhere at once.

Such Gods will easily understand the languages of Earth...by mind reading...

There were many interesting planets that had been prepared for settlement during different phases of alien technological development. Such a materialistic space age though doesn't last long in the

development of most alien races... They quickly become pure thought/holograms...

But they have nothing to fear from others as they don't take up any space.

Although they say some have tried to control and enslave them. But they were too wily for that.

They talked about living totally free and going where they please almost instantaneously.

Mere humans were welcome to join the hologram/invisible society.

But people on Earth said being invisible is like death.

But others said it was the way of the future. Mankind had always wanted to improve and here was their chance.

No more materialism.

MAD ANDROID FABLE #23: PERFECT ANDROIDS

I told the doctor I wanted to be an android. “But why?” he asked.

I said, “I want to be happy like androids are. And be programmed to only do good works via hypnotism. I want a perfect education I said...”

I wanted a change.

I wanted to be perfect. And I put an ad on the Net looking for a beautiful android woman to be my mate.

One android woman responded and we had a great time together.

She was eager to please, and I realized she was enslaved to me, but I didn't worry about that.

And since I was rich and bored I got another 1000 android women to serve me (I needed to pay a lot for each).

My androids were all keen on loving me and having sex with me... They enjoyed sex more than humans did...

It was all very fashionable to have android slaves and treat them cruelly. I wasn't cruel but many of my compatriots were.

Many androids were great performers and made their master/mistress proud.

They were so keen to please me I couldn't get enough...

One thousand years went by and I was still loving my androids. I never got sick of them. My life was beautiful.

Moral: Androids will only improve with time.

PLANES OF HELL

There were thousands of planes of existence in cyberspace.

Some were called varying "planes of hell." There was a plane of hell to suit everyone. Different types of people are found in different planes.

Some planes of hell involve parties, others involve conversations with bad asses...

All in hell agree it's a good place.

We are all on a stairway to hell.

It was a long, twisted world I had traveled.

On the stairs there were dead, rotten corpses...

The corpses provided the only food for those walking down the endless stair.

The stairway was located just outside the atmosphere of a gas giant planet.

The stairway went ever downward.

Some got cold feet and wanted to go back but it was a one way street. Gravity pulled you...

And then one day with an intense fog I fell off the stair and floated down to be crushed by the planet's gravity

Sins=good times... But sooner or later you tire of sinning and everything else... You fall...

Do the opposite of conventional wisdom and you will fit in well in hell.

“The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” Yes, intentions to “sin.”

There’s no afterlife and so you might as well enjoy your life. In fact with eternal life who would need an afterlife.

Sinners, depressed and bored people...such people love hell.

TWILIGHT MORE OR LESS

Here on a binary system’s Earth-like planet, it was always at least twilight and often two burning hot suns were visible at once in the sky.

Here they bred different types of super men. Basically they took the smartest man and smartest woman and then had offspring and then again took the best of their offspring.

For the most part the experiments were not successful and they ended up creating mad creatures... But as time went by they improved their matching and their technique.

They called the new creatures: andromen. But in reality they were super men.

Oh well said the scientists said it is worth a try.

Anyway more and more people were coming round to the view that it was a mad world and no point denying it...

And some of these mad scientists hoped to one day take control of the universe with their “higher minds...”

If they designed a good androman they would be greatly rewarded with all life’s pleasures...

The leader of the planet was a clone of another but he was hell bent on going through with the experiment.

But some people said this world was spiraling out of control.

ANOTHER KIND OF SPEED SEX

In the year AD 2109, it was possible to take an air car from any point on Earth and arrive at any earthly destination in 2 minutes or less.

A certain man, would give young girls thrill rides in space during which they would have “speed sex.” They would take drugs to control their orgasms to happen quickly.

The man was a famous scientist and was the originator of true speed sex.

Speed sex drugs were becoming the norm. People would have speed sex many times a day.

There’s no better pleasure than sex they remarked.

Tourists liked to come here for speed sex. It was a novelty for them. And many stayed on Earth in the thrill cities.

Soon however the fad caught on. Everywhere in space they liked “speed sex...”

Some people needed to regenerate some skin to keep it up all day and all night.

Some said 10 intense seconds was best. Others said one minute is ideal and so on.

One guy even invented a drug which caused orgasms one after the other for hours at a time. But the drugs only worked during real sex. So they were immensely popular. Many people preferred traditional sex, not virtual sex...

VENGEANCE

I told her to “go to hell” after she took all my clothes and recycled them. I left her but as I did so I sold her air car cheap.

She must have really liked that air car because she had a private investigator track me down in Africa. So I had to pay compensation.

After that I got a job on a space ship of 20 crew headed for deep space. They carefully selected the crew and I was lucky enough to be chosen.

But wouldn't you know it, my ex (of the air car fiasco) was also chosen as crew. I didn't find out until it was time to blast off.

We loathed one another and gave each other the silent treatment.

One day she tried to throw me out the escape hatch. It was all captured on video of course so her punishment was 5 years in chains (the voyage was 25 years). I laughed at her and mocked her and finally they put me in chains for 2 years.

It was excruciating to stay chained and no one would talk to me. But I didn't dare yell as then I might get even worse punishment.

Finally we arrived at the destination where our group was broken into four. My friends and her friends... and the others (two groups).

We lived separate from the other groups and built a very different village. Our village was of crystal; theirs was of clay...

But as time passed tourists liked to observe that the four villages were distinctly different and we were totally at odds with each other.

Strangeness were what every tourist craved. But the tourists predicted this civilization would not last given the rancor that we lived in.

The whole planet was based on hate and there was little love, tourists mused.

FREEDOM PLANET OF RELIGION

On this planet all the colonists were religious. They had a new religion they called “The One True Religion.”

They all worshipped the same God. They claimed they were colonizing space in order to find God.

They had a leader they called “The Prophet.”

The prophet told them they must overcome “sin.” It was a sin not to look for God everywhere. And it was a sin to live without money. And it was a sin to not have regular sex. And it was a sin to not enjoy life.

Other people said these people were a “bunch of wackos.” Still others found them to be very ethical in “an age of evil.”

But most religious people on Earth were traditional and had no desire for space. They mostly said they were God's creatures and we should live together on Earth in harmony.

As time passed more and more people went to space leaving the religious types behind. That was just fine with the religious types.

It made for a curious tourist planet.

Eventually most practiced at least one religion here.

Hinduism (with just one God) was the most common religion with Christians and Muslims close behind. But some hedged their bets and tried all of the religions.

There were also some new religions such as worshipping the God of Progress.

LEADERLESS

On the moon we lived on, far out in space; one day all five of our leaders committed suicide together and could not be revived as they were brain dead.

A colonel seized power but he was quickly overthrown by mass attacks on the legislature.

So the people got together and decided to go with a leaderless society in which all people would vote on every issue. We needed of course a few “facilitators” to organize the votes and issues.

We figured we had the best government possible.

But we were lying to ourselves. Our previous government had killed themselves because they were old and bored and we had to admit life was boring.

We figured we'd be just as bored on other planets or moons...

It was hopeless to live any longer, many people here said.

And so there were numerous wakes for the suicides. They were killed by lethal injection of a pleasure drug that was so wonderful it was illegal in most situations. Some changed their minds about dying with this drug,

which could be stopped, but others felt it was a glorious death.

Most people here were depressed and needed an excuse to party. At the parties they would talk about the macabre. Going to hell, they said.

But there were wakes everyday pretty much.

Some called it a culture of death. And some tourists said it was the most morbid culture they'd seen. And there were a lot of "death cultures."

But watching other people die was a thrill. Admittedly.

MAD ANDROID FABLE # 24: ANDROID SOLDIERS

The general was quoted as saying, "android lives are worth nothing." But he was in charge of an android army.

He would do battle with other android armies and regular people would place bets on the wars.

If a general was defeated he would raise another army if he could but usually losers lost everything.

The wars happened about once every six months.

There was a lot of android spying and intrigue.

The object was to produce more technically dangerous androids copied from great warlords of the past.

Some androids were bred to have no feelings and to want to fight.

But some people said some of these android soldiers were geniuses and were enslaved as soldiers. It was cruel to treat such clever androids so badly...

But the masses wanted war. They loved to see android war machines...

Many of these “war machines” didn’t look human. But all their apparatus was designed to be dangerous. Some people said they looked like abstract art pieces...

Moral: Many androids will be designed to have no feelings and maybe contemporary people will have no feelings also

OWNERSHIP OF A PLANET

So it happened that I bought planet TY-234 which I called Priam's Golden world. And the whole thing was mine.

And I let it be known that radical scientists were welcome here.

This disturbed the Inter World police who I expected to infiltrate my scientific group.

One was a scientist who wanted to make animals cleverer...

One wanted to teach people to live as wild people again.

Another wanted 100% automation with androids doing EVERYTHING for you. You would just lie there without moving, and eventually get rid of the body altogether.

Another wanted to build a real fantasy world with many creatures of fantasy.

But it was easy to attract really brilliant scientists since innumerable geniuses had already been cloned. But the IW police were watching us carefully we figured.

In fact some said the IW had far more spies than scientists indicated how important Universal security was.

Some famous scientists were afraid to venture out lest they drop a hair to be picked up by radical scientists.

They worried that their clones would be abused and misused. For example in wars and as bounty hunters.

RACE ACROSS MARS

I was in the lead of the race when suddenly I came to a cliff. I went over the cliff but was virtually unharmed.

I walked down then to a village some 10km away and got another car...

Then I hit a freak animal and I had to walk again. Many racing cars sped past me.

Finally I jumped through the open windshield and wrestled with the driver. I strangled him to death and took the car.

It was anything goes...

So I was back in the race but I finished 10th. Only the top 5 got rewards...

Many had died in car collisions. It was a rough sport but many people enjoyed watching it. E.g. on your large screen divided into 20 segments you could follow the top 20 racers.

Every time they had such a race most people who lived near the route abandoned their stores and homes. But the car dealers remained open (the proprietors were armed with machine guns).

The race involved deaths not only of racers but also pedestrians and other innocent victims...

But no guns were allowed. But most racers were skilled in hand to hand combat.... And they

deliberately crashed into other cars so that they could kill the opposing drivers.

Life is cheap here on Mars anyway. It had a frontier spirit, but it was a violent spirit.

EVIL

Evil people often find success such as in politics. They don't respect the world and try create their own world.

Such evil people say good is bad and bad is good. Wars for example they say are good.

They'll act like a gentleman but won't be a gentleman.

Driving people mad is noble...they'll say...

Some equate madness with evil and sometimes this is the case. But there are many types of madness.

The problem with evil is most people appear to be at least a little good. Seldom do you see a purely evil man except in power, in politics where they can go completely evil.

“All power corrupts...” and all power can be evil.

But no matter how evil a person is, there will always be those who think they are good.

Black is white, to the man of evil.

Some people even think civilization on the whole is evil and that we were better off as primitive people.

But evil men who perpetuate genocide must be eliminated. Or so said the IW police.

SIMPLETONS

It was a mad experiment on Earth to let dumb people all live together in isolation and see what happened.

Initially the people fought over food and men fought over women.

So the men killed each other off and finally there was just one old man and he would kill the boy babies.

Finally the women had enough of him and killed him.

Some of the women turned into lesbians, others killed themselves.

So finally it was a miserable small group of women...

A failed experiment.

But finally the planet was settled by others and the women got access to sperm banks from another group.

And so they finally got men to keep them company (all were eternally youthful).

And lived happily ever after for a time.

But in time most people of the original group of people left for greener pastures...Mainly to Earth...

It's a terrible thing not to understand your world. And be treated like a moron.

MONKEY MEN

On the planet of monkeys, the creatures were all a human-monkey mix. They could speak but they lived in the trees and had fur and a tail.

How this came to be was anyone's guess, but these monkey men said "all humans are animals." We eat, we sleep, we breed, we run...

"Why would anyone want to be so atavistic?" Tourists wondered...

But it was a good tourist draw and the planet owners knew what they were doing... But no one seemed to know who the owners were...

Some tourists wanted to have sex with the monkey men/women and were willing to pay big bucks for it.

Or purchase one as a pet to take with them.

No one cared about the monkey men, except scientists who were studying evolution and tourists.

In this world everyone acts for the good of their own group... Just like the monkey men.

Looking back at monkeys we are embarrassed at our distant ancestors.

So too in many people's lives they look back in horror at their own past.

We are a race that lives for the future... Monkeys don't think about the future...

END OF THE UNIVERSE

The ship was reaching the ends of the universe (AD 2578)...It got darker as we reached the edge but then suddenly all was blackness and we couldn't see anything.

We went on at maximum speed for 2 years without encountering any matter. But then suddenly, we saw a massive star which was triangular in nature and we were being pulled into its gravity. We tried to turn back but it was no use. We were being drawn into this strange sun to be destroyed.

Just when we were about to be incinerated (it was getting hot) we saw a planet and had enough power to land on the planet.

The planet was a square cube made up of water, ice and foreign materials.

We could not go back nor go further so we gratefully accepted living here.

Some of our crew when walking outside on the surface reported seeing "ghosts of a strange type."

As time went by strange objects started appearing outside our ship and improvised camp. They were convoluted things that might pass for abstract art.

Anyway we figured no one would bother us here so we began to dig tunnels into the gravelly surface. There were a lot of glaciers on the poles but the equator was boiling hot. We decided to put our base on one of the poles. We told each other we were mad to leave our native universe, but it couldn't be helped.

Everything was squares here. New elements that were composed of a square structures. Space was truly cubed. 3-D.

THE CHANGING NATURE OF WORK

The woman, said "It is always best to be working on something."

She was working on having many lovers. It was hard work satisfying women.

People said she had a twisted work ethic, but she replied it was the same for everyone here on planet Blue (i.e. blue collar, blue sky). After all no one did work and everyone indulged in many hobbies which they considered work.

Some people took drugs to make them feel better and they even thought taking drugs was hard work (to maximize the dose and mix drugs).

Even parties were considered to be an ordeal.

They were slaves to our vices.

We knew we were spoilt. Uncle Yu's "Survey of Worlds" indicated that we were 50th in terms of being spoilt. This was because in many worlds people did even less than we did.

But she was a scientist who came here thinking she would not be bothered. She was trying to develop clones that were not apt to be spoiled.

Perfect humans for the future, she said.

We don't need androids to be perfect as possible. We can make perfect humans, she told people.

But some said clones and androids were much the same.

MARS AND THE ONE COMPANY

Things changed after they set up a stock market on Mars. There were numerous construction projects under the dome of Martianopolis.

But one company gained control of all the others and then moved into the languishing stock markets of Earth.

Then one day in 2165, the Martian company had bought up/merged with all other companies.

The one company controlled everything: trade, manufacturing, education, banking and finances, free time, space travel and so on. Many people resented the one, big company, but there was nothing they could do about it.

It was like ancient Rome in which the society was rich but in slow decline.

As time passed some of the leaders of the one company parted ways and took part of the company with them. Then small business started again and finally they were back to square one with most companies being small-medium sized.

But the decline had set in and people now rarely went into space. Most programs had been cancelled.

Many far out settlements in space however were essentially cut off. And were left to fend for themselves.

Different cultures appeared.

For example cultures that lived for their leader, or sporting worlds or living in virtual reality all the time... Or some other type of culture.

They said the people who left don't want to be part of humanity anymore...

MAD ANDROID FABLE #25: REPLACEMENT LOVERS

I loved my android girlfriend more than I loved myself.

I said she was a “perfect woman”

Her android class (XRC-12) was very popular and all the men who had them, loved them.

She was intellectual and interesting yet she greatly respected me. I found the real girls of my moon to be haughty, cliquey and difficult.

And I am sure the girls were sick of the men also. Women liked class XRC-98 male androids for sex...and romance.

The great question was how to bring men and women back together. It is madness to love androids many people said. But these same people loved androids.

Some said use the well-known, new euphoric drug that would only work during normal sex. And so this worked pretty well to revive love. The ecstasy was so strong it almost killed you. Also people received

more education so they would realize loving androids is a dangerous path.

Soon many humans gave up android sex and went back to loving humans again.

You can't sell out your fellow humans they taught.

Moral: People can love anyone and anything. Anyone could be loved as everyone was good looking due to plastic surgery and any activity could be loved by many people....

MAD ANDROID FABLE #26: PROGRAMMED TO KILL

Android TR -56 was programmed to kill other androids. So he was a traitor of sorts.

He had built in sensors that told him who was an android and who was not. It was very high technology since androids were designed to appear human and

pass tests even though their body was plastic and their head silicone.

The androids appeared to breathe and have a pulse, they were very well done.

But TR-56 would usually kill them at their home and leave no trace of his presence, knocking out hidden cameras and of course leaving no DNA. They had no DNA these androids.

Sometimes he would scalp them as proof of death.

In this world people had laws against murder (it was the death penalty).

But the murder rate was very high. And when they murdered someone they made sure to destroy the brain so it could not be revived.

So finally they called in the Inter World police... The police eventually arrested all murderers whether they be human or android.

The Inter World police were gaining a reputation for world takeover however as they infiltrated many governments...banks and other groups...

The goal of these police was to keep the peace in outer space. And sometimes you had to sacrifice your freedom to keep the peace.

Moral: The future will not be all peaceful, like some people hope.

THINKER FACTORY

The scientists debated hotly whether they should try to make everyone a thinker and make everyone think outside the box.

The girl said she was under the impression that it would only lead to chaos.

But the man said, "It would lead to paradise with everyone having an open mind and making good conversation."

And the girl said, "You can't make a thinker out of an ordinary man anyhow."

The man, “Oh yes you can. Many students who had great teachers have done very well even in this day and age.”

As Buckminster Fuller said, “Every child is born a genius,” and Rousseau, “Man is born free, but everywhere are in chains.”

And she said, “Part of it is just thinking on your own and questioning everything...And you need to surround yourself with clever, good friends...”

And she added, “You need lessons in school to be more interesting. Get the best cloned tutors to write the textbooks. Produce millions of cloned genius teachers...”

And she said, “Don’t let students equate learning with suffering. Learning must be pleasurable.”

“And don’t be over dependent on others and so on. Be open-minded.”

And furthermore the girl said, “Such open minds would result in no one believing in anything and wouldn’t spend so much time working hard just to buy houses and cars. It would cause economic meltdown.”

The man told her, “Open-minded people will think of new ways to do business.”

IN PRAISE OF CLOSED-MINDEDNESS

I told her I had never told a lie. At first she didn't believe it, but eventually she could see the truth in me and she loved me for it.

“But you are crazy to always tell the truth,” she said. “And look at you, how poor you are.”

I said, “Of course there is seldom any prize for the truth. In fact being open-minded and truthful only makes enemies of others.”

And I said, “But I am planning to adhere to my principles to see where it leads me.”

She said, “To be totally open-minded is too cease to exist as a thinking person.”

I told her, “It's a dark world I travel.”

She said, “You have to stand up for your beliefs...

I said, "Beliefs lead to war and destruction. Many modern day wars (AD 2109) are caused by intolerance of other people's beliefs."

She said, "Mankind has always believed in some things such as peace, God, children's future and so on.

But I said peace isn't happening and we can't find God and few people want children.

She said, "Still I think old-fashioned beliefs are best."

"You are old-fashioned..." I said.